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Chapter 1 to 24

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Chapter: 1

Title: A Determined Frame of Mind

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Summary: HPDM slash, sequel to A Reckless Frame of Mind. Draco and Harry now face the might of the Ministry in an attempt to discover who cast the Cassandra Curse on Harry. Add in Harry's trust problems, and it's a good thing Draco's confident.

Pairings: Harry/Draco; mentions of Harry/Ginny and Ron/Hermione.

Rating: R/M.

Warnings: Violence, language, sex, quite a lot of psychology.

Notes: This really won't make sense if you haven't read *A Reckless Frame of Mind.* It picks up a few days after that story's final chapter.

Chapter One—Harry Is Uncooperative

"I'm sure I can think of a few more names if I just concentrate."

Draco leaned back in his chair and looked sternly at Harry. They were in one of the "alcoves" of the Manor, which could really function as a room in and of itself. The tall, narrow window looked out over the Manor's back gardens, which, tended by house-elves, bloomed steadily even in the lateness of the season. A table made of some smooth dark wood Draco's parents hadn't identified stood near the window, and Harry hunched over it with his back to the outside, writing steadily on a piece of parchment. Of course, Draco had already learned to recognize when Harry was writing words and when he was scribbling nonsense, so he knew the other man wasn't as

productive as he'd been pretending.

"Harry."

The scribbling stopped. "Yes, you're probably right," Harry muttered. "I've reached the limit of the people inside the Ministry I think might be to blame for this." He looked up at Draco and offered a small smile on the edge of a grimace. "So now I should start thinking of people *outside* the Ministry. Clearly."

"Harry," Draco said again, and stood up.

Harry stood up, too, his eyes narrowed and his chin defiantly lifted. "Honestly, if you can think of places in relation to the Ministry *other* than 'outside' or 'inside,' you're cleverer than I am."

"Stop this," Draco ordered him quietly. They were near enough now that he could reach out and put his hands on Harry's shoulders, but he wouldn't do that yet. It would only exacerbate the problem. "I know you're trying to put off our discussion for the day, and it won't work."

Harry only lifted his chin further, and crossed his arms. Draco shook his head a little. Had he not known better, he would have said that Harry hadn't just spent thirteen months under a curse that caused everyone to disbelieve everything he said, and which had nearly killed him several times. The only physical reminders of his suicide attempt were the thick bandages on his wrists, which Draco changed each day. And he wouldn't have known, either, that he was the only one who had broken the spell personally and thus the only one who could understand and believe Harry; no one else would until they found the caster and forced him or her to remove the Cassandra Curse.

But just because he couldn't see other, physical reminders didn't mean that Harry wasn't hurting on the *inside.* And that was what Draco wanted to talk to him about, and what Harry kept putting off by trying to think of other people in the Ministry who could be the caster.

Well. When in doubt, make Harry Potter angry.

"I thought you trusted me," he said.

Harry snarled at him. "Don't start *that* again," he said. "Yes, I trust you, Draco. That doesn't mean I want you to poke all over the inside of my head. There's nothing wrong with the inside of my head."

"Oh, Harry," Draco said. "If only." He glanced at the bandaged wrists once, as if involuntarily, and then returned his gaze to Harry's face. He had to hide a grin when the green eyes narrowed further at him, until it seemed as if Harry were squinting into strong sunlight.

"I *told* you," said Harry, his voice rising slightly. "The only reason I tried to kill myself was because I needed a way to get away from the Ministry that would convince them I wasn't worth looking for when I vanished. They wouldn't want a crazy Auror back, would they?"

"No," Draco said. "But you also told me that you wouldn't have cared very much if you had died then."

"Ha, well, *that* was a mistake," Harry muttered.

"We need to talk about this," Draco told him, keeping his body still and his tone as calm as possible. "You spent so long under that curse without company or trust or, hell, someone *touching* you. That needs to be addressed."

"You're not a Mind-Healer," Harry muttered. "Just a Psyche-Diver."

"One who's seen your soul," Draco reminded him. "And because I'm a Psyche-Diver, I've had a lot of practice working with abnormal psychology."

"My psychology is *not* abnormal."

Draco gave him a freezing glare, because that was one way to make Harry *shut up* and do what he was supposed to be doing.

Muttering protests, Harry nonetheless turned and shuffled from the "alcove" to the dark and quiet room Draco had chosen for their talks. Draco followed, quite prepared to catch him should he try to dart down a side corridor and escape into the bowels of the Manor, which was what had happened yesterday.

This would be much easier if Harry Potter would stop being so Potter-like for a moment and cooperate.

Harry hunched his shoulders against the leather seat and wished there was a way to cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and then dash out the door without Draco noticing. Imagining the look of drop-jawed astonishment on Draco's face was funny.

Of course, he wouldn't actually look like that. He would whip out his wand, Body-Bind Harry to the chair, and then lecture him.

Harry hated the talks, but he hated the lectures even more.

"I suggest we begin with what we almost talked about in there." Draco, damn him, looked comfortable as a cat in his elegant leather chair, his hair spreading in fine strands against the elaborately carved stone spindle just above the leather. "Why, when you claim to trust me, don't you want to talk this way?"

Harry pressed his fingers to his temples, and supposed he might as well tell the truth. Clearly, Draco wasn't going to leave him alone until he did.

"Because you've done enough," he said. "Broken the Curse—for you—and given me shelter here. I don't want to be helpless, and that's what these talks make me feel like, as if I can't do anything but act shattered and lie around waiting to be healed. It's bad enough that I have to hide in the Manor and be under a glamour if I ever go out in public. I'm fighting to get my footing back, so we can approach each other on equal ground—so I can actually *contribute* something to the hunt for the caster. And you're surprised that I don't want you helping me with these talks, even if you can?"

A flaying bitterness had crept into his voice, but Harry didn't care. If Draco was insulted, perhaps he would back off and stop insisting on these little "talks."

Draco said nothing for long moments. Harry peered between his fingers. *Has he given up?*

He realized he wouldn't be that lucky when he saw the stubborn set to Draco's jaw. This was Draco Malfoy, who wouldn't leave well enough alone and insisted on kicking his way into Harry's soul after his best friends had given up on him as hopeless. Of course he would think that any explanation was just an excuse.

"It's not shameful to need help," Draco said.

"Ha," Harry said. "You've *gloated* over those people you were able to help by Diving into their souls, you know you have."

"That's not shameful, either," Draco said, with a small smile. "But abandoning that argument for the moment, don't you think you should accept my help? Otherwise, something might go wrong when we start hunting the Curse's caster. You could pull away from me at the wrong moment because you distrust me, or pursue some dangerous course without consulting me, and then—"

"I wouldn't do that," Harry said crossly.

"You still won't talk to me about basic, elementary things," Draco said. "Until just now, that is. And you've refused every attempt I made to touch you since we came to the Manor."

"Because I don't want you to do that," Harry said, rolling his eyes. "You shouldn't *have* to, you know?"

There was another reason, but he was keeping it to himself. If he was embarrassed about needing Draco's help to escape from St. Mungo's, he was even more embarrassed by his reactions when Draco touched him in hospital. His skin had soaked up the slightest brush of fingers like water, and he was only left hungrier every time Draco departed the room. That was natural, of course, since he hadn't had many people touch him so gently in a year, but still. *Embarrassing.*

"We can't have you jumping at every single sound and slight brush of an arm when we go to the Ministry," Draco said. A faint gleam entered his eyes that made Harry frown; he'd seen it, but he

couldn't remember where, and Draco leaned forwards before he could recall it. "Besides, have you considered that I might *like* touching you?"

Harry felt his mouth fall slightly open. He shook his head, shut his jaw with a snap, and said, "I fail to see what you would get out of it."

"Touching someone as beautiful as you are has its own compensations." Draco had deepened his voice to a purring tone.

"Come off it, Malfoy." Harry rose to his feet. "I decide to bare my heart to you, and you decide to mock me?"

Draco laughed aloud; he couldn't help himself. Harry scowled and eyed him as if he thought Draco would make some comment on the state of his robes next.

"That's something else you could stand to hear more of, then," he said. "Compliments."

Harry only shook his head at him. Draco frowned now. "When you refuse to believe me," he said, "*that's* when you retard your healing, Harry. More than at any other time, certainly."

"I don't want—" Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath, blowing it out again through this lips as if he hoped that it would take his anger with it. It didn't work; he opened his eyes, and they still shimmered with fury. Draco could have told him it wouldn't. The best ways to get rid of tension were talking and fucking, and the people who recommended breathing exercises were the kind who rarely took advantage of either. "I don't want to feel beholden to you," he said. "Any more than I already do, I mean. I know I owe you debts. But could you *please* not make me feel as if I ought to be bowing at you feet for it?"

Draco opened his mouth to reply, then shut it again. *This is new*. "I didn't know I was doing that. Explain, please."

"When you look at me like I'm the prey and you're the predator," Harry muttered, "or like you're going to get some great reward out of touching me and listening to me, it—it makes me feel like I'm supposed to *grateful* that you're doing it." He hissed again, this time driving his breath through clenched teeth. "Look, like I said, I know that I'm supposed to be grateful to you. But let me address my gratitude in my own way, all right? I'll make it up to you. But let me choose how to make it up."

Draco gave a tiny shake of his head. *Never let it be said that Harry Potter doesn't have pride and want to stand on his own two feet.*

"And how would you choose to make it up?" he asked.

"I don't know yet." Harry looked at him with eyes that were more open and more searching than

Draco had seen since the first day he brought him home. "But let me choose. I'm sure I'll find a way."

Draco narrowed his eyes. He honestly hadn't considered letting Harry heal at his own peace, because—because, well, being Harry Potter and like that, he would put it off and put it off until he managed to grow some kind of skin over his mental wounds, and that would result in his acting unpredictably at the worst moments.

But—

Well, perhaps Draco could let him *try*. Either he would fail almost at once and be a little more humble the next time Draco offered help, or he would succeed for a time and *then* fail, and his pride would be the better for a greater fall.

Draco would be close at his side at all times; he had no intention of letting Harry out of his sight, or out of the Manor at all until they'd practiced answers for everything that could go wrong at least twice. He could catch Harry if he made a mistake, or soften it, so that it wouldn't kill them.

And in the meantime, he could work in subtler ways than touching or talking to soften Harry's resistance, and make him see that Draco wasn't such a bad bloke after all.

He shrugged at last, and gave Harry a faint smile. "All right," he said. "If you can tell me who in the Ministry you think we should question first."

"Umbridge," Harry said with no hesitation. "She hates me, and she didn't hesitate to use Dark magic objects on me at Hogwarts—"

"Dark magic objects?" Draco frowned. He remembered the woman trying to cast the Cruciatus Curse on Harry, but he hadn't heard any rumors that she'd had Harry try to clean out a Snapping Toilet or the like, which was the most dangerous magical artifact he could conceive of Umbridge possessing.

Harry rolled his eyes and held out his right hand. Draco caught it, telling himself he was a bit pathetic for how good it made him feel to touch Harry, and bowed his head so that he could study the white words visible in faint lines on the skin.

I must not tell lies.

Draco stepped hastily back, though he didn't let go of Harry's hand. "Blood Quill," he said.

"Yes." Harry shrugged, as if the name of the object didn't matter to him, and tried to pull his hand away. Draco obliged, but only after he'd let his fingers explore the rough lines of the palm and the softer skin on the back enough to satisfy him. Harry blushed and looked away as he explained. "That was why I thought of her, since she made these words when I insisted on saying Voldemort was back. She might find it amusing to cast a spell that would force me to tell the

truth while everyone else heard it as lies."

Draco cocked his head, sucking thoughtfully at the inside of his cheek. He had to admit, it was more of a clue than anything else they'd come up with, and from what he remembered of Umbridge, she was just the sort of witch to hold a grudge across years and decades until she came up with the perfect punishment.

Still…

"I think we should start with Lila Ambernight," he said.

Harry blinked at him.

"The Auror who came to question me on your disappearance," Draco said. *Honestly, can he not keep a fact in his mind that doesn't involve Quidditch or suicide?* "She was far too smug. She peered at me as if she thought that I'd had something to do with your disappearance. If nothing else, going after her is self-defense. We have to find out what she knows, and soon."

"I think Umbridge is the better choice." Harry folded his arms and all but stuck his nose in the air. Draco felt a frisson of laughter tickle the back of his throat. Didn't Harry know that was the kind of gesture *he* should be performing?

The thought of Harry picking up his mannerisms…Draco couldn't decide if it was more horrifying or endearing.

"Care to explain why?" Draco asked. "Or will we just charge into her horrible office full of pink jumpers and kittens and start overturning enchanted china plates in a search for a book of Dark magic?"

"Not a bad idea," said Harry, but a grin pulled at the edges of his mouth and let Draco know he was joking. "But we have *something* on her. We know she hates me. I worked with Lila for a few months, and she never exhibited anything but indifference for me. We were pulled off the last case we worked on together because we just—ignored each other, and nothing got done."

"At least I stir up more of a reaction in you than that," said Draco, feeling a small stab of pride that he could do so. "But it's not Lila I'm worried about, so much as someone she may report to. I told you before that she strikes me as the sort who could be dangerous in someone else's service, if she's not ambitious after her own goals."

Harry sighed. "But we have actual *evidence* against Umbridge."

"Hatred and words scratched into your skin from years ago are not evidence." Draco held his tongue on what else he'd have liked to say about those scars. He wasn't sure he had the right. He had been a member of Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad when Harry got the damn things, after all.

And he was trying to let Harry guide the pace of his own healing. Really, he was.

"But she's always been horrible," said Harry. "And if there's one thing I know about Lila, it's that she wouldn't use Dark magic. Dark magic killed a relative of hers—a sister, I think."

"It would have been useful to know about this *earlier*," Draco said, making his voice sharp, in case that would have some effect. It didn't seem to; Harry just looked at him and shrugged, as much to say that he was telling him now, so why was Draco so upset? Draco bit his lip and sighed. "But she could work for someone who *does* wield Dark magic, Harry, and she might never know it. How many people in the Ministry had no idea that the Dark Lord's followers were commanding some of them during the war?"

"Yes, but—"

"I say we begin with Lila."

"And I say we begin with both," Harry unexpectedly consented and argued both at once. "We'll set traps for Lila and Umbridge on the same day. That's easy enough, isn't it? The first journey is just for reconnaissance, anyway, and we won't actually learn anything important on it."

Draco inclined his head, reluctantly impressed. When Harry wanted to, he could be diplomatic. That was useful to know.

"We'll begin with both," he conceded. "I've set up a cover story for you—spread about tales that I had a Bulgarian cousin coming to stay with me for a few days, and that's why I haven't gone to St. Mungo's. You'll go under a glamour." He grinned. "Think you can stand to look like a Malfoy for a few hours?"

"Long enough to get my life back," said Harry. "I want my friends to believe me again, and Ginny, even if she's chosen someone else."

Draco pricked his ears—he had not heard that Harry had lost his fiancée for good—but Harry was carrying blithely on, ignoring the actual interesting news. "And I have you to thank for it. Yes, I can stand to wear your name." He caught Draco's eye and gave him a weak smile. "And even look like you, though that's a great hardship, I'm sure."

Draco would actually hate to cast the glamour to cover up Harry's hair and eyes, though he wouldn't tell him that. He liked looking at him just as he was.

But that would nudge the conversation in a direction Harry had made it *quite* clear he was not ready to go. Draco left it to his daydreams, and began to speak of more productive things—their schedule once they got inside the Ministry, for example.

Harry was grateful when Draco left him alone. He made his way to the bedroom—well, it was

more a wing—that Draco had given him, and spent some time staring out the window at a fountain that dominated this corner of the gardens. The fountain showed a young woman with a fairy's fairness of face, but the size of a normal human, coyly tipping a shell over her shoulder to scatter the water into the basin below. The whole of it was carved of some blue stone, and Harry was sure that one piece of that the size of a tablespoon or a fingernail was worth more than he made in a year.

He closed his eyes. The sunlight outside often wasn't real to him, still; part of him thought he was back in St. Mungo's even now, doomed to rot in the Janus Thickey ward.

As he had said, he knew it was due to Draco that he wasn't.

And that was another reason he didn't want to get too close to him, one that he wouldn't confess aloud for fear of putting it into the right words. He was starved for affection. Harry knew that. There was too great a chance that he would latch onto the first person to come his way, the only person in the world who could actually *hear* him, and insist on making Draco the center of all his emotional drama, his one anchor.

It *couldn't* happen. Harry knew what would happen the moment the curse was broken and Draco had the acclaim he'd been dreaming of. He'd move on to something else, or go back to Psyche-Diving, and Harry would be left alone, terribly alone, in a world where even his oldest friendships were not the same.

He had to retain himself alone and apart as much as possible. Then he would be able to grow scars and scabs over his wounds, and in time he would be able to resume something *like* his normal life.

Harry wanted the facsimile of that, false though it might be, more than he wanted to open his eyes some morning and find himself utterly dependent on Draco Malfoy.

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Chapter: 2

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Two—Draco's Bulgarian Cousin

Harry paused for a long moment, staring around the bedroom and clutching his wand, before he realized that the vision that haunted him must have been a dream. He could relax then, but warily, and it seemed a long moment more before his fingers would consent to unclench and release the wand.

He had dreamed he was hurtling through the corridors of the Ministry, hunted by dozens of faceless enemies who grew in number with every step. When he did manage to put his back to a wall and turn to face them, he found that every single one of them had the black cloak and white mask of a Death Eater.

He tried to convince himself now, as he wiped his face with one hand, that it was only a nightmare and not the revival of a suppressed memory. He had tried too many times in the past year to recapture every memory of that crucial day he'd been at the Ministry before the Cassandra Curse manifested. If there had been some clue to give the caster away, he would have recalled it by now. His dreams didn't mean a Death Eater, or a former Death Eater, was the one who had cast it.

"Master Harry is being well?"

Harry jerked up with a gasp that hurt, and then shook his head warily when he saw the house-elf standing in front of him. Batty was the oldest of the elves who served the Malfoy family, and Harry had learned that she deserved her name; she was forever moving furniture back to the places it had occupied in the time of Draco's grandfather, and even the dust had to be distributed in old, familiar patterns before she would consent to clean it. She quietly muttered imprecations about his presence in the house whenever she thought he couldn't hear her, and never minded the scoldings Draco gave her. But sometimes he caught her watching him with a disconcerting gleam in her eyes, as if she were merely waiting for the proper moment to dispose of him. This was one of those. Her gaze measured him frankly for any spot of weakness, and Harry thought she would attack the moment she discovered one.

"I am, Batty," he said, clearing his throat. "Very well." He tried to smile at her, but neither his heart nor his lips were in it. "You can tell Draco I'm awake," he added, because when he tried to convince Batty that she should keep that secret for a while to allow him time to recover, she became immediately affronted and demanded to know why he was lying to Master Malfoy.

"Master Harry is being awake," Batty said. "Master Malfoy will be glad to know."

She gave him one final shrewd look before vanishing. Harry shrugged and rolled his shoulders at the same time, wishing he could dissipate the extremely manky feeling she gave him, and then went to shower.

He reassured some final fears there, as he ducked his head under the warm spray and shook it back and forth, flattening the hair with water as much as possible.

He *did* need Draco's help to raid the Ministry, as much as he hated to admit it. Just because he accepted it didn't mean he was becoming dependent.

Not yet, he told himself as he turned sideways and then backwards so the water could wash him more thoroughly. It rebounded off the tiles with a soft ringing sound—tiles smoother and a stall

wider and broader than Harry would ever have allowed himself, even if he did have the money to spare. *But if you become used to luxuries like this, if you think of him with too much affection, if you succumb to the stupid things your thoughts tell you sometimes, then you will lean on him. And what happens when he steps away from you?*

Well, Harry wouldn't have to find out what happened, because he didn't intend to ever be in that situation. He stepped out of the shower to fetch a towel, wipe himself dry, and then seek out the most formal set of robes Draco had lent him. It would help with his disguise as a Malfoy, and it might give Draco second thoughts about his approachability.

If anything can.

Harry shook his head again. Just because Draco watched him with sharp eyes sometimes…Well, it was natural, wasn't it? Draco hadn't ever given a piece of his soul to someone else. Naturally he would wonder what had happened to it, and what was occurring now in the soul of the person whom he'd given it to. (Harry had refused to let Draco Dive into his soul again, because he saw no need).

And no, he thought, grimacing at the turn his memories had taken, he was *not* allowed to feel honored that Draco had given him a piece of his soul. That was silly, and would only lead to romantic delusions he couldn't afford.

"So." Harry folded his hands in front of him. Despite the tempting breakfast spread before him—everything from five different kinds of drinks and fresh grapefruit to delicate golden-brown toast and sliced strawberries to cover them—he'd barely eaten. Draco had to diagnose nerves, along with a certain reluctance to linger over the meal, as if he thought Draco would change his mind at the last moment. "Glamours, you said."

Draco nodded. "But not *just* glamours. I've seen too many disguises fail when someone cast a Dispelling Charm in the right place."

"Often dressed up as a girl in the dungeons, did you?" Harry muttered, picking up a piece of toast to nibble on.

Draco rolled his eyes, but was too pleased to see Harry eating to really retaliate in kind. "We'll also use dye for your hair," he continued, "and a charm to lengthen it. Even if someone casts a spell to end all magic on you, that won't affect something permanently altered."

"I know," said Harry. "There's a difference between Transfiguration and glamours. I learned that when I was getting ready to run to the Muggle world."

Draco inclined his head. Harry had revealed his plans in fragments, but enough for Draco to get a good idea of what he had once intended. He had thought it was mad then, and he still did. "Tell me something," he said.

Harry looked up at him, eyes alert.

"Why didn't you choose some isolated place in the wizarding world?" Draco asked quietly. "As long as you performed the Transfiguration and didn't tell them your real name, the curse would still have a diminished effect on you. Why did you want to go to the Muggle world?" Draco could never have contemplated leaving all magic behind completely, no matter what danger he was in.

"Someone could still recognize me by my magical signature if I was around other wizards, Malfoy." A small, grim smile chased itself around the corners of Harry's mouth. "Or were you entirely asleep during the relevant sections of Charms Theory?"

Draco sat back and gave him an affronted look. "I *am* trying to help you, Harry."

"Hmmm," said Harry noncommittally, and buried his mouth in a slice of grapefruit.

After some more glaring—and really, *why* did Harry have to be so difficult? It wasn't as if they could ignore the fact of what Draco had sacrificed for him forever—Draco decided to return to talk of the plan, in hopes that Harry could regain his sanity by listening. "So. Glamours, dye, and a layered glamour on the scar on your forehead, so that two targeted spells would be needed to take it down—and if someone's aiming them there, they probably already know who you are anyway."

"They could be testing everyone who comes into the Ministry for signs of a scar there," Harry said, unconvinced.

Draco sighed heavily, much put-upon. Harry's mistrust would get in the way of their plans, just as he had envisioned, if Harry didn't stop fearing that his enemies were omnipotent soon.

"Do you want to stay here, then?" he asked, shifting his voice to the one that he used on people who tried to sell him "Dark Arts detection charms" in Diagon Alley. "Just hide for the rest of your life, and forget about finding who did this?"

Harry's hands closed on the edge of the table, and his eyes had a hectic glitter, as if he were feverish. "Of course not!"

"Then stop acting like a child who thinks his enemy can spy on him from the closet and know everything he does immediately," Draco snapped, and leaned forwards. "They won't find us out, Harry. And if they do, they'll have to give themselves away somehow, so their finding out would just provide us with more clues about who did this."

"But you said—"

Draco was quite sick of useless arguments like this. He jumped to his feet. At least that made Harry stand up, too, his hand on his wand and his attention on the immediate threat.

"Stop fucking arguing," Draco commanded him quietly.

Harry bared his teeth. And Draco started, because suddenly there was a swift humming in his ears, like the wings of a frightened bird.

It was the piece of his soul.

He had hardly felt it since coming back to Malfoy Manor from St. Mungo's. When they were physically close, and after they had both accepted that the soul-piece was there, it no longer strove to connect them. And since Harry was within a limited radius at all times, Draco hadn't needed to locate him. That was Batty's job, if he needed to know where Harry was.

But now—

Harry had a savage look on his face, the look of a wounded animal trying to figure out where the pain had come from and what would happen next. He started to back away, but Draco crossed the distance between them and laid his palm against Harry's chest before he could bolt.

The humming soared to a high, sweet pitch, like some especially persistent cricket, and then silenced. Draco bowed his head, and felt the connection tug once, as if it were plucking just to be sure it still existed.

A part of my soul is in him.

It was something more intimate than he had ever given anyone else, something he still tended to forget if he wasn't being careful.

Harry had gone silent and still, as though he, too, considered it stupid to fight when they shared what they did. When he felt he could speak, Draco leaned forwards and murmured into Harry's ear, "Let's just go through with the plan the way we agreed upon yesterday, shall we? We don't need to hammer all the implications out right now."

Harry nodded in a dazed fashion. Draco traced one finger around his lips, and the green eyes just regarded him cautiously.

I prefer him like this, Draco thought. *Not silent, not exactly, but when he has no choice save to consider me.*

He tried to break the mood by stepping away and smiling lightly, but it didn't work. Even when he was working the blond dye into Harry's hair with the aid of an enchanted mirror, the knowledge of the soul-connection lingered between them, another level of awareness.

Not that Draco *minded*, exactly. Harry wanted to heal at his own pace. Draco had said he would respect that.

But he wouldn't be true to himself if he didn't test the boundaries.

Just a bit.

Harry shook his head and told himself that he shouldn't be remembering the feel of Draco's fingers in his hair; he'd put the dye in nearly half-an-hour ago, after all, and what normal person would remember something like that, like a flesh memory?

Someone deprived of all human contact for nearly a year, and acting like a prat about the little he did receive?

Harry shook his head one more time and then did his best to stand stolidly at Draco's side as he talked his way past the suspicious Undersecretaries to the Undersecretary. Incredibly, Dolores Umbridge had regained her position, after a few years of scrambling around in the lower levels of the Ministry, and now Scrimgeour used her in the same capacity Fudge had—thought Harry at least had the feeling that he had never trusted her as much.

The dye turned his hair blond. Subtle glamours had altered the color of his eyes so that they seemed hazel instead of green, and sharpened the angles of his face so that he resembled a poor echo of Draco. Harry had pointed that out with a small amount of grumbling, because anything that could cause an argument in the wake of the *extremely* strange hum between them was a good idea.

Draco had only smiled at him and said, "No matter what you look like, Harry, you'll always be handsome to me."

Harry had flushed and turned away, because, goddamn it, what was he supposed to *say* in response to something like that? Someone should publish a book that contained proper responses to Draco Malfoy's backhanded compliments. Harry, at least, would buy two copies, the better to have one on him at all times.

He had changed into robes that were just slightly out-of-date—according to Draco—and absurdly formal for a visit, when Draco had simply invited him along to show him "the wonders of our fantastic British Ministry." Draco had lengthened his hair, as promised, and grown him a beard. And the glamours layered over his scar were so subtle that Harry had trouble detecting them himself, even as close as he understandably was. He would have to trust that he was disguised as well as it was possible to be, Draco had said.

He seemed to overestimate how easy it was for Harry to trust.

"And why should we allow you to see Madam Umbridge?" one of the secretaries asked. She was a woman with a nose so upturned that Harry believed she must have trouble breathing, and eyes of a blue so piercingly brilliant she must be using glamours herself. She had on a pink robe that clashed with her red hair. She peered intently, disapprovingly, at Harry, who tried to affect a

gormless stare. "And who is this with you?"

"My Bulgarian cousin, Albert Malfoy," Draco said importantly, and then leaned forwards and lowered his voice. "Very well, I'll tell you my business, though I warn you that Madam Umbridge won't be impressed with you if it gets loose before I tell *her*. I have information on the whereabouts of Harry Potter."

Even knowing that had been the necessary key to visit Umbridge, Harry still felt an unpleasant trickle along his spine at the speaking of his name. The undersecretary gasped and turned as pink as her robe, and then began to fumble with a speaking tube in front of her, doubtless thinking how good it would look to be the one who brought the news to the Undersecretary to the Minister.

"Just a moment, Mister Malfoy, sir," she said, her cheeks still glowing. She whispered into the tube and listened intently. She looked disappointed when she glanced up a moment later. "Madam Umbridge isn't in her office."

"Oh?" Draco painted an expression of such intense corresponding disappointment on his face that Harry had to stifle a laugh. "And I was *so* looking forwards to talking with her." He flashed the witch a smile that could have probably melted icebergs—and immediately Harry told himself that it was inappropriate for him to notice that. "I don't suppose she left word saying where she'd gone?"

"Oh, Mister Malfoy, I don't—" The secretary was still flushed, but for a different reason now. Draco leaned nearer still, putting his elbow on a corner of her desk. Harry had to look away, and repeat like a mantra that just because Draco was getting close to someone else didn't mean that he was about to abandon him, Harry. It was all just part of the plan, after all.

"I'm sure Madam Umbridge would understand if you made an exception," Draco said softly. A mermaid couldn't have coaxed better, Harry thought with reluctant admiration. "Just think what this news could mean, Madam-?" His smile and slightly dipped chin, inviting confidences, seemed to make it impossible not to answer, and so of course the woman did.

"Honeybee." And then she lowered her eyelids and giggled like an idiot. Harry rolled his eyes once he made sure that she was looking safely away from him. *He's not that attractive, woman. Good God.*

"Honeybee." Draco's voice made the word a caress. Harry shivered, and then told himself to *stop it.* God, he was vulnerable like this, and he hated being so. "It couldn't hurt, could it? I assure you, Madam Umbridge would *want* to know this. My information is perfectly, *precisely* accurate."

He's going to betray you, fool, Harry's mind hissed at him.

Harry clenched his eyes shut and tried to regulate his breathing. He *had* to trust Draco, or what

was the point of being here at all? Without Draco, he couldn't even leave Malfoy Manor safely; he couldn't talk, which was one reason they had decided to pretend that "Draco's Bulgarian cousin" knew almost no English.

For a moment, the wild longing swept Harry to simply turn and flee. He would be out of the Ministry before Draco could catch him, and he could remove the glamours and the dye himself. He would be *gone.*

Grimly, he battled his own hatred of the situation, and just managed to calm down in time to hear the undersecretary's response.

"Then I suppose there's no harm in telling you that she went to the Auror Department," Honeybee giggled. "After all, it's not as though she would be *angry* with news of the fugitive Harry Potter's whereabouts."

"That's true." Draco caught the woman's hand and kissed it. "Thank you most kindly, my dear. Come, Albert," he added over his shoulder, and then rattled off a string of impressive-sounding gibberish that was meant to be "Albert's" native language. Harry followed him numbly, still breathing a bit harshly from the upsurge of helplessness.

You've got to trust him. You've got no choice.

At least the harsh reality of the situation had managed to curb any ridiculous romantic fantasies he might center around Malfoy.

Draco could have cheered when he heard Umbridge's location. That meant that she and Lila Ambernight were likely to be in the same general area, and they could more easily locate and question them both without giving themselves away.

If Harry could hold steady that long.

Draco shot him constant concerned glances, while trying not to be too obvious about it. Harry's breathing had quickened since they took the lifts up to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and his eyes now and then reflected a despair that had caused a few of the passing wizards to peer at them in concern. He looked—well, he looked two steps away from a nervous breakdown, if Draco was honest with himself.

And he thought he could guess why.

He leaned nearer to Harry and whispered into his ear, "I'm not about to betray you."

Harry shot him a startled look, which made Draco feel a bit insulted—how could Harry still be a mystery to him when he'd seen the man's *soul*, after all?—and then glanced away again. He seemed to be making a concerted effort to control himself. Draco sighed inaudibly. He would have liked, for more than one reason, to reach out and rub a hand over Harry's shoulder, but it

was impossible in the current situation for him to touch Harry as long as they both needed.

When we get back to the Manor, Draco promised himself, as the lift stopped at the proper floor and spoke the name of their destination in a calm voice.

Draco didn't waste time; the moment that they were out of the lift, he had his wand in his palm, whispering, "*Point Me* Dolores Umbridge." The wand pointed straight into the heart of the Department, so it was there they went, ignoring the sometimes curious, sometimes pointed stares of the Aurors over desks full of paperwork.

Harry walked more slowly behind him. Again, Draco thought he knew why. This was the place where he had spent a substantial part of his nights and days, after all, especially in the last year. He would recognize colleagues, old partners, probably his friends—though Draco fervently hoped they wouldn't run into Weasley.

Draco shook his head. He could recognize his own jealousy, and his own impatience; he wanted Harry's mind focused on their plan. Harry would claim to be an old acquaintance of Lila Ambernight's family, and insist, in the "charming" way of an obnoxious foreigner who didn't speak much English, that she must be wrong when she tried to put him off, while Draco engaged Umbridge. It made sense that they each take on the one the other was most suspicious of. Lila had dealt with Draco recently and might take his reappearance badly, while Harry would have difficulty controlling himself around Umbridge.

But it still meant they would have to separate, since Draco highly doubted that Umbridge would consent to speak of the fugitive Harry Potter in front of other people, and they would probably pass Ambernight's desk before—

"Vot is this?" Harry exclaimed, in his horrible accent. Draco winced, but then, the chances that anyone here would know what a Bulgarian accent was supposed to sound like were unlikely. Harry could just imitate Viktor Krum, and all would be well. "A voman I know? You is Martha's niece! You must be!"

Good luck, Draco tried to will to Harry, since he had no chance of saying it—in fact, he was supposed to wander on, as if he hadn't noticed that his cousin had gone missing—and then made his way forwards. Two more turns, and he rounded a corner and came on Umbridge hemming at a harassed-looking Auror.

She looked nearly the same as she always had, Draco thought in revolted fascination. Still the pink jumper, still the toad-like face, still the fake beaming smile that she had given him when he became a member of her Inquisitorial Squad.

This time, though, knowing that she might have been the one who'd put the Cassandra Curse on Harry, Draco had to control the impulse to hex her lungs out of her chest.

He stepped forwards and coughed lightly. Umbridge turned towards him with the same fake

smile, but no sign of recognition.

God help me, Draco thought, nauseated, *she has kitten earrings.*

"Madam Umbridge?" he murmured. "Undersecretary to the Minister?"

"Yes, that's me." She widened her smile a bit for him. "Mister Draco Malfoy, is it? And what reason might you have for seeking me out?"

"I have some valuable information." Draco took a step nearer and lowered his voice. "It concerns Harry Potter."

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Chapter: 3

Thank you again for all the reviews!
Chapter Three—Yes
"We can talk here and not be overheard, Mr. Malfoy," said Umbridge, with a grand wave of her wand as she opened the door.

Draco stepped into a room oppressive with magic. On the walls hung enchanted china plates with kittens playing on them. Wards of several different descriptions flickered in the corners and along the edges of the door and desk. The desk itself had hidden drawers, glamours, and an extra chair, most of which Draco could just see out of the corner of his eye. An inkwell that occasionally spat bright green sparks sat next to an enormous pile of paper.

"Important correspondence for Minister Scrimgeour, of course," said Umbridge with a smile, when she saw him looking at it, and shifted it gently out of the way. She sat down behind the desk and folded her hands, not seeming to notice that she should have offered him a seat if it would be a conference of any length. "Now. What is your information on Harry Potter?"

Draco managed to force a pleasant smile onto his face, though he never knew how he did it. "There were certain sights I saw in his mind which did not impress me as important at the time," he began promptly, drawing on the story that he and Harry had constructed together. "But since then, I have reviewed them, and I have realized what they meant. He intended to flee north."

Umbridge sat up; even her kitten earrings stopped gamboling about on her shoulders and rushing the edges of her horrendous pink jumper, and looked at him. "North? To Scotland? Back to *Hogwarts*?" From the sound of it, she would have liked any excuse to interfere with the supervision of Headmistress McGonagall.

"No," said Draco. "Every image of the school that I saw in his mind was associated with loathing." *And if that had been true, I'm sure it would be because of you, old cunt.* "He was aiming for the Hebrides. He believes it cold and lonely enough that no one would ever find him there."

Umbridge looked thoughtful. "There are wizards there, however. Several small communities. He could not hope to avoid detection forever."

Draco made himself twist his mouth into a cruel sneer. "I don't think he was brave enough to give up the company of his own kind completely. Who would he go to for praise and adoration if he fled the wizarding world? It's not as though Muggles know who he is."

The woman laughed like a toad pleased with its pool of mud. Draco gnawed the inside of his cheek with small movements, so it wouldn't be visible from outside his mouth. *Bitch.*

"A good point," she said. "Are you *certain* that he went to the Hebrides, or was it only something he planned on?"

"Only something he planned on." Draco shrugged. "But I know the Ministry has made a splendid search in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade and other centers of the southern British wizarding world, Madam Secretary. I think that if he were easily findable here, you would have found him."

Umbridge preened, playing with the small pink bow in her hair, which Draco found so revolting that he had to lower his face as if in respect, so she wouldn't see his expression. "You are right," she said. "Right. Well. We shall turn our attention north, Draco Malfoy. And you shall be handsomely rewarded." Her voice turned suddenly stern. "Do not think that will mean a lightened sentence for your father, however."

Draco looked up with a smile that he'd taken a moment to render ingratiating. "I understand," he said earnestly. "The Ministry has to keep order, Madam Umbridge. My father was a threat to that order. He had to go to prison. Any other reward would do very well."

There, he thought, as his voice whinged and slid over the last words, and Umbridge's smile grew even broader. *Now she'll think me both calm and obedient, and so greedy for money that I'll have no reason to hide anything—like Harry's whereabouts—from the Ministry.*

"I am so glad to see that sort of wisdom appearing among our young people, Mr. Malfoy," said Umbridge, and loosed a long sigh that ended up with a wobbling bubble of spit clinging to her lips. Draco tried hard to avoid staring at it; he was glad that he would not need to spend much more time in the same room with her. "If it were more common, the Ministry could devote more time to improving the culture and the wisdom of the wizarding community, instead of enforcing laws that should be simple sense."

Draco murmured urgent agreement, and started to turn towards the door, since Umbridge had begun to write a memo and wouldn't need his presence any longer. Before he could slip

discreetly out and make his way back to Harry's side, however, a heavy knock sounded on the door, and then Minister Scrimgeour strode into the room.

He halted when he saw Draco, one eyebrow rising. Draco dipped his head in response. He was bowing to the power the man represented and not to the man himself, but it was not as though Scrimgeour had to know that.

"Visiting Madam Umbridge?" Scrimgeour asked, cocking his head to the side. His ragged mane of hair surrounded his head with a halo so thick that Draco wondered idly if his Aurors could tell when he was coming by how it rustled. Harry had never mentioned it, but then, he and Harry had had very little time for casual conversation. "I did not know that you were a friend of our Undersecretary, Mister Malfoy."

"Giving information on the probable destination of Harry Potter, Minister, sir," said Draco, and bowed just once. His instinct was to try for twice, but that might seem too sarcastic even to Scrimgeour. He wasn't the most observant man alive, no, but he had a fine-tuned ear for the nuances of respect. He'd winnowed the Ministry after the war, casting out those who refused to pay *some* kind of allegiance to him, even if that was just shutting up and keeping their eyes on the floor.

"Ah," said Scrimgeour, and his voice held a complicated mix of emotions that Draco thought was worth coming to the Ministry just to hear. There was reluctance there, and regret, as if he disliked being reminded that one of his best Aurors had gone mad and tried to kill himself. But there was also anticipation, as if he liked the thought of a hunt. "Yes. If you've given the information to Madam Umbridge, I think it's best if she tells it to me."

That was doubtless the cause of more preening from Umbridge. Draco didn't look, though. He nodded and slipped out of the office with one more bow, making his way back towards Lila Ambernight's desk.

He wondered what the Minister's feelings were towards Harry Potter, the hero who could have upstaged him badly if he'd had a modicum of political ambition. Draco knew they hadn't worked together well during the war, but Harry had entered Auror training, after all. And Scrimgeour did seem interested in winning him back, which he wouldn't be if he were utterly hostile to Harry. One would think that he'd welcome the suicide attempt as a gift from Merlin, in that case, and obstruct the hunt for Harry.

Draco would have liked to linger and eavesdrop on the conversation between the Minister and his Special Undersecretary, but he didn't quite dare. And he'd brought no devices with him to make overhearing easier, more was the pity. He made a note to himself to do that for his next venture into the Ministry.

He *had* noted the expressions on Umbridge's face, though. She had looked greedy for news of Harry, intent on knowing what exactly was happening with him. That didn't prove she'd cast the spell, but it did show that her interest in him hadn't waned with the years, even though they

would have almost no occasion to cross paths.

A shout rang down the corridor from ahead.

Draco redoubled his pace, switching his mind smoothly from the complications of intrigue to the problems in front of him. He had no real doubt that the source of the trouble was Harry. Who else could it be?

"But you must remember your distant cousin Esmeralda," Harry persisted. "Vonderful voman. Ve are connected through her, I am certain."

Lila only gave him a disdainful glance and reached for a file on her desk. Harry read the title upside-down, and nearly shook his head in disgust. The title referred to a minor case of cursed artifacts someone was selling over in Knockturn Alley, not to the mystery of Harry Potter's escape.

He had to admit that Draco's plot to disguise him as the foreign Albert was a stroke of genius. The disgust that the Cassandra Curse inspired in anyone but Draco was dismissed as the general xenophobia that most of the Ministry felt for wizards from other countries, and his lies were further confused by the accent. If Lila thought he was deceiving her, she could always tell herself she hadn't really understood what he'd said. Harry had "helped" by exaggerating both the accent and his leers at Lila, as if his claim of "family" connections were just an excuse to talk to a woman he found handsome.

She's not nearly as handsome as Draco.

Harry shoved the thought so firmly to the back of his mind that he thought he heard small cries as it fell down the stairs. He'd reacted like that several times since coming to the Ministry, and it was simply unacceptable.

"When I require your companionship," Lila said, drawing his attention to her again, "I will ask for it." She had sat back and was regarding him with a cool, disdainful expression she seemed to taken off a hook in some immense closet. When Harry met her eyes hopefully, she shook her head and turned away, lip just curling in a sneer he knew he wasn't meant to see. "In the meantime, since you must *know* we are not related, Mr. Malfoy, please cease your transparent deception and leave me alone."

Harry had, reluctantly, to admire her. This was the same composure that Lila had used to put him off when they were partners. She rarely argued; she simply enforced indifference on him until he was compelled to give her indifference in return. And now she went back to work with an air that suggested nothing would be allowed to interrupt her, even if someone was impertinent enough to try.

Harry glanced around the small walls of the cubicle that enclosed her desk. Wizarding photographs waved and opened their mouths in soundless calls and smiled, trying to attract

attention. Harry picked up the nearest one. It was a young woman with bright blonde hair, her smile demure, but a trace of a great sadness around her eyes.

"Who is thees?" Harry asked, though he knew perfectly well who it was from his period working with Lila. He also knew it was the only photograph in the entire area likely to get a reaction from her.

Her shoulders stiffened, and she stared at him with the cold eyes of a snake. Harry could see why Draco had thought her dangerous. "That is my sister, Melissa," she said. "A wizard wielding the Dark Arts killed her." There was an entire layer of frozen disgust beneath the words "Dark Arts," rather like the ice hidden under the surface of a pond in winter. "He might even have been from your country. I'll thank you to put her picture down and *go away.*"

Unfortunately for Lila, Harry had had a lot of practice in ignoring people who would prefer that he back off and investigate something else. He gave her a cool smile, feeling more comfortable and in control than he had in months. Perhaps the whole damn year under the Cassandra Curse, in fact. "Vhat is vrong vith the Dark Arts?" he asked, as though he didn't care about the warning behind her tone. "I understand that your attitude is—how do you say it?—*unenlightened* towards them here, but in my own country—"

Lila rose to her feet, and in one smooth movement struck him across the face and took the photograph of Melissa away. Harry jumped to his feet and shouted, because that was what an ignorant foreigner would do.

He couldn't regret it. He had seen two valuable things. The first was the look of stark and staring revulsion in Lila's eyes. She might have unknowingly served the person who cast the Cassandra Curse, but she wouldn't have used it herself, or worked for someone who did. It was undeniably Dark magic, and Harry hadn't thought one wizard or witch could hold as much hatred for the Dark Arts as Lila did and not explode.

The second was the title of a file shoved, as if casually, in between thicker and more interesting-looking stacks of parchment. His own name gleamed from the spine of it.

Hurrying footsteps converged on the cubicle. Harry turned with an indignant look on his face, ready to explain himself and assert that this silly *voman* had slapped him, and all he had done was a bit of harmless flirting.

But while his back was turned, Lila hit him with the Revealing Spell.

Though intensely painful, it was magic that the Ministry allowed to its Aurors in the name of doing justice. It hit in the middle of the body and opened up from there, stripping away glamours and spells designed to conceal weapons, and writing the most dangerous secrets the victim carried in letters of fire on the air. Harry had used it himself on occasions when suspects were being more troublesome than helpful.

But if there was any spell Harry couldn't afford to have cast on him now, it was this one, since it would immediately show his true identity and remove the glamours above the scar.

He screamed in pain—which wasn't feigned, since the curse felt like a splash of scalding water in the middle of the back—and then flopped to the ground, drawing his own wand on the way and casting a Smoke Charm to wreathe the entire area in a low-lying, thick mist. They would have to have at least three wizards to dissipate the entire spell, with as much power as he'd put into it. The Revealing Spell still wrote *Harry Potter, under the Cassandra Curse* on the air next to him, but the mist covered it, dimming the incredible red and gold colors of the letters, and the Revealing Spell didn't last long. Harry hoped fervently that by the time the Smoke Charm was herded away, his secrets, too, would have faded.

Lila shouted, "*Finite Incantantem*!" and then gave another wordless, angry yell when the mist continued to eddy and shift about her. Harry scrambled to his feet and ducked out of her cubicle.

Draco was beside him in an instant, eyes wide and concerned. His hand fell on Harry's spine, and Harry hissed and arched away in pain, too much hurt to conceal his wounds out of pride. Draco's face went pale for a moment—which Harry must have imagined, surely, because he didn't care that much—and then he had hold of Harry's arm and they were walking rapidly away.

The pace was perfect. Since they didn't run, no one thought they were fugitives. Draco wore the intensely bored expression of a man who had remembered pressing though uninteresting business elsewhere. He supported Harry while appearing to tow him along, so that Harry had a chance to steady his breathing and somewhat ease the burning pain in his back. They were riding down in a lift before any shouts of pursuit followed them. Harry continued to listen as they descended, but there were no shouts at all, which he thought there surely would have been had someone seen *Harry Potter*. They must be concentrating on dissipating the Smoke Charm.

Draco marched him straight to a fireplace on a lower floor, tossed in a handful of Floo powder, shouted, "Malfoy Manor!" and almost pushed him through.

Harry went without objecting.

The moment they were back in the Manor, Draco closed the Floo connection behind them, and then grasped Harry's shoulders and turned him around. Harry squirmed and struggled, but Draco ignored that. Worry made him the stronger at the moment, and he wanted to see the wound.

To his relief, Harry's robes had somewhat protected him, though there was still a smoking patch of cloth and an angry red patch of skin beneath that. Subduing his own anger at the person who had wounded him, Draco said quietly, "I'm going to call Batty to help me tend to you. In the meantime, I'll lay you down on my bed, and you can tell me what happened."

"It's fine," Harry protested, curving his neck and arching away from Draco's touches like a wild horse. "I don't need—"

Draco tugged him close, though he was careful not to lean on the injury, and spoke directly into his ear. "Yes, you do." One of his hands moved, skimming his fingers delicately just above Harry's throat. Harry made a little hitching sound, and his eyes fell shut.

The expression of intense vulnerability that overcame his face then told Draco much he would not have suspected otherwise. Umbridge wasn't the only person he could read.

He needed to give Harry what he needed without humiliating his pride too much. Keeping that one hand hovering above his throat, teasing without touching him, he shouted for Batty to bring cool cloths and one of the general books on medical magic from his library, and tugged Harry towards his bedroom.

Draco's bedroom was broader and wider than Harry's, which only made sense, since he'd given Harry a guest wing, while this one had always been designated for the occupation of a member of the family. The bed swayed with canopies of a dizzying color; Draco didn't know the glamour that covered them, but it was one that changed shades with the moods of whoever slept there. Currently, it was a deep green flecked with splotches of gold, like trees in sunlight. Harry was still protesting in the back of his throat, but in between staring at the bed, craning his neck back to stare up at the immense, hidden ceiling, and trying to decide what he thought of Draco's touch just above his neck, Draco had dropped him onto his stomach before he was aware. And then he could test the softness of the sheets for himself.

"Stop complaining," Draco ordered, while he nodded to Batty. The house-elf didn't like Harry much, but she would never disobey an order from her master. She vanished while Draco picked up one of the cloths, already cool thanks to house-elf magic, and pressed it against the burn on Harry's back. A murmured spell made the robes pull back, allowing him access to the wound while not stripping Harry naked.

Harry tried to get up anyway.

"No, you don't," said Draco, deliberately hovering his hands over Harry's shoulder blades, so that Harry brought himself into contact with them. He stopped promptly and sucked in an enormous breath. Draco pretended not to notice. "You need healing," he said, pushed Harry flat, and picked up the book which Batty had brought him. "And you need to tell me what happened."

"I played the part of obnoxious foreign lecher as well as you told me to," Harry muttered, flopping back down. "And she didn't respond, so I picked up a photograph of her sister—the one who died by Dark Arts—and hinted I knew Dark magic. She didn't take that well." He hissed as Draco pressed one more cloth down, but cut off the hiss suddenly as Draco trailed his fingers along above his spine, touching nothing save the very edges of his sudden gooseflesh. He had to swallow several times before he could continue. "She used the Revealing Spell on me."

"And you—"

"Used the Smoke Charm in turn." Harry uttered a painful chuckle as Draco removed both cloths.

"I don't think she saw anything before my Charm overwhelmed hers, and it would have taken several wizards to get rid of mine. It was risky, but worthwhile. She has a file on me in the general mess."

Draco suffered a fleeting impulse to scold him for not stealing it, but if he had, then they might as well have announced to the wizarding world in general that "Albert Malfoy" was Harry Potter. It was better to wait and retrieve it later. Draco already had a plan in mind that he thought would accomplish that.

"I don't think it was her, though," Harry continued earnestly. "She *hates* Dark magic. As you pointed out, she might work for someone who performed the Cassandra Curse as long as she doesn't *know*, but she'd turn on him the moment she did. No questions asked." He licked his lips—Draco knew the sound, though Harry's head faced the bed—and said, "What did you discover in Umbridge's office?"

"Hush just a moment," Draco said, making his voice absent. "I'm studying." And he did have to read the incantation he'd need, and practice the wand movements. He just made sure that he practiced the wand movements with the empty hand not clutching the book, and just above Harry's back.

Harry arched very slightly upwards. Draco proceeded to ignore that, and swept his hand across another twenty times before he said, "All right, ready," and cast the spell. Harry audibly gasped as a white mist shot out of Draco's wand, engulfing his burn as liquid, and then froze solid. Draco waited the five minutes the book instructed, then tapped the ice sharply with his wand. It cracked and fell away, and beneath it was new, stretched, shiny skin, which should feel better in a day or two.

The spell had, inevitably, chilled Harry. Draco moved his hands back and forth, providing just a hint of heat here, another there, all the while telling Harry about Umbridge and then checking him for further burns. He already knew there were none. That didn't matter. This was about tempting Harry into taking what he needed.

Draco was driving Harry mad, and the prat *didn't even realize it.*

Harry craved warmth. He wanted the hands sweeping along above him to descend, massage him, grip his shoulders, make good on the promise given whenever their fingertips stirred a slight hair or pulled back fastidiously from a little bump or ripple of skin. But Draco went on talking in a perfectly normal voice, and had no idea of the effect he was having.

Harry shut his eyes and tried to ignore his need. He reminded himself of all the bad things that would happen if he became intimate with Draco Malfoy. Laughter would be the least of it. Draco Malfoy was fickle in all interests but Psyche-Diving, surely. He would want to go back to his comfortable career in St. Mungo's, Diving into the souls he had told Harry he loved. He wouldn't want to devote all his time to finding out who had cast the Cassandra Curse, which might take months.

But the words didn't matter against the need, which was smothering his mind in velvet. If he had had *one* break, one moment when Draco had sat back on his heels and not nearly touched him, Harry might have been able to think clearly. But he didn't have that moment, and he finally arched upwards, unmistakably, and pressed himself against one palm.

Oh, God, that felt *wonderful.* Harry listened to the unabashed moan coming out of his mouth and told himself that he should feel a bit of shame, but he didn't, not really. He'd been burned, and then chilled to heal the burn. Surely that entitled him to a bit of body warmth? Just to make sure that the cure hadn't done more harm than the initial curse?

"Yes," he heard himself mumbling, as if that would make sense to Draco, and pressed up again.

The hands descended heavily at once, just what he wanted, rising to rub his shoulders, following the line of his ribs, now and then ducking beneath the remnants of his robes. Harry wriggled closer, parting his legs so Draco could continue to kneel between them, letting out a violent gasp of satisfaction as Draco put one hand on his hip to hold him steady.

And then the fingers were back, massaging gently around the burn. Harry buried his face in the seductively soft pillow, so he couldn't hear Malfoy's chuckles if they began, and deliberately lost himself in the sensation.

Malfoy seemed to know just how to touch him. He didn't skim the delicate skin along Harry's ribs lightly, which would have only tickled. He gave equal attention to his shoulder blades and the dip between them. He paused on Harry's hips in between movements, long enough to reassure, not long enough to worry Harry that he would go lower and touch his bum. He worked at a tense knot a time or two, and Harry relaxed gratefully, pressing the pillow around his face to muffle his gasps this time.

It was what he wanted: companionship, a reminder that someone else existed in the world who game a damn how he felt, without bringing sex into it at all.

He couldn't go so far as to think that Malfoy *cared* about him. He wouldn't permit himself that delusion. But Malfoy would want him comfortable and limber, of course, so that he wouldn't fall behind the next time they attacked the Ministry. Yes, of course that was it.

"Yes," Harry whispered into the pillow.

There was no harm as long as it only lasted a little while and he didn't make it into something it wasn't.

Draco would gladly have gone further, draped himself over Harry and showed him the complementary heat of another human body, or turned him over and exercised his curiosity on the parts of Harry he'd never seen bare. But that was the key to losing the other man's trust, skittish as he was. Draco contented himself with what he had.

He was more than content, actually, as long as he could touch Harry again. He hadn't realized how much he missed this. And Harry lying tamely under him, now and then arching like a cat, was much better than the times in St. Mungo's when he'd struggled wildly, afraid to feel.

Draco had flattened his palms and was stroking along Harry's spine when a sudden stiff set to those shoulders warned him the interlude had ended. Draco promptly rolled away and sprawled beside Harry on the bed, letting him turn over and do what was necessary to protect his modesty. Draco looked at the wall and yawned elaborately. By the time he looked again, Harry had taken his own wand in hand and used nonverbal spells to repair his robes.

And his eyes were narrowed, his face flushed. Draco gave a little nod and prepared himself for an attack. Harry would need to show that he was still perfectly independent and proud, and the way to do that was to take the offensive, referring to their touching session before Draco could.

"Are you straight or bent?" Harry demanded.

Draco blinked. *Well. He probably thought I was going to mock him about his orientation or proposition him, and he's trying to head that off.*

Draco saw no reason why he should allow Harry to control every nuance of their interaction, though. It was his turn to assert some independence and throw Harry off-course. He crossed his legs and smiled sweetly. "I'm curved," he said.

Harry blinked at him. "What?" he asked, and then flushed more deeply, as if he realized how stupid that sounded.

He doesn't look stupid, no matter how he sounds. Draco admired the way Harry's flush went with the deep colors of his eyes and hair. The Revealing Spell had evidently stripped out the blonde dye as well as the glamours. It was a look Draco would like to see more often. Perhaps a little teasing shouldn't be anathema. "I'm curved," Draco said. "My spectrum's different." He closed his eyes and hummed under his breath.

"That makes no sense," Harry said. "You're straight or you're bent." He hesitated, then added, "Unless you're bisexual, I suppose." He made it sound as if people who were bisexual did it on purpose to confuse him.

"Have you ever seen a boomerang?"

"*What*?"

"I said," Draco murmured, letting his eyes slide lazily open, "have you—"

"I know what you said." Harry waved it away, his eyes *burning* as they stared at Draco. *Very good,* Draco thought. *I can rouse the emotion. I just need to convince him to focus it in a slightly*

different direction. "I just don't know what you *mean*, Malfoy."

I think he calls me by my last name when he's trying to shut me out. Rather too late, when we're joined at the soul. "A boomerang has two points that are parallel to each other," Draco said helpfully, "and a middle further away. That's what I'm like. Sexually, of course," he said, and slid a hand down his chest. Harry followed the path of it with his eyes, and then jerked his head away. "I think my figure is rather fuller than that."

"Get to the goddamn point," Harry muttered. His hands were digging into the bedclothes.

"You brought it up," Draco pointed out, helpful again. Harry said something that Draco didn't think was worth paying much attention to, and so he continued. "Sometimes I like things that are similar but very far apart from each other, and sometimes I like things that are in between them."

"That makes no *sense.*"

"Unlike you, I don't require the world to make sense." Draco rolled over and closed his eyes again. "I find it's more fun that way. Now, unless you plan to stay and sleep with me—"

That was all that was needed to make Harry dart out the door. Draco opened his eyes and smiled at the ceiling.

Now I've provoked him. He won't be able to stop thinking about this. And either he'll bring it up again, to prove to himself that he's not afraid, or he'll press the opposite direction and treat me with distant courtesy—which he can't bear, since he needs me, and that will just cause him to come back to me more violently in the end.

I'm keeping my promise. I'm letting him heal at his own pace. Even if it's patently ridiculous.

Feeling very pleased with life in general, Draco finally let himself fall asleep.

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Chapter: 4

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Four—Harry Tries to Have a Row

Harry stalked back and forth in his room. It was the morning after their assault on the Ministry, and he had showered, slept fairly well, and now only awaited word from Batty that Draco was awake and ready for breakfast.

But he could not feel content, despite all that and despite the scattered pieces of information that they had learned from their venture into the Ministry yesterday. After all, he continued to remember how he had collapsed like a child tempted by a promise of a sweet and given in to Draco's teasing.

It was impossible, of course, that Draco could have actually *wanted* to touch him. But he had not been above teasing.

And that meant that Harry had no allies here. (How had he fooled himself into thinking he did?) Draco would do whatever he wanted, and Harry's own body was conspiring with him against Harry. It could *not* be allowed to happen again.

But it might if Harry was hurt and then Draco decided it would be funny to tease him again.

So!

He had to do something. But his options were limited. After all, Draco was the only one who could understand him in any respect. Writing to other people, the way he would have liked to write to Hermione and Ron, wasn't an option because they would see lies on the parchment. Escaping from the house would only render him mute in a world of people speaking a different language. Investigating on his own would deprive him of all the resources, including a safe hiding-place and a regular source of food, that Draco had at his disposal.

What *could* he do, then?

Suddenly, Harry lifted his head. Of *course.* Really, the past had been such a resource to him during his initial year under the Cassandra Curse, with his constant resort to the companionship of the dead, that he should have thought of it before. What had he done when he was helpless against the Dursleys, when he knew they had the power of life and death—or at least food and an empty stomach—over him?

Simple. I angered them. Then they shouted at me and forgot to hold back and play teasing little games, like the one where they pretended I might get food for dinner and then told me they hadn't promised. Make Draco angry, and it won't free me from the curse, but at least it will take away some of his pleasure in teasing me.

As for how to make Draco angry…

Harry smiled, and the smile was evidently grim enough that Batty, who appeared and stared at him a few moments later, took a step backwards. Harry acknowledged her reminder of breakfast with no more than a simple nod.

That would be as easy as escaping from the curse *wasn't.*

Draco was growing tense and annoyed.

He didn't like being either, and so he attempted to retain coolness on his face even as he cut open the light and flaky fish that Batty had brought him; breakfast was rather late this morning, because Draco had slept in and then taken a long, leisurely shower. He would have to go to St. Mungo's today and explain his extended absence, and then he would have to go to the Ministry and explain as much of his "cousin's" conduct as he could. The breakfast therefore had some of the attributes of a lunch, and was a more substantial meal than usual.

No matter at what time the food had come, though, it *had* to be better than the bland and boring meals that Harry had been served in the hospital.

But he stared past Draco's shoulders moodily, responded to none of the conversational sallies Draco offered him with more than a grunt, and batted at the food as if he had become one of Umbridge's kitten earrings more than he ate it. And then he dropped his cutlery on the plate with a loud and indecent clatter and stood, stalking out of the dining area back towards his wing.

Draco rose to his feet. "What in the world is the matter with you?" he asked Harry's back.

Harry yawned, loudly enough for Draco to hear, and then kept walking. He had already almost vanished around a corner by the time that Draco, stupefied, hurried after him.

I made more progress with him than this. I know *I did. And what does he do? Act as if he would rather do anything than acknowledge that.*

Draco stepped up behind Harry, and stopped himself just as he was about to grip Harry's shoulder and shake him. It would do no good to show how thoroughly he hated being ignored. Instead, he stroked Harry's arm with a light, caressing motion.

Harry jumped as if his arm had been on fire, and backed against the wall. His eyes were standing out like a terrified house-elf's, the whites around them so prominent that Draco thought he looked a little ridiculous.

I didn't mean to scare him that badly. Slow, now. Smile. Show him that there's nothing to be afraid of. Offer to talk if he wants it. I know that he said he didn't want to a few days ago, but I think he's trapped his emotions and his suicidal thoughts so thoroughly inside himself that he might really be going mad.

So he smiled, and made sure his manner was careful and comfortable as he spread his hands to either side of him. "If you don't want me to touch you, I won't, Harry," he said. "But I do want to say that if there's anything you need to talk about, my door always stands ajar for you. In the middle of the night, even."

Harry narrowed his eyes. The tension grew thicker and thicker in the air between them, and then

began to hum.

Draco smiled. The piece of his soul in Harry's had begun to sing, trying to snap the anger apart. *Surely Harry can't resist that, can he? I've never heard such a beautiful sound, and I…*

For the first time, it seemed that the piece of soul was trying to pull them together even though they stood a few arms' length apart and knew exactly where the other one was. Draco followed the forming connection, which felt like the longing he had sometimes conceived for a particularly toothsome sweet after dinner when he was a child, and stepped forwards to wrap his arms around Harry.

A moment later, he found himself facing Harry's wand.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "What the *fuck*?" slipped out of his mouth. He couldn't help it. Harry was acting as if they were strangers, or as if Draco's last action had been to punch him instead of offer to sleep with him.

There's letting him heal at his own pace, and then there's ignoring him when he has obvious problems.

"What do you want from me?" he demanded of Harry.

I could ask him the same thing, damn him!

Harry was shaking, and only hoped that he had managed to keep the tremors from his arm, so that his hand wouldn't quiver as if he were holding a toy wand on Draco. He had never been so upset.

He had forgotten about the piece of soul that Draco had buried in him.

A beautiful sacrifice—and a thing like a Horcrux, a thing that he didn't even ask me if I wanted before he planted it. Maybe it had some purpose in the hospital, when it could guide him to me before I got found by someone else. But surely, now—

"Can you take it out?" he asked abruptly.

"Take what out?" Draco blinked, as though he couldn't guess. Of course, for him, Harry thought bitterly, the piece of soul inside Harry would be exclusively a beautiful and noble and becoming sacrifice and all that rot.

"The piece of your soul." Harry gestured at his chest, though he was vague about where exactly the core of his soul resided. "You've convinced me that you're really good at heart—" *ha* "—and it's not as though I can run far, as long as I stay in the confines of the Manor. So shouldn't you have it back?"

Draco shook his head slowly. "It doesn't work like that, Harry," he said, and his voice had gone soft again. *I knew I shouldn't have said anything,* Harry berated himself. *He was growing angry, getting there, and now he thinks I'm some terrified creature who needs tenderness again. I can see it in his eyes.* "Once that spell is performed, it's permanent."

"How do you know?" Harry asked. "Have you ever done this before?" At least, if he knew that many people were walking around with fragments next to their hearts labeled "Draco Malfoy," he would feel less self-conscious than he did.

"No," Draco said quietly. "That was the first time I performed the spell."

Harry smiled triumphantly. "Then you don't *know* it's permanent—"

"The book I pulled it from described it that way, and also said that it could be dangerous to try and integrate a fragment of your soul back into you after it had spent some time in another person's core," Draco said, still calm. "And you haven't finished listening to me, Harry. This is the first time I've done it because you're the only person in the world I would *ever* consider trusting this way—the only one special enough to deserve that gift."

The words tore at Harry's defensive walls, trying to pull them down, trying to tell him that what Draco offered was true—

It is not. This is a teasing game just like the one he played yesterday. What does he have to gain *from meaning what he says?*

Harry narrowed his eyes, and ignored the melting sensation that wanted to invade his chest. He was *not* melting. He was *not* some playtoy, and he would not become one. "I don't believe you," he said.

Draco's look grew indignant. "You think that I hand out fragments of my soul like smiles? I'll have you know that incantation is both powerful and dangerous—"

Now it was guilt that awoke, squirming like a lizard around Harry's heart. *He risked so much for you, and this is how you repay him?*

It's how I have to repay him, he answered himself shortly, *if I don't want to become a Malfoy marionette. He'll still have his life when I'm done with this. What loss would I represent? And I'll have my life, too, and won't become the petted lapdog that he so clearly intends me to be.*

"No," said Harry, forcing the words up his throat like shards of broken glass. "I know that you're telling the truth about—that part. But you can't be telling the truth about why you gave it to me." He laughed, and though the Cassandra Curse wouldn't allow him to lie, he could throw words like acid into Draco's face. "You want me to believe that Draco Malfoy, Psyche-Diver and pure-blood and all-around success story, finds anything to value in the shards of an Auror who's

cracked as a dropped pot? Pull the other one, Malfoy, it's got bells on."

Draco *understood*, now, and he was cursing himself for not seeing it at once. The best defense he could give put up was that he had not realized, until now, how deep Harry's fear ran. The man in front of him was a breath or two from full-blown panic.

Almost any move that Draco made right now would be interpreted as an attempt to control him. The game yesterday hadn't just been a game to Harry, and he hadn't interpreted it as the initial stages of seduction, either, the substitution for the real thing until he got over his distrust and gave himself to Draco of his own free will. He had thought Draco intended to fuck him for fun, and abandon him when he was finished.

And even the piece of soul would be thought of as a hook, if Harry was watching the world through that particular lens.

Draco stared into the blazing green eyes, and wondered how in the world the Dark Lord had ever thought that he could break or divert Harry Potter when he wanted something. This was a man who had been denied control of his life in so many different ways that, when he found someone else trying to snare him again, he would break free of the trap or die trying.

Useless to explain to Harry that Draco wanted the same things he did, and would be happy to strive beside him as he achieved them. Freedom and solitude would be the things to calm Harry down, right now.

And promises which, after all, Draco didn't have to keep if Harry changed his mind about making him keep them.

"All right," he said.

Harry staggered a bit, as though he'd been pressing against a wall which blocked his way forwards and had suddenly vanished. "All right, what?" he asked warily, stepping back and training his wand on Draco's chest.

Draco spread his hands wide, only a bit regretful that he couldn't have them on Harry's skin right now. This was still a man who needed healing of his conscience and his soul right along with his body. "I'll take the piece of my soul out of you," he said. "But it will take some time and study. First of all, the book I learned the incantation from in the first place is one that *I* modified for Psyche-Diving. I'll need to research the magic in other volumes, to make sure I'm not ignoring some crucial step. But I'll also need to learn how to keep myself safe as I reintegrate the piece of soul into me. You wouldn't want the only one who knows you're speaking truth in the entire world to die and abandon you, right?"

Tightly, Harry shook his head. The hope in his eyes was so painful. Draco again had to control the impulse to reach out and gather the shaking, suffering man against him. He *wanted* to trust

that Draco would keep his word, but clearly, that was impossible for him right now.

How much strength must he have to simply get up in the morning and face the day? And how long has he been counting on it? It might be nearing the end at last.

"Good," Draco said. "So. I'll study. And I also need you to write a letter for me."

Harry cocked his head. "Why? Anyone you show it to will simply assume that it's lies." Bitterly, he added, "You wouldn't believe how many different ways around it I tried when I first learned about the Cassandra Curse. They assumed Veritaserum was water. They assumed all my writing was deceptions for the sake of fun, too. And as for spells that would tell the truth, like the Revealing Spell itself…nothing worked. It's always twisted."

Fear lurked in his voice, though Draco thought Harry had become so used to that terror that he didn't notice it any longer.

No, I can't blame him for being afraid of disappointment again, frustrating as it is for me. If he still gave his trust blindly, he would have died months ago.

"I know," Draco said softly, "but this time, we're going to use the curse to your advantage, since I *do* have to explain the mess I made in the Ministry yesterday."

Harry set his mouth in a firm line. "Explain it to me, first."

So Draco did, and watched as Harry's stance grew a little less cautious and, once, he laughed aloud. Draco shivered at the sound of that laughter, and later lingered as much as he could over his changing of the bandages on Harry's wrists.

It was the only chance he might get for months to slide his fingers over bits of Harry's skin, no matter how ragged.

This will kill me, won't it? he thought regretfully, but there was nothing to be done with it. In his own twisted way, Harry had been right, and the decisions he could make about healing were the only right ones for him.

"I—surely you can't be serious, Healer Malfoy?" Grunhilda Sporesby, one of the most important people in St. Mungo's, gaped at him. Draco was silently impressed with himself, since he'd never seen that ancient, gray-haired matron ruffled.

"Psyche-Diver Malfoy," Draco corrected firmly. "And yes, I *am* serious. I find that St. Mungo's no longer suits my career needs." He nodded to the piece of parchment she held, one of the two precious letters he'd carried here in his robe pockets. "That is my resignation, and as you can see, it's effective immediately."

Grunhilda coughed. Her office was large and cheerful in an inane way, showing photos of smiling patients on every wall. It hadn't escaped Draco's notice that most of the photos were slowly acquiring a faint glaze, as happened to the oldest of wizarding pictures. The days when Grunhilda had worked with patients herself were long past.

"I—know that your reception in St. Mungo's has not always been everything that could be wished," she began. "But to abandon your sacred duty of caring for as many sufferers as possible—to stop looking into the cores of souls because a few people were rude to you, a few times—"

She stopped. Draco doubted that his expression of contemptuous irritation was easy to address, no matter how hard she tried.

"Let us not pretend, Healer Sporesby," he said. "The Healers of St. Mungo's hated me because they thought I wasn't here for their altruistic reasons. And they were entirely correct in that, as it happens. I have to choose a place that will suit me on my way to greater fame and wealth, and I'm sick of putting up with the insults of my inferiors for the sake of the few advantages that the hospital offers in that vein."

She looked as stunned as though Draco had just walked up and slapped her across the face. Draco savored it.

"Your sacred duty—"

"Oh, fuck my sacred duty," said Draco, and for a moment wondered if the profanity would actually cause her to have a heart attack, and whether he would be able to summon a Healer to attend her before she fell over if so. When it seemed, disappointingly, that she was sure to live, he went on. "I might have had a duty, but it's to myself, and no religion I know of calls that sacred." He smiled, making sure it was only a faint curve of his lips. "And visiting the souls of the truly insane, randomly assigned to me, is unpleasant. I would prefer to entertain those who actually wish to make use of my services and can pay for it."

"If someone is sane enough to think they need your help, they're probably *sane*," said Grunhilda accusingly.

"I know."

"That means that you'll be treating people who can give you money, more than experience. Rich hypochondriacs who just *believe* they're mad."

"I know." Draco produced a smile for her delectation.

"I thought I understood you, Draco Malfoy." Her voice was actually shaking as she pushed a curl of gray hair behind her ear. "I defended you to the others when your mere presence here made them question my hiring practices." She shook her head, and then her eyes closed as if in sharp

pain or shock. "I thought I understood you," she repeated in a whisper.

"You know," said Draco, pivoting towards the door, "many people have made that mistake, but, funnily enough, never the same people twice."

He left her sitting there, and slipped free of the hospital to breathe the clean air outside, already looking forwards to a future without the constant suppressed waves of hostility and jealousy around him.

Umbridge stared at the letter Harry had written. "*Ingenious,*" she breathed. "Harry Potter is far more daring and clever than I ever gave him credit for."

Draco drew himself up. "And spiteful," he said, letting his voice shake. "To make a fool of *me*..." He shook his head.

The letter was a taunting masterpiece—it should be, since Draco had thought of all the best insults—and claimed that Harry Potter had kidnapped the real Albert Malfoy, taken his place with Polyjuice, and accompanied Draco into the Ministry to learn what he could about himself. Yes, he'd slipped up when he'd nearly revealed himself to Lila Ambernight, but he was safely beyond their reach now, hiding in the isles of northern Scotland, where they'd never find him.

Since the letter would, of course, read as a lie, Umbridge and whoever else she appointed to the hunt for Harry would assume that he was still hiding in London, perhaps Muggle London, and would probably try another assault on the Ministry.

The letter accomplished three things at once. It got people looking in the wrong direction entirely; it made Draco seem like another of the outraged parties, quieting suspicion that he might have been the one to remove Harry from St. Mungo's; and it was a bit of bait cast in bloody waters, temping response from those most interested. Draco did not yet know who would snap at it, but it would be supremely entertaining, and informative, to watch.

It might even have a fourth advantage, now that Draco thought about it. It made Harry seem like a mastermind, with plots laid far in advance of when he needed them. They would be looking for a Harry who acted on his own, an isolated genius, not someone who had a partner.

"I shall make this known to the Minister at once, Mr. Malfoy," Umbridge said importantly, and picked up her speaking tube.

Draco gave her a bow, and then exited the office. He wasn't surprised to see Lila Ambernight look up from her desk and study him with cool eyes as he passed.

A fifth advantage, even. It will inspire her to involve herself in the hunt, too, and thus keep our two major suspects both close. If she has a master, it could show up him or her.

He resisted the temptation to smile at her. It might give the game away.

"Master Malfoy does not care for Master Potter."

Harry looked up from the book he'd been trying to read on Malfoy family history while he waited for Draco to return, more than a little amused. Part of that was the fault of the history—it stressed the lengths that Draco's ancestors would go to to seduce the lovers they wanted, including abduction—but most of it centered on Batty. She had been muttering "idle" imprecations on Draco's character under her breath as she cleaned the library.

"I know that," he said. "He'd just like to fuck me and then drop me, if he gets the chance."

The house-elf turned around and stared at him with bulging eyes. "Master Harry Potter is having a foul mouth!"

"It can get fouler," Harry assured her.

She vanished with an echoing crack, and left him alone.

Harry chuckled and turned a page. *I don't need warnings from interfering house-elves. I know that Draco doesn't care for me and that I can't trust him, none better.*

But that didn't mean they couldn't work together, Harry thought, now that he had calmed down a bit and could consider the matter rationally. Draco would get his fame. Harry would get his freedom.

All in all, a mutually beneficial arrangement.

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Chapter: 5

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Five—Staying Sane

Draco continued to give Harry curious glances until they went to bed that night. Harry supposed Draco wanted to know what had changed in the time since he left to enact the next phase of their plan and the time he returned. Harry had, after all, calmed down enough to greet him civilly, and he had even laughed at a few of Draco's jokes during dinner.

But Harry still declined the invitation to sit and talk for a few hours—it wasn't as if they would be talking about how to find the next suspect in the Ministry; they had to wait for Harry's false letter to do its work—and went to bed alone. He shut the door behind him with a faint smile.

He had thought of a way to stay sane while he waited in Malfoy Manor, unable to travel anywhere, unable to do anything but depend on Draco for help. It was not something Draco would approve of, most probably, but he didn't need to *know* about it, either, not until after Harry was done.

It wouldn't hurt anything. Harry wasn't stupid enough to actually *send* out the letters until the Curse had ended and he was safe again, after all.

But he would write to Ron and Hermione nonetheless. He would write letters as if they would be able to read them and understand the truth of his words, and imagine them receiving the letters and sending responses. At least it would be a *kind* of talking.

Because Draco was right about one thing. Harry knew he couldn't avoid madness if he stayed silent on everything.

But talking to Draco, giving the bastard that kind of power over him, just wasn't an option. God knew what he would use it for when this was done.

Harry had plenty of ink and parchment in his bedroom, of course; Draco had urged him to ask Batty for everything he needed, and the house-elf had brought ink and parchment with severe stares but never a grumble. She seemed inclined to reserve her bile for more important things, Harry thought, amused, as he arranged an inkwell and a stack of pages in front of him. Like trying to make him distrust Draco.

He didn't need any *help* to do that.

For a moment, when he dipped his quill, remembrances of Hogwarts tried to overcome him. He cleared his throat roughly and shook his head, and then began to scribe the words.

He wrote to Hermione first. He would quill joint letters to the both of them, but she was the one he most wished he could speak to at the moment—more level-headed than Ron, and more likely to listen to the full context of a problem before she would offer any opinion.

Dear Hermione:

I miss you. I wish there was some way you could receive an owl from me and be pleased, instead of just worried about where I was and replying to coax me to come back to St. Mungo's.

The Cassandra Curse has sapped me of so much. Your friendship. My peace. Ginny. My ability to think. I still don't know what the best course is. I have to let Draco plan it because I don't have any other option. But—but I wish it didn't have to be that way. Even knowing that the Curse is

nothing but reality, and I should have accepted that reality months and months ago, I still spend time wishing it was different. Does that sound stupid to you?

Probably not, knowing you. You would just frown at me and tell me to go ahead and do *something, no matter how stupid I thought my feelings were.*

So, I am. For the moment, I'm ready to act on any slight clue Draco's plans turn up. God knows what's going to happen next, but I'll be waiting when it does.

And I'm not going to argue with Draco any more, tempting as it is. Why should I? It does nothing productive. If he'd fight with me, maybe it would clear away some of the emotions I have hanging like a storm inside my chest, but otherwise…

I have the idea that he's doing his very best to help me. Isn't that strange, Hermione? And I would be pleased and grateful to accept, but Draco Malfoy's idea of help isn't like anyone else's. He'd probably want me to take the Ministry to court for "damages" or something. As if the actions of one person in the Ministry condemn everyone inside it! But to him, they would—just like meeting and disliking you has probably convinced him that anyone Muggleborn is exactly the same. He never was good at thinking in particulars.

Harry hesitated, his quill hovering above the page long enough to drop a blot. Was that really *true* anymore? If Draco didn't see the differences between individual souls, he wouldn't be a very successful Psyche-Diver. And if he hadn't tried several different techniques on Harry, he never would have uncovered the secret of the Cassandra Curse.

Harry dismissed it with a shrug. It *felt* true. And this was *his* private letter, written just to clear those feelings out that Draco's smug superiority wouldn't touch. He could watch later and learn the nuances, if they existed, for himself.

But of course I can't trust him. If nothing else, that would—

Harry paused again. What he was going to write next was so honest that…

On the other hand, where would he be honest with himself, if not here?

Still with his hand held back from the parchment, as if he would change his mind and erase what he had written at any moment, he scribbled, *prove that I've changed so much I might never be able to have your and Ron's friendship back the way it was again. And I want that back, Hermione. So much. Ginny's moved on from me, but you haven't, and Ron hasn't. At least, I don't think you have.*

The panic building inside his chest made Harry close his eyes and imagine Hermione's concerned, caring voice saying, "Of course we haven't, Harry." He wouldn't work himself into a frenzy anticipating things he had no way of knowing. Yes, Ron and Hermione might have decided to give up on him the way Ginny had. On the other hand, their friendship with him

wasn't an exclusive bond the way the tie to a fiancée was. They could make room in their hearts for other friends and still keep a place open for him.

He decided to think that they would.

I've already acknowledged that it probably won't be the same, he wrote. *But I have to curb my imagination when it tries to make me see* how *different it will probably be. What's the point of trying to heal if I can't at least choose how I change?*

So my relationship to you will change, but it won't be nonexistent. That's the status of any bond I have with Malfoy, though. If I did everything he wanted me to, I would be warped away from the path, and would emerge back into the sane world as a complete stranger to you. So I won't let that happen.

Your friend, Harry.

He shoved the letter away, and sat a moment, tentatively feeling at the edges of his heart. He was immensely relieved to realize that it had helped him, somewhat. He no longer felt as if he'd start screaming just as a vent to pour some of the stress out.

He tugged the stack of parchment towards him and started to write a letter to Ron.

Draco stepped into the shower and stretched luxuriously. Water, perfectly timed by a spell to fall when he wanted it to and at the temperature he desired, struck his shoulders and his neck, and he relaxed with a long shake and an even longer sigh.

Harry was still driving him mad.

He was calmer now, yes, and seemed to make an effort to get along with Draco. At least he probably wouldn't tear away into a wave of useless anger again. Harry Potter continued to make many of the same mistakes again, but not *identical* ones.

Still…

Draco had wanted to lean across the table many times during dinner, tug on the piece of his soul lodged inside Harry's chest, and say, when startled green eyes met his, "There. Now ignore me if you can."

He hadn't done it. But there was only so much patience that he could affect and so much temptation he could take before he snapped.

There was a means at hand to relieve part of his frustration, though.

Draco slid a hand down his torso, tilting his head further back as he did so. The images were in

his head in moments. And, surprisingly, none of them were naked images. He had enough memories of Harry simply reacting to his touch in St. Mungo's not to need nudity, and his strokes were still leisurely and purposeful.

If Harry would turn to him here, surrender passionately in the way he had under Draco's hands the other day—but that had only been for a few minutes. If he would widen his eyes the way he had the second time Draco touched him, the time they'd lain tangled in each other's arms and legs. If he would make those helpless little whimpering noises the way he had the first time Draco brushed his fingers along his cheeks.

No gentle touches for more than a year meant that Harry hadn't had sex for more than a year, either. Oh, sure, he'd probably wanked, just the way Draco was doing now, but he hadn't been touched by another human being. He must be *dying* for it, and the thought of all that skin beneath him and all that half-outraged desire just for him…

Draco opened his eyes and gave a surprised gasp as sudden liquid flooded over his hands and mingled with the water. He hadn't even sensed the pleasure building; he'd descended so gently and quickly into the images.

He reached for a towel even as he turned his torso to the spray and let it wash the white flow down his chest and thighs away. That had been all he had come into the shower for.

He no longer felt as if he were stretched taut between wild horses and waiting for the moment they would begin to draw and quarter him. Still, he knew that some of the tension would return in the morning. It would until Harry gave in and accepted that the one human being who understood him in the world right now also *understood* him, and desired him.

Harry wasn't ready yet. But there was nothing that said Draco couldn't…encourage him. Subtly.

He grinned a bit, and then called Batty, to make sure that she had certain orders and understood them very well.

Harry hesitated at the top of the stairs. This was the entrance to the wing of the house where Draco slept, and though he'd been in Draco's bedroom before, the afternoon they came back from the Ministry, it still felt wrong to intrude.

But, damn it, Batty hadn't shown up despite repeated calls, and Harry didn't know the name of any of the other house-elves in the Manor. When he'd tried calling for elves in general, or clapping his hands the way Draco did when he wanted something, nothing had happened, either. A journey to the kitchens revealed no food in preparation and dangerous-looking spells guarding the cupboards and cabinets.

And Harry was hungry.

If Draco was still in bed at this hour, he deserved to be woken, anyway. At the very *least* he could make the house-elves order some food for Harry before he vanished into his much-needed beauty sleep again.

Harry worked his way towards Draco's bedroom, mouth set in a thin line. He rolled his eyes at the many doors he opened that didn't lead into bedrooms. There were more loos than anyone sane could need, and an inordinate number of private entertaining rooms, and one room filled with brooms and Quidditch gear. Harry tried to ignore the stir of longing in his stomach when he saw that. Quidditch lay on the other side of an insurmountable abyss. Even if he did break the Cassandra Curse, he wasn't sure that he would ever again be able to muster enough trust to appear unarmed in front of so many people.

Finally, he reached Draco's bedroom door. He touched it cautiously, and waved his wand over it, but it didn't appear to be locked or warded.

"Less cautious than I would be," Harry muttered as he nudged the door open. "Of course, maybe the house-elves are all standing guard around his bed."

He'd planned to march in clapping his hands and yelling, and then lift his wand to cast the sound of several thunderclaps, so that he would have the satisfaction of seeing Draco roll out of bed, startled and disoriented, hair ablaze around his head.

That…didn't happen.

Instead, Harry halted and stared. He hadn't realized before that there was such a large window in Draco's rooms, but there was. And the deep blue curtains on it were drawn back, as if Draco had ordered the house-elves to leave them that way so the sun would wake him.

It hadn't worked.

Thick bars of sunlight fell across the bed, but just short of the sleeper entwined in the sheets. Nonetheless, Harry could see him clearly. The sheets were dark green at the moment, the glamour that covered them rippling up and down the scale from malachite to jade, but never becoming any other color.

On that bed Draco lay cradled like a prince out of a fairy tale.

Harry licked his lips, not sure why his mouth was dry and his heartbeat was high in his ears, like a river in flood. Sure, Draco lay with his arms folded, elbows crooked out to the sides, and his head pillowed at the join of his hands, so that he looked graceful and arranged even in the depth of sleep. Sure, the sunlight made his pale skin and his pale hair glow, while not forcing them to sparkle in a distracting way that would have stunned Harry's weak eyes. Sure, he quite clearly slept nude, which added to the distraction factor—although the sheets covered every part of him from the waist down, and muffled the lines of his flanks and legs.

None of that should have made him react like this.

You know why.

He did. Draco was beautiful.

The realization was just…all around him in the room, present as the sunlight, overwhelming and wonderful as the colors of green in Draco's sheets and canopy. Harry could not have stood in this room and *not* thought that. His sexual orientation didn't matter. The fact that he thought Draco was a right git when awake didn't matter.

He was beautiful.

And Harry couldn't clap his hands or cast a spell and awaken him. He couldn't.

On the other hand, he couldn't seem to leave, either. He kept lingering and looking. Draco would probably awaken when some outraged house-elf appeared and demanded to know why Harry was at its master's door, which was another reason for hastening away. And yet Harry remained.

It felt like watching some wild animal browsing on flowers. A unicorn in the Forbidden Forest, maybe. Harry knew it couldn't last forever, and that each moment flowing past as he stared brought the end nearer, and yet he couldn't look away.

Draco stirred at last, and Harry felt a pang of keen loss. He would look silly flailing out of the room in an attempt to make it seem as if he hadn't been there, though. After all, house-elves didn't need doors, and there was only one other person in the house. He steeled himself for the first mocking comment.

Draco opened his eyes, and sleep must have still held his brain, because he grinned a bit, dazed, and then stretched out a hand.

"Good morning," he said softly.

Harry looked straight at the pale skin of his right forearm. It was clear and unmarred. That meant nothing, of course. After all, Death Eaters were marked on the left forearm, and he could still have his wand nearby. Under the pillow, even.

But to Harry it made Draco look achingly vulnerable. And he kept the hand outstretched, instead of rolling over. Harry stared at him. Draco looked back, his smile dim and peaceful, his arm starting to shake with the effort of holding it steady.

The soul connection between them began to hum.

For the first time, it didn't make Harry leap and start. He licked his lips again, and then took a few steps forwards. It felt as if he were doing something greatly daring. After all, Draco could

laugh at him any time now—not least for making a simple morning greeting into something so laden with awe.

But he didn't laugh. He just kept gazing, blinking now and then like a lizard content on a sun-warmed rock, in no haste to clean the sleep out of his eyes. Harry edged closer and closer, and still the hand remained, reaching for his. It did turn over when he reached the edge of the bed, the palm curling up, empty, unprotected.

It seemed only natural to clasp it.

The warmth of the hold, and the unexpected firmness of it when Draco closed his hand around Harry's wrist, sent a jolt through him. But it was the same kind of jolt Harry would have felt if the unicorn he were watching had turned and come towards him to rest its horn on his shoulder, instead of bounding away.

He bowed his head. The humming in his ears grew louder.

The silence around the humming was the sweetest sound Harry had ever heard, except phoenix song.

"Good morning," he whispered back.

Draco watched Harry through half-lidded eyes, smiling. It had been a simple trick, instructing Batty to stay away from Harry in the morning and to tell the other house-elves not to prepare breakfast. Hunger would eventually force Harry to seek him out.

Draco had been able to predict the time to within the hour. And he had arranged, after that, to look beautiful.

And he had shown that he had trusted Harry.

That was wove the magic between them, whatever Harry might think in his daze of sunlight and green. Harry would have hated beauty that seemed complicated and seductive; he was wary of traps. And he would have approached Draco in a guarded manner if Draco had shown *him* guarding.

But show him trust, and he responded.

He was beautiful, too, this close, his green eyes wide with wonder and the soul-bond humming between them. Draco didn't think he realized it. There were people, both men and women, who knew they were lovely; even if they never did anything with it, you could see their knowledge in the way they moved. Harry carried himself as if he were unaware that people even *thought* about such things.

So beautiful.

Draco sucked in his breath suddenly, but let it out gently enough that he wouldn't alarm Harry with a gasp. He had just realized, as he stood at the edge of a warm cliff, what his *own* willingness to be this open in front of Harry meant.

Something much more than just gaining Harry's trust because he could. A wanting that went beyond sex.

Well. The trust had to come first. Draco put the realization away for now and sat up, still moving slowly, languidly, giving the impression that dreams clung to every inch of him. And, as he had thought would happen, Harry moved back a few inches to give him room, but didn't let go of his hand or run from the room.

"I slept well," Draco said, keeping his words low and precise. "You?"

"Very well." Harry blinked his eyes once or twice, and light frown lines appeared along his scar, as if he felt the presence of a spell and didn't like it. He shifted, so that the rough edges of the bandages on his wrist pressed against Draco's skin.

Draco knew their enchanted interlude was about to end, and it was better to let it fall apart now than to let Harry awaken and retreat into embarrassment. He yawned, deeply, tilting his head back. The sunlight would strike his hair and neck, he knew, and make his sometimes disturbing pallor appear to handsome effect. And it would, even more to the point, bare his throat to Harry, and show he had no fear of that.

From Harry's slight gasp, it was working.

Harry could not remember feeling more comfortable since the nights he used to spend snuggled up in bed with Ginny. The soul-bond had become a soft, constant sound. Like bees making honey, it was going about its own work, and so long as Harry didn't disturb it, it had no reason to attack.

He could no more have kept from staring at Draco's throat than he could have kept himself from obeying the call of gravity.

And that was all right.

Harry blinked. He didn't want to tear himself apart for that. He was sitting close to Draco, touching him of his own free will, and the distrustful corner of his mind wasn't screaming at him for being an idiot. The distrustful corner of his mind was completely quiet, in fact, drugged into stillness.

Every one of Harry's bones felt as if it were melting.

But Draco would think it was strange if Harry just kept clinging to his hand, and so he turned his eyes away and drew his hand reluctantly free. The sensation of warmth traveled along his palm for slow, delicious seconds. Harry choked a whimper, and then told himself not to be such a child.

Ignoring the sweetness of the soul-bond's humming, he asked, "What about breakfast?" He couldn't speak above a whisper, though.

"Yes. I'm hungry," Draco said, and his voice was the same—deep, tranquil, dragging over the words as if he would like nothing better than to sit here for the rest of his life and speak them.

Harry made a soft, helpless sound, and shook his head a bit as he stood. Maybe that would get the cobwebs out of his mind.

He was acting ridiculous in front of Draco Malfoy, a man he had no reason to trust.

He felt so *good.*

Maybe, just maybe, Harry thought, his brain moving too slowly for the urgency of the subject, he should see about changing a few of his basic assumptions.

Because if he hated and feared Draco Malfoy, he shouldn't feel this much longing to watch him dress, or have this much difficulty turning his eyes away.

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Chapter: 6

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Six—Snapping at the Bait

Harry wondered if he should feel annoyed at the mood that overlay the entire (late) breakfast with Draco that morning. Everything seemed—careful. Draco spoke less than usual, and less sharply. Sometimes he glanced at Harry with a smile, though that was as close as he came to referencing what had happened between them in his bedroom. Harry could feel the hum of the soul piece whenever he was weak and listened for it.

He wanted to argue that he wasn't weak, that he didn't need this careful coddling and swaddling that Draco gave him.

But would you have enjoyed it so much, if you didn't need it?

Harry gave a helpless shrug at his eggs. The year under the Cassandra Curse had left him confused about his own strength. He knew he needed to maintain it, but other than by writing the letters to his friends and accepting that his relationship with them had changed, he had no idea how. And even the idea of yielding to Draco seemed less an indication of helplessness than it had been mere hours ago.

He turned, at last, away from the thought of his own weakness—it led him nowhere, and occupied him too much—to stare at Draco from the side. It was one of those quiet pauses when Draco seemed entirely concerned with his own eating, and didn't look up at Harry. Harry got to see the sunlight fall on his hair, and the slight white sheen it lent to his skin.

Does he never go outside?

But he couldn't make the thought hold the contempt he wanted, either.

So weak you don't even have control of your own emotions! Harry snorted and concentrated fiercely on his plate, which at least couldn't contradict him.

But the contradiction he had become aware of remained, and ripened, and grew, until if Draco *had* spoken to him, Harry probably would have blurted it out. He could be grateful *that* hadn't happened, at least.

If he believed everything he'd said about Draco in his letter to Hermione—if everything there was *true*, and Draco was no more capable of caring about him than a shark was of caring about a seal—then where did this comfortable coddling and swaddling come from? Why should Draco *want* to spare his feelings? He had no stake in that. He had a stake in seeing that Harry recovered as soon as possible, in fact, so that he could claim his reward of fame and prestige.

Things never made sense, no matter how Harry turned them.

Perhaps Draco wanted to make Harry trust him and then gloat about it later. But the gloating would be a small reward for so much *work*. And if he wanted to appear in public as Harry's ally and savior, then it would have had to be kept between them, anyway.

Harry passed a hand over his face. He was tired, and confused, and the late breakfast hadn't helped at all.

"You want to rest?" Draco asked him. Harry looked up, and told himself not to notice the curves of Draco's cheekbones. Nothing of the gentle expression that had been on his face when Harry interrupted his beauty-sleep—

Beautiful sleep—

remained. He was alert, predatory, hunting. Harry's shoulders fell from their tense posture, and he replied, "No. I'd like to go for a walk in the gardens, but I know you said it's dangerous for me to venture outside the physical protection of the Manor at all—"

"Batty will go with you," Draco said. He snapped his fingers, and the sullen house-elf popped up. Harry smiled at her, and she stared at him suspiciously, moving her mouth in silent imprecations which Draco didn't appear to notice. Of course, Harry welcomed her because he thought she might help him recover his balance and his cautious, critical distance from Draco, but neither one of them needed to know that. "I'm afraid I can't attend you, since I have a patient this morning."

Harry snapped his head around. "A patient? But aren't you going to St. Mungo's?"

Draco shook his head. "I resigned. Remember?" he added, and Harry was forced to recall that they *had* discussed it, along with Draco's plan to set Harry's letter afloat in the Ministry. "My patient will come here." He licked his lips, giving the impression of a cat who had been promised a pleasant meal. "It certainly didn't take long for the news that St. Mungo's best Psyche-Diver had left to spread."

"But won't this patient see me?" Harry asked. "Most of the windows in the Manor look out on some part of the gardens."

"Not the one I'm going to use," said Draco, and gave him a slow smile. "Besides, you have your wand. I trust you to cast a glamour in time, if you heard shouts and saw someone flying towards you. I'll set another house-elf up as a warning system, just in case."

Harry closed his eyes and turned his head away.

"Harry?" And there was concern in Draco's voice. Well, of course. Couldn't allow the goose that laid the golden eggs to die too soon.

"I'm all right," Harry whispered, and thanked God that his voice didn't crack in the middle. *That*, he would have had a hard time explaining, as he would the tears that pressed against the undersides of his eyelids.

Draco trusted him to protect himself.

Draco didn't think he was so weak and so useless that he needed to be watched over and assisted in every movement of his life.

Not even Harry's doubts could devalue that gift.

Draco stood near the window of what had once been his mother's conservatory, gazing out on the gardens. The windows had been shrouded under powerful spells so that not as much sunlight would intrude. At the moment, it provided the perfect vantage for Draco to watch Harry

unobserved.

Harry appeared perfectly content to amble around the Manor's gardens with Batty, though he stared rather too obviously at most of the flowers, and showed himself an absolute novice in walking the neatly tended sands of the paths without disturbing them. Draco quelled the impulse to step out of the house, take his arm, and show him how it was done.

He could hear, if he concentrated, Batty's shrill, squeaky voice. She was giving the standard botanical lecture that had been meant to impress visitors to the Manor in his grandfather's time. Draco rolled his eyes. She really was a relic.

Harry will be all right.

Still, he lingered by the window, and it was harder than he expected to turn away. Distance between them had become a fluid thing since the scene in the bedroom this morning, wavering and contracting and expanding when Draco least expected it.

While he waited for his patient in the impressive library—loaded with most of the books he had used to develop Psyche-Diving, and the honors that St. Mungo's had been forced to give him for developing it—he closed his eyes and thought about that distance. It was no longer just due to the piece of soul in Harry's core.

If it ever had been.

Draco was not blind to his own self. He had been forced to learn it rather invasively when he was practicing the techniques of Psyche-Diving; he had no one to practice them on but himself, of course. It was one reason he had always laughed when the Healers spoke of coaxing someone gently back to health. Draco didn't have the kind of soul that would let him get away with that, even if it *was* the better course. If his behavior or his mind underwent a massive change, he knew it would be reflected in his soul.

The intense attention he had paid to Harry in hospital, and continued to pay, rather argued that something had changed. He drew his wand, aimed it at himself, and whispered a modification of the simplest soul-reading incantation. In the case of someone else, he entered through the mind, but of course one could not use Legilimency on one's own thoughts.

The world around him wrenched harshly to the side, and then reformed itself in the familiar arches and domes and whorls of his soul. Draco nodded, as at an old familiar friend, to the chips of black and purple and gold that surrounded him. But the background of his soul was the jagged green mountains, and he almost reckoned that he could breathe in the fresher air that hovered around them.

Not *purer* air. Draco would never claim that. His soul was no purer than anyone else's. But he knew, as so many people did not, the source of his own emotions and impulses, likes and dislikes. What he did not lack in was explanations. What he never gave was excuses.

He glanced around for the sign of the change, and froze the moment he saw it.

Over his mountains arched a glittering curve of blue-green, shaped like a rainbow. Its end was somewhere far away, so far that Draco thought he would need to swim towards his core to reach it. The nearer edge was a few inches away, as he conceptualized distance in the soul, and he stretched out a hand, shaking with eagerness, and ran his fingertips through the edge of that glinting and cool light.

The same deep inherent goodness struck him as had struck him when he swam through Harry's soul. The blue and green mingled like this formed an unusual shade, and just like any color that inhabited the soul, it had more than one meaning. There was something of compassion there, and understanding, and the same thoughtlessness that occupied so much of Harry, so that he charged ahead first and invented reasons for his conduct later. Draco knew, dimly, that he should be appalled that he had turned into so much the reckless Gryffindor. He should see this as a flaw in his soul.

He did not. He could not.

Harry had not given him a piece of his soul, not the way Draco had gifted him with a fragment of his, or Draco would have *felt* it—and he and Harry would have needed to talk about the Psyche-Diving abilities that Harry had apparently kept concealed from him. But in becoming so invested and interested and entangled in Harry's life, part of his soul had altered to mimic the qualities that he found so appealing in Harry.

Draco had seen this happen before, when he'd spent weeks immersed in someone else's history and personality. But it had always been temporary, and usually lapsed back into the normal colors the moment he was out of regular contact with his patient. This—Draco hadn't read Harry's soul since the day he'd brought him home, more than a week ago.

This might be permanent, a change that he had adopted because he'd *wanted* it.

Draco's knowledge of his soul was inadequate to describe the feelings spiraling through him, and he didn't try. He just watched the blue-green arch in silence, until the pop of a house-elf far away warned him that his visitor was probably here.

That Harry had given him something so beautiful…

Draco took a moment to calm himself before he ascended and had to deal with someone who wasn't his Harry. He could put on a mask of cool indifference even when these kinds of emotions filled him. He'd had long practice in hiding savage glee when the Healers at St. Mungo's had to learn that his methods were superiors to theirs, after all.

It was harder hiding exaltation, he discovered.

Because that was the emotion's name.

But eventually he managed it, and opened his eyes to direct a nod to his house-elf, Tinky. Tinky gave a little squeak and vanished, and a few moments later Draco's patient was hesitating in the door of his library. He was a tall, weary-looking, stretched-thin black man, whom Draco might have thought to be Blaise's cousin if he didn't know better.

"Regis Jones?" Draco asked.

Regis nodded, and Draco came forwards to shake his hand. "You're welcome to sit," he said, drawing the professional mantle of the Psyche-Diver around him like a cloak, "and tell me about the—problems—that you think plague you." Hesitating delicately there, both to avoid naming it as insanity and hinting that the problems might not be as serious as the patient thought they were.

Never let it be said that Draco Malfoy didn't know how to manage his patients.

Save the most important one, perhaps.

"And over here are night-blooming roses." Batty sniffed audibly. "Not that Master Harry Potter would know what they are, as Master Harry Potter comes of dirty blood and these are not *Muggle* flowers."

Harry laughed to himself. He had survived a year with everyone he knew and loved best hating him. Why should he let the taunts of a house-elf make any difference?

The gardens were more tranquil than he had expected, even though Batty was seizing every fountain and sundial and flowerbed as an opportunity to make him feel inferior. The sunlight had lost the foreign, enchanted tinge it had had for Harry earlier that morning, when it had made Draco glow like a divine image, and was just ordinary, honest light now. The blue of rare roses, the white gleam of narcissus, the green stone that several leaping dolphin statues were carved of, the intense red gleam of butterflies darting over the flowers…he let it pass into him and soothe him.

And he didn't even try to avoid thinking about Draco. The thoughts were going to come anyway, so why not let them? And it *did* seem as if he could think more calmly and sensibly in the sunlight.

So. One thing he knew. The spoiled, self-centered boy he had known would not have grown into a man who tried his best to rescue Harry and take him from St. Mungo's. Harry didn't know for certain what had changed him. It could have been his sixth year at Hogwarts. It could have been the war, which had had the effect on Harry of almost numbing him to death and loss, while pressing him ever closer to those he loved who were still alive.

And now you've lost them all.

Harry ground his teeth. He was thinking about the *present* now, not the past. He would use the letters for talking. His dialogues with himself were all circular or pear-shaped, anyway.

He didn't know what had changed Malfoy. It didn't matter. He'd changed.

Has he changed enough for me to trust him?

And there's the rub.

"These benches are made of marble older than Master Harry Potter's paternal line," Batty said, and then turned around and scowled at him when he absently brushed his hand across them. "Batty humbly suggests that Master Harry Potter refrain from touching them. Master Harry Potter would not want to smudge them."

Harry shrugged at her. With his thoughts actually taking a productive course, the inside of his head was more interesting than the outside.

Harry didn't know for certain if he could trust him. After all, he kept tripping and falling against the one essential thing, the question that had no good answer, or else an answer that would do him no good: what benefit could Malfoy derive from pursuing this so far and for so long?

Glory, he's said. But the glory was uncertain, and far in the future; Harry had no idea how long it would take to break the Cassandra Curse, or if they'd ever manage it. Draco had given up a comfortable job—

His profession, for God's sake, which he helped develop himself.

—and a piece of his *soul*, and time alone, and space in his own home, to help Harry. That wasn't even talking about what he'd taken on by doing it. Harry would have defied Draco to put up with him for half-an-hour when he was healthy and sound of mind. Now, he wasn't fit company for a sick rat. And there was the danger from the Ministry, and possibly from St. Mungo's. Harry wasn't sure what the hospital would or could do if they found out Draco had abducted one of their patients, but at least the legal consequences couldn't be comfortable.

And what was it all for? Harry moodily kicked a bench. He didn't know.

"Master Harry Potter is *not* to be kicking benches," Batty said, her voice rising in a screech that Harry idly thought was probably like a Victorian maiden's on discovering her bridegroom had lost the wedding ring. "Master Harry Potter is to be respecting the benches, and the flowers, and all the other ornaments of the garden!"

Harry shrugged at her again, and she turned her back and marched on before him, the hairs in her ears bristling.

What does he want? What can be worth this?

Harry sucked the inside of his cheek, ignoring Batty's comments about how it was a filthy Muggle habit, and shook his head. There was at least one dark possibility: that Draco had seized what, in his mind, was a glittering diamond, and that when he realized it was paste, he would turn viciously on Harry. Any trust Harry had given him would then become a weapon, and Harry knew he probably wouldn't survive Draco turning on him.

He threw back his head, and considered the sky overhead solemnly. It was a light, banded blue, crossed with several blazing clouds.

But isn't that true anyway? Even if he turns on me for another reason, and not that one, I won't survive. The point is that I need to get myself into a strong position from which I can *survive, no matter what happens. I was almost there when I entered St. Mungo's—and then I ran into Draco.*

Harry narrowed his eyes against the sunlight and let Batty's monologue become part of the background.

To get there… to become strong again…

The conclusion is the same no matter how I come at it. I need to trust him.

Not blindly, of course. He could still be plotting to betray me just for the fun of it, or he might see a better chance in turning me over to the Ministry than retaining me. But for the moment—with the proviso that I'll pull back in an instant if I see anything too suspicious—I'll rely on him a bit more than I do. Just a bit *more.*

Relaxing, Harry turned his head and looked towards the front of the house, wondering for a moment whether Draco's patient had departed. Luckily, given their late breakfast, he wasn't really hungry for lunch.

And then he stood straighter, because something was wrong. It took a sharp command to shut Batty up and long moments of listening, sensing, and filtering out the different impressions of the Manor's wards before he realized what it was.

Harry had worked in the Auror Department for six years now and had several different partners. Granted, he'd spent the last year alone and on the most dangerous cases, but that didn't take away his knowledge of the previous five. And he'd been around some of his colleagues even longer than that, since they'd mentored him through the three-year training program.

He knew their magical signatures.

And the magical signature of a familiar Auror was written on the air around the Manor in squirming letters. Harry drew his wand and cast a glamour on himself, that of a nondescript brown-haired, blue-eyed man he'd used on several cases, and then relaxed as much as he could,

opening himself to the signature in order to identify it. Probably it was someone incompetent. After all, wouldn't the Ministry be using most of its resources to hunt him in London or the North? Spying on Draco in Wiltshire, after he'd seemed to cooperate with the Ministry so well, would be grunt work.

And then he identified the signature's location—the house—and the particular person the magic came from.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, one of the most competent Aurors the Ministry had.

Harry began to run.

"It's the *voices*," Regis was explaining in a tone of grave conviction. "I know they're probably not real, but—" He paused and shot Draco an intense look. "You know how sometimes it sounds like the voice of your conscience is a separate person? Well, is it really all *that* different? My mother could be in my head. Or her voice could be. I know *she's* really not, she's still alive, after all—"

Draco held his tongue and fought the temptation to give this idiot a lecture on the theory of how wizards became ghosts, which certainly would not include haunting the inside of a beloved son's head.

His mother must love him, because I think no one else would.

As he had suspected, his first patient was some fool convinced he was insane and rich enough to waste Galleons on purchasing the services of a Psyche-Diver to confirm that. It wasn't a serious case, or at least, it wasn't one that Draco contemplated Diving into the man's soul to solve. As he had also suspected, they'd spent this first session in talk. Regis only wanted someone to babble to about his "problems," and Draco would use the time thus gained to persuade him to consult an ordinary Mind-Healer.

Of course, he showed none of his boredom. From long practice in all sorts of situations, his mask of calm concern was perfect, and he knew exactly how to hum at pauses in the conversation to show he was still listening.

"And sometimes they tell me to do—shameful things." Regis blushed, and Draco hoped he wasn't to be treated to a recitation of the bloke's sexual indiscretions. "For example, *Expelliarmus!"*

Draco reacted too late as his wand was snatched away from him. He started to rise and clap his hands for a house-elf, but the man in the chair across from him cast several hexes in swift succession, and Draco found himself in an expert Body-Bind, gagged, thoughts shifting sluggishly under a sedation spell that he'd used many times himself in St. Mungo's. The house-elves wouldn't sense any distress from him and wouldn't receive any signals, and unless one of them intruded into the room by accident—which they would never do, knowing their

master had requested not to be disturbed—he wouldn't be found.

Shit, he thought, struggling to think. *I have to—I have to—*

But he couldn't remember what he had to do, what was so urgent that doing it was absolutely paramount. He breathed in and out instead, and found his eyes focusing dully on the pattern in the carpet. In the back of his head, he cursed himself for a fool, even though he knew full well it wasn't productive.

Regis, or the Auror—and even coming to *that* insight took him labored moments—turned away from him, and towards the door.

And then there came a strong, confident voice shouting, "*Stupefy! Obliviate!"*

The body of the Auror fell down and lay still. Draco stared at it. He wasn't sure he could wonder about the cause; his mind had just agreed with him that the voice was indeed strong and confident.

Quick footsteps hurried to the chair, a wand waved, and suddenly Draco was free and thinking clearly. Also furious with himself, but that was a given.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked quietly, surveying him. It was Harry's voice, though it emerged from an unfamiliar, coarse-featured, blue-eyed face.

Draco nodded once. To his gratitude, Harry believed him without more nagging questions, and faced the Auror again.

"Who is he?" Draco asked, hiding his curiosity as to how Harry had known behind a carefully constructed mask of calm. He'd made a mistake, yes, but it had turned out all right. Now wasn't the time to scold himself for it.

"Kingsley Shacklebolt," Harry said, casting a few more spells that removed some glamours on the man and melted his face into one vaguely familiar to Draco. He chuckled. "It looks like your bait caught a shark, Draco."

He turned around and grinned, and the gleam in his eyes cut through all glamours to let Draco know it was Harry Potter—and a Harry Potter with faith in himself he hadn't seen since he first confronted him in St. Mungo's, a Harry Potter who made his breath catch. Yes, now was *definitely* a time to avoid scolding himself.

Harry nudged at the Auror with one foot, and continued, never removing his eyes from Draco's, "We can send him back to the Ministry with any tale we want, now. This is about the best thing that could have happened." His face altered a bit, and he added, "Except that I would rather you hadn't been put in danger."

And there was more than one new thing in Harry's eyes and voice, now.

Draco spent a moment wondering what he had done to deserve this good fortune, and then recalled the very long tale of his excellent qualities and couldn't help but return the smile. Besides, it wasn't good fortune so much as skill and planning and knowing how to take advantage of chances.

He set out to take advantage of another one.

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Chapter: 7

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seven—Telling Tales

"Do you have Veritaserum?" Harry asked, crouching down next to Shacklebolt and keeping his wand turned on him, as though the man might wake from a *Stupefy* and *Obliviate* and *not* make enough noise for them to hear him at once.

Still, perhaps it was a wise precaution, Draco admitted to himself. The Ministry had already proven smarter and more competent than he had thought they would be.

Or Harry's enemy is.

"You would support the use of it, uncontrolled?" Draco teased Harry, while his mind raced through the several truths that had just been revealed, and how he would use all of them. "How shocking, Auror Potter."

Harry made a rude snorting sound, which Batty would certainly object to if Harry ever did it while she was serving them at the table. As it was, Draco found a smile edging onto his face; Harry should make that noise more often, since it showed that he was getting back some sense of himself. Harry, looking at Shacklebolt still, didn't notice Draco's foolish expression. "I'm not an Auror anymore," he said. "And nothing could persuade me to become so."

"Really?" Draco asked. "Why not?"

Harry just stared at him. "You've read my mind and my soul," he said. "You *know* why. I tried to commit suicide to get away from the Ministry and ensure they wouldn't seek me out again. They saw me as a workhorse, nothing more."

There was a thick bitterness in the back of his voice that Draco wanted instinctively to soothe. He doubted that now was the time, though. Harry had just asserted his independence rather strongly. He would reject any sign of caring as a sign of condescension.

"Well, you've answered my objections to Veritaserum," he said, drawing his wand. "It's easier to use Legilimency on him and read the truth of why he was sent here from his mind. I don't have Veritaserum in the house, and we couldn't keep him here long enough to fetch or brew some."

"And it can be tracked." Harry's hand flexed open on his wand for a moment, and then closed convulsively. "I'd forgotten that."

Draco nodded. "On the other hand, I know how to cover my tracks in another person's mind. I did it the first time I spied out information from a Death Eater in order to survive."

"I didn't know you had to do that."

Draco turned to face Shacklebolt, because Harry really *would* be suspicious if he saw the smile Draco could feel sneaking onto his lips now. *Is that curiosity in your voice, Mr. Potter? The desire to know more about me, perhaps?* He couldn't be sure whether it was only the chance to save his life and act like an Auror again or something else, but Harry seemed more open than he had been when he went to wander in the gardens that morning.

"The war wasn't a holiday for me," he said. "Ask me about it sometime when we don't have an Auror to interrogate." And he looked into Shacklebolt's slowly focusing eyes and aimed his wand. "*Legilimens.*"

The darkness came up and whisked him into the man's mind. Draco concentrated on the memories he wished to see—those of the meeting in which Shacklebolt received his assignment to visit the Manor—and they rose up around him like solidifying smoke. Draco watched in interest as Shacklebolt stepped into Umbridge's office and braced his back against the door. Clearly, he didn't like her anymore than Draco and Harry had reason to.

Umbridge, in the memory, had a mouth as wide as her face, and she sent little flecks of spit flying when she talked. "Mr. Malfoy has been most helpful to the Ministry. However, there remains the fact that Harry Potter tricked him once and might trick him again. You're to go to Malfoy Manor and pose as a rich patient wanting to take advantage of Mr. Malfoy's Psyche-Diving skills. Arrangements have already been made for you to assume another identity and do so."

Kingsley's memories surged with feelings of disgust. Draco gave a little nod to himself. He was fairly sure the Auror hadn't known anything about the Cassandra Curse, or suspected that Harry was actually a victim of the Ministry. "But what am I supposed to look for? If Harry Potter isn't there—"

"Ah, but he might be." Umbridge held up one finger. "In a disguise so cunning that it would fool

even Malfoy. After all, it happened once before, when he pretended to be his cousin. It wouldn't be easy to fool someone as observant as a Psyche-Diver, and yet Mr. Potter managed. Understand," she said sternly when Kingsley opened his mouth to object again. "We're concentrating our efforts in other areas, as well. But we can't waste the chance that Potter might want to repeat his triumph—he's obsessed with doing so, according to our psychological studies of him—"

Draco snorted, secure in the knowledge that no one in the memory could see or sense him in any way. If they knew Harry's current state of mind at all, they would realize that he was barely convinced he could *have* triumphs.

Although that might have changed with the way he took down Shacklebolt.

"—and so return to the scene of his former crime." Umbridge fiddled with the small bow in her hair. The earrings she wore today were tiny lambs, gamboling about so cutely that Draco almost gagged. "You'll just bind Malfoy after you gain access to the Manor, investigate his house for signs of Potter, and then *Obliviate* him. It's a simple enough assignment, all in all," she added, voice sharpening when Kingsley hesitated.

"Listen," the Auror said. "I knew Potter. He wasn't stupid, and he's had his instincts sharpened by working on difficult cases. He might have fooled Malfoy once, but he wouldn't count on doing it again. I doubt he's at the Manor."

"You have your orders," said Umbridge stiffly. "Unless you want to actually disturb the Head of the Auror Office with your ideas…"

Kingsley didn't want to. He accepted the file Umbridge gave him, bowed his head stiffly, and then departed. He hadn't even asked the question Draco would have expected, about how he was to fool a Psyche-Diver who could read his mind and soul. Evidently he trusted enough in his own expertise to keep Draco talking until he could lull his suspicions and Stun him.

And it did work, didn't it? They sent one of their best.

Draco dismissed that memory and spent a few moments roaming about, looking for any trace of knowledge that Kingsley might have concerning Harry's case. There was still nothing. When Kingsley thought of Harry, it was with pity and a faint disgust that he had let himself be so manipulated and used by the Ministry for the sake of being free to tell childish lies. He was determined that he would be nothing like Potter, and he had treasured and valued his own partner even more since everyone he knew refused to work with a pathological liar.

If you could have known, Draco thought, lip curled as he slipped out of the Auror's thoughts, *you would have done anything to keep him.*

"Was he the caster?" Harry asked the moment Draco opened his eyes.

Draco shook his head. "But he received a specific mission from Umbridge to come to the Manor, look about, and see what I knew," he said. "And she implied that the orders came down from the Head of the Auror Office himself."

Harry's face reflected blank surprise for a moment, and then he shook his shoulders. "Pius Thicknesse," he said. "Well. I've never had any conflict with him directly, but he doesn't like me."

"Why?" Draco asked. He hadn't any clear picture of what Harry's relations with his superiors had been like before the curse—or even after, he supposed. His strongest impression was simply that everyone in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had hated Harry after the Cassandra Curse had taken effect, but that wasn't unusual. Mediwitches in St. Mungo's had hated Harry after the Cassandra Curse had taken effect.

Harry looked up, blinking. "Oh," he said. "I thought you knew."

Draco's smile curdled a bit; he couldn't help himself. Harry had trusted Draco to tell the truth about what he saw in Shacklebolt's mind, but he still wouldn't volunteer much information about himself. "Yes," he said. "Because you and I had so many willing heart-to-hearts."

Harry narrowed his eyes, and controlled the surge of panic that told him he would fail if Draco took any dislike to him. Draco was still a Malfoy, and they would still jump on any distress they saw. It was no wonder Draco had been able to drive Harry in circles so far, manipulate him with nothing more than a brush of a hand on his shoulder or a careful word, or that he delighted in the soul-connection between him. He had been the one to create it, so even if he didn't control it, precisely, he had the satisfaction of knowing that their strongest tie came from him.

Harry chose, then and there, to take a second step towards establishing himself as independent from Draco. The information could be important, so he wouldn't conceal it. But he would offer it in a completely indifferent manner, so that the things Draco learned wouldn't be a greater invitation towards intimacy.

I'm giving him trust. That's not the same thing as intimacy.

"All my superiors were uneasy around me," he said evenly. "For a while, they thought I would take advantage of the popular sentiment after the defeat of Voldemort to establish myself in the Auror Department on that alone." He rolled his eyes when he saw Draco's minute flinch at the Dark Lord's name. *For God's sake, he's been dead and gone for nine years.* "When I chose to go through the training program, they thought I'd disrupt it. When I became an Auror, they thought I'd insist on taking all the high-profile cases with the chances for the greatest prestige. When I showed myself willing to do scut-work, too, they kept waiting for the day I'd become bored with being an Auror and go into politics. It was rather tiresome. Nothing I did could convince them of my good intentions." He shrugged. "I suppose the period of my constant lying was almost comforting for them. At last I was acting out and trying to get away with claiming special

treatment, the way they always thought I would."

"You don't think," Draco began slowly, "that one of *them* might have cast the Cassandra Curse? Someone with a good deal of power tried to put you into the Janus Thickey ward to rot. Someone powerful in the Ministry, like Pius Thicknesse—"

Harry shook his head. "No, I don't think so. They were ever so pleased that my solve rate went up while I was under the Curse, so that I actually looked *better* to the press, and made them look more competent, in turn. Assuming that they had the brains between them to recognize the Cassandra Curse and use it, I would think they'd bet on that as the end result. All the supposed victims died, either because they drove people away and then became victims of situations they couldn't handle, or because they committed suicide. They wouldn't have wanted that to happen to me. I had to choose suicide as a means of convincing the Ministry I was crazy and couldn't work anymore; they didn't believe me when I said I was tired, and they kept assigning me to more and harder cases."

"But they're the best candidates we've found so far," Draco argued. "And Umbridge's orders came—"

"From Thicknesse, yes." Harry's voice was flat. He could see Draco frown about that. He did not care. "He's the Head Auror, so of course they would have to come from him. But I still think the Curse is a work of malice, from someone who hates me *personally*. We did try to convince them that I'm a master manipulator and a dangerous political player, after all. They were just being cautious by sending Shacklebolt here."

Draco eyed him in silence. That temporary openness had blown off like a storm, and Harry watched him with green eyes wary enough to show that he'd continue the argument for hours, if Draco didn't let him have his way.

Draco dipped his head, conceding the debate for the moment. Besides, what he planned to use Shacklebolt for would draw the attention of Harry's enemies no matter who they were. If disgruntled Ministry officials were distracted and thrown off the trail along with the actual caster of the Curse…well and good.

"Here's what we should do, since you were kind enough to cast a Memory Charm on him already," he said. "We'll send him back with a tale that he *did* find you here—"

"What?" Harry demanded, an incredulous look on his face.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Hear me out." Harry folded his arms and gave him an unimpressed look, which made Draco wonder just how much confidence stopping Shacklebolt had handed him. An uncomfortable amount, perhaps. Draco wanted Harry to recover, yes, but he would prefer that the idiot not rebel against *him* while doing it. "This adds to your 'master manipulator' aura. You were living in my house and I *didn't even know it.* You'd fooled me completely. But when

Shacklebolt here confronted you, you bragged about your plans to set up an attack at the Ministry itself and then fled, since he's still the better duelist." He eyed Harry. "Will they believe that?"

Harry sighed. "Better make him believe that I was caught off-guard, or caught up in my bragging. Otherwise, no, most of them would have the sense to realize that he couldn't defeat me."

Draco accepted that with a nod. "The day after our little plant here carries the story back, *I* show up, expressing outrage that you were in my house and demanding that the Ministry catch you. I appear more firmly an ally of the Ministry than ever, since I forgive them for sending an Auror to investigate my home and bind me." He let a thin smile pass over his mouth. "And in the meantime, Shacklebolt here is under strict orders to collect that file that you saw on Ambernight's desk and turn it over to me."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Are you going to cast the Imperius Curse on him?" His hand moved to his wand again, as though to say he would hex Draco before he'd let him do it.

Draco shook his head at him. "The Unforgivable Curses are really no worse than any other set of spells, you know. You can brew a suggestion potion and command anyone who drinks it. You can cause pain with the Dark Arts. And if you slice open the femoral artery with a *Diffindo* and then prevent your victim from healing it, she'll die just as surely as if you'd cast the Killing Curse at her."

Harry tapped his wand. Draco sighed. *Legalistic Gryffindor. He's still that, no matter what kind of an outcast he calls himself.* "It's not the Imperius Curse," he said, to settle his Auror's sensibilities. "It's a form of Legilimency. Shacklebolt will be in a dream state half the time, and be convinced that it's from a hit on the head he took while he was dueling with you. He'll retrieve the file, but only when he can do it undetectably, and hand it over to me as soon as possible. And then he'll forget he ever did it. He'd be able to deny that he'd done it under Veritaserum, which is not the case with someone under the Imperius Curse, unless they've also been ordered to lie."

"And you're *sure* that someone won't see the traces in his mind? I've heard of Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries—"

"Let's just say," said Draco, the corner of his lip lifting a bit, "that in developing the discipline of Psyche-Diving, I investigated and learned about varieties of mental tampering that no one else will even recognize."

Harry stared at him. Then he shook his head. "And have you used any of them on me?" His tone was—mostly—joking.

Draco caught his eyes, though, and wouldn't let him look away as he said, "Of course not. And if you distrust my declaration, I'm perfectly willing to send away for some Veritaserum, drink it in front of you, and then repeat that particular truth. If you have the guts to repeat that particular

accusation."

Harry turned his head away, his cheeks flushing lightly. Draco was glad. He could accept that some of Harry's distrust was the natural consequence of spending so long under the Curse and having not a single ally while he acted to save himself, but Draco was becoming quite tired of the idea that *he*, who had sacrificed a piece of his soul for Harry, was in the same category as the person who had cast it.

"Understand?" he whispered, when some moments had passed and Harry's blush had grown deeper. "Do you understand that I would *never* do that to you, and that I don't appreciate your implying that I would?"

Harry bit his lips over the impulse to apologize. He hadn't done anything wrong, after all. He'd just been defending himself, the way he needed to, since his little bit of trust and his ignorance of Draco's ultimate motives wouldn't let him think that Draco would absolutely pass up the temptation to rearrange Harry's mind. He might think of it as harmless fun, but the temptation would still be there. He was perfectly willing to manipulate Kingsley's thoughts, after all.

But Kingsley isn't you.

Harry took a deep breath, and decided to swallow his pride for right now. He didn't have to let his apology mean much. "You're right," he said. "I—I believe you wouldn't do *that*, at least." *And maybe I do.* "I'm sorry."

There was a long silence. Harry didn't know what Draco thought, because he kept his head turned determinedly in the opposite direction. The longer he thought about this, the worse he felt, and the more he wanted to elaborate on his apology.

But that might mean falling into a trap, trusting Draco more than he should. He needed to be more on his guard than ever, now that he fully understood how accomplished Draco was with mind magic, and how dangerous. It was a difficult thing, but Harry would rather waver along that line, and sometimes make mistakes, than fall over it completely and only realize he'd lost part of himself when Draco dropped him like a hot rock at the end of this.

"I said I was sorry," he repeated, when the silence had become unbearable. He forced himself to turn around and meet Draco's eyes again. The soul-connection between them chose that moment to start humming again, the way it often did when they were on the edge of an open argument with each other. Harry grimaced. At least it gave him something to focus on besides the hurt that he'd caused Draco. "Are you going to get to work on Kingsley's mind?"

Draco gave a barely perceptible nod, and then bent over Kingsley, though he kept eye contact with Harry until the moment when he actually needed to look away in order to use his Legilimency. Some of the accusation had left his gaze, but it was still penetrating, as though he never wanted Harry to forget how much he'd offended Draco.

And that was ridiculous, because why should Draco care about what Harry said when it didn't affect his ultimate goal?

But then Harry reminded himself of the realization that he'd come to in the gardens, that he still had no idea what Draco wanted from him. Maybe the strain on their tentative friendship was intolerable in some odd Malfoy, Slytherin way. Maybe Draco was still thinking that Harry's distrust would get in the way at a crucial moment in their plans, and Harry would hesitate instead of letting Draco save his life or rescuing him.

So Harry stood by quietly while Draco gave Kingsley his false memories and his undetectable orders, and mumbled a farewell before he vanished into his room again. He had to write another letter, this time to Ginny. He wouldn't send it even if the Curse was lifted, thanks to Ginny's acceptance of another lover and the ending of their engagement, but he had always been able to pour his heart out to her unhindered. She listened to him better than Ron and Hermione could.

Harry needed that, right now.

So far, their plans had worked out. Draco had received nothing but sympathetic murmurs when he visited the Ministry in false outrage, and Umbridge, at least, seemed to count on him as a firm ally, judging by the number of owls he'd got from her.

Draco would have been more satisfied if Harry wasn't back to treating him carefully again, watching him with confusion in his eyes and answering questions in a polite, neutral manner, but he couldn't have everything. And he was used to waiting for what he wanted, thanks to his years as a Psyche-Diver, even if he *did* become horribly impatient while he did it. And at least carefulness and confusion and neutrality were better than the panic that had once lit Harry's face when Draco got too close.

The other man seemed to be struggling with decisions and concerns that Draco couldn't share. Draco bit his tongue a dozen times a day to avoid telling Harry that he *wanted* to share them, and why didn't Harry talk to him and see if he didn't find that easier than working through his muddles alone? But he had to refrain. Harry was delicately balanced right now, more than he had been since coming to the Manor. Draco might get what he wanted if he remained silent and casual just a bit longer.

But Merlin, it was difficult.

That realization he'd come to in his bedroom the morning he enchanted Harry only grew stronger. He wanted Harry for more than the satisfaction of helping him, for more than the reputation he might gain once the Cassandra Curse was broken, and for more even than the pleasure of touching him. He wanted the man who had a blue-green soul and whom he'd thought worthy of a piece of his own. He was even willing to wait for Harry to come to him, though the waiting had swiftly acquired overtones of torture.

Let something happen soon, he asked any fate who might be tempted to look kindly on him.

And then, something did.

Draco and Harry were eating breakfast one morning five days after they'd sent Shacklebolt back to the Ministry when a large tawny owl swooped through the window. Draco accepted the outsized envelope from it, and fed it bits of his eggs while he tore the envelope open. A file spilled into his hands, bearing the name *Harry Potter*—the same file Harry had described as being on Lila Ambernight's desk.

Harry was at his side in an instant, closer than he'd come in days. Draco allowed himself a private thrill as he hesitated solemnly, then opened the file.

The top parchment was a copy of the statement that St. Mungo's had created when Harry was admitted to the hospital after his suicide attempt. Written in a sprawling hand across Auror Ron Weasley's signature as the person who had found and stopped him and the confirmation of Harry's birth date, height, weight, and other personal information was the phrase *Finally. May he stay there.*

And Harry went still, and whispered, "I know that writing."

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Chapter: 8

Thank you again for all the reviews!

And here is the chapter that I suspect many people have been waiting for since the beginning of 'A Reckless Frame of Mind.'

Chapter Eight—Enemy Mine

Draco stared at Harry, waiting for him to go on. But Harry only stared at the handwriting across the St. Mungo's statement as though it would reveal its secrets of its own free will. When a minute had gone by without his blinking, Draco hissed and snapped his fingers together in front of Harry's nose.

Harry jumped, harshly enough to push his chair back from the table. Then he shook his head and looked up at Draco. His eyes were sober and quiet. Draco drummed his fingers on the table and tried to avoid strangling him.

"I know who did this," Harry said. "And I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to stop helping me here and now. This man is powerful, and—"

"I want to know." Draco didn't think that anyone who knew the whole history of their recent interaction would blame him for having a clipped voice. Harry had the solution to the mystery and was holding out on him, *now*? Draco was within a few heartbeats of drawing his wand and using Legilimency on Harry if he wouldn't tell him willingly. "Who is it?"

Harry licked his lips. Then his eyes closed as if he was stepping forwards to face his own execution, and he said, "Minister Scrimgeour."

Draco sat back heavily in his own chair, and stared at the file. He said nothing, but his mind darted madly back and forth across what he knew like a hummingbird from flower to flower, picking up the pieces and laying them together in new configurations.

Scrimgeour. Of course.

Someone with immense power had ordered the St. Mungo's Healers to cooperate in moving Harry to the Janus Thickey ward, and even if he had done his best to avoid notice by making it look as though Draco had given his permission for it, he would still have had to convince *one* person to forge Draco's signature and turn their back on the Savior of the Wizarding World. There were a very limited number of people in the Ministry who had that kind of rank. Draco should have suggested they begin at the top and work their way down, instead of targeting the relatively powerless Lila Ambernight. Umbridge was more of a possibility, but still, the Healers were more likely to question her orders than Scrimgeour's; she wasn't a public figure to the same extent that he was.

And then there was the fact that he knew the relationship between Scrimgeour and Harry had been strained long before the Cassandra Curse was cast. Scrimgeour had used the Boy Who Lived, as he would have been a fool not to, but no one had ever accused him of *liking* Harry. In fact, hadn't he tried to get Harry on his side before Dumbledore died, and produced a rather clumsy maneuver that actually turned Harry against him instead? Draco couldn't remember, but he would be sure to ask in a moment.

And Scrimgeour had come into Umbridge's office when Draco finished his private conversation with her. He had probably been alerted the moment Draco entered the Ministry, and he might have suspected, at least then, that Draco had a fairly good idea where Harry was.

And orders had come down for Shacklebolt from the Head Auror—but they had come *through* Umbridge, which was a strange thing when Pius Thicknesse could simply have called Shacklebolt in and given him the orders himself. But it wasn't strange enough for Shacklebolt to question, of course.

And if Lila Ambernight *did* have any knowledge of this, the one person she might have been persuaded to keep quiet for, and the one she certainly would have served willingly if she didn't

know he cast the Cassandra Curse, was her Minister.

It all made too much sense, and it lit a fire of roaring anger inside Draco. So the Minister didn't like Harry. So he resented his actions during the war, when Harry had acted under his own aegis and Dumbledore's instead of joining with the Ministry. Even an idiot should have been able to see that Harry had no political ambitions. He didn't want to trade on his name. And he had come to an accommodation with the Ministry after all, hadn't he, being one of its Aurors and not abandoning it until circumstances forced him to? Years could have passed, decades, and still Harry would have been content with his low-ranking Auror job and not made a run for Minister, Draco was certain. Scrimgeour was more in danger from certain Heads of Departments, or his own Undersecretary, than he was from Harry.

But then, Harry had said that this curse was a piece of personal malice and hatred, not a disinterested political move. Draco was certain Scrimgeour had spent years watching Harry, his resentment brewing, his agitation only sharpened when Harry did nothing and he had to suspect him of some long-range and especially cunning plot. And then he had found the Cassandra Curse, and probably seen it as a way to be rid of Harry with no blood on his hands whatsoever.

Draco knew how it must have been, and the fury he felt made it difficult to sit still.

He raised his eyes, and saw the expression of dread on Harry's face, and knew what the prat would say even before he opened his mouth.

"I can't ask you to shelter me anymore," Harry said. "I'll leave as soon as I can."

Harry wanted to howl at the moon like an enraged werewolf, but the anger had to dim and die when he saw the expression on Draco's face, and he fought it away. After a year under the curse when he hadn't had any choice, he'd had enough practice.

The danger that this revelation would cause to Draco was plain enough. Scrimgeour was already aware of their investigation, and he must suspect that Draco was still in contact with Harry to have sent Kingsley. And he could destroy a man who had recently quit St. Mungo's and was now affiliated with no organization, much less the Ministry, even more easily than he could one of his own Aurors.

Draco had been—kind to Harry, in numerous ways. Or he had acted out of self-interest, but it had resembled kindness and generosity enough that the effects were the same. Harry had to protect him. He couldn't let Draco risk his neck.

Against Umbridge? Yes, though Harry would still have insisted on confronting her alone once they had sufficient proof. Against a host of lesser Ministry officials? Yes, and he might even have relied on Draco's support then, because they were a breed of people that Draco would understand better than he would. But Scrimgeour was a difficult target, protected by more people than anyone else in the Ministry, including a special division of bodyguards instituted two years

ago after a semi-serious assassination threat. Harry would have to think long and carefully about how to approach this. He couldn't let—

"Fuck you, Harry," Draco said flatly.

Harry gave a little nod. He hadn't thought they would part on such bad terms, but no doubt Draco was thinking of the time, and even money, in the form of the lost salary at St. Mungo's, he'd invested in this, and regretting that he hadn't done something more productive. "I'd like to stay here a few days while I owl about for a flat. I'll gladly pay you. I sent some of my Galleons into a side account that no one else knew about and which was supposed to support me in the Muggle world—"

Draco was on his feet a moment later, striding around the curve of table that separated them. Harry drew his wand, and tried to suppress the thrill that raced through him when he watched Draco's tiger-like strides. Then he shrugged and let it through. After all, soon it wouldn't matter how handsome he thought Draco was or wasn't.

Draco seized his shoulders and gave him a small shake. This close, Harry felt a sudden renewal of uneasiness. He had anticipated a punch, which he'd dodge, or a spell, which he'd counter. But Draco looked—

Stubborn.

That was *always* bad news.

"Fuck you," Draco repeated. "Do you think I'll give up *now*? Of course not. I'm only disgusted that I didn't see this earlier, that I haven't proved a better adviser to you." The hands on Harry's shoulders flattened out and smoothed down the cloth they'd rucked up, and Harry's skin burned where they touched. It was a motion disturbingly like a caress, though Harry knew it couldn't be. Would Draco touch someone like that who had just put him in imminent danger of arrest or death? "We'll fight him together. And you'll need my intellect, that's certain, to get close to a man as well-protected as he is."

Harry would have bolted to his feet in alarm, but Draco being in front of him rather put an end to that plan. He settled for shaking his head violently, while trying to keep his eyes on Draco's. Maybe he could convey his sincerity through his expression. Ginny had used to say that he was good at that. "No! I can't allow that. I—"

His throat seized up as Draco leaned incredibly nearer, until Harry felt his breath fluttering the stubble on his own chin. He shut his eyes, so that he wouldn't go cross-eyed and because he hoped it might lessen the effect. It didn't. He was still so *aware*, achingly helpless in the face of what Draco represented.

"You aren't master of me," Draco whispered into his ear. Harry felt his head roll limply back against the chair before he knew it was going to happen. Please, he thought fervently, let Draco

not have heard the whimper he couldn't prevent from escaping his lips. "And you aren't master of my actions. And I've come this far in helping you. And it *enrages* me to know what he's done to you, all because he's a coward and a prisoner of his own misjudgment." His hands moved from Harry's shoulders to his hair and the nape of his neck, tugging and curling as if he were petting a cat to keep from getting too angry. "Do you know what I do when I'm enraged, Harry?"

God. Harry couldn't have opened his eyes now for anything in the world. Draco could have announced he was betraying him and sending an owl to Scrimgeour, and he would have remained here, still as a trapped rabbit, until Draco took his hands away. Harry's breathing and heartbeat were fast enough to make him dizzy, but he scarcely heard them because his ears were cocked for a sound of Draco's voice.

If he turned on you, he could destroy you more ruthlessly than Scrimgeour ever dared dream of.

Harry felt a renewed surge of panic, because this was the one thing he had *not* wanted to happen, this dependence, and he knew he wouldn't be strong enough to drive Draco to a safe distance, the way he should. But the panic welled and died away again like a single spring rising in the middle of a sea. The rest of him was caught in utter surrender. His lips parted, and he tilted his head, further exposing his neck.

He knew what he should do, but control of his body was shut off from his rational brain just as thoroughly as it was when he fell asleep.

Draco felt the moment when his anger transformed into lust, just as strong, just as savage. This was Harry with his defenses down, transparent and given over as he had been during the massage after their escape from the Ministry—except that, this time, Draco could see his face.

It would be so *easy* to gather him up and take him to bed now. Draco *wanted* it, so that his voice was hoarse when he did speak from the dryness of that yearning.

"Harry. Harry?"

Harry, rising from oblivion, it seemed, as if he'd been hypnotized, gave a hoarse, inquisitive murmur, and then his eyes fluttered and opened. The look he gave Draco was one of terrified wonder, the same gaze that he would give a dragon about to eat him, because by then he might as well feel something other than fear.

And that was tempting, too. Did Harry have any *idea* how much Draco wanted to fuck him right now?

But Draco clenched his teeth and held himself back. He knew that Harry would yield and let him have his way if he pushed. But this trance he was under could only last a few hours at the most. He'd wake up later, stare at Draco in hatred, and then vanish from Malfoy Manor. And then Draco would as helpless in the search for him as Harry's friends and Scrimgeour were.

Better to use this obedience to make Harry promise that he would still let Draco be part of the investigation. So Draco bent and murmured into Harry's ear, making his voice as much like a lover's as possible, but also mock-reasonable. Instead of persuading Harry of the delights of the flesh—which would come later, though not by much, if he had anything to say about it—he needed to show him how deep his instant hatred for Scrimgeour ran, and come up with the beginnings of a scheme.

"When I'm enraged, Harry, I start hunting. But I don't do it in a sudden or haphazard way, oh no. I wait, and I study my enemy, first by asking people who know him, and then by looking up all publicly available material on him. Do you know why I do that, Harry?"

Harry licked his lips. Draco wished he knew a spell that would provide him with the instant benefits of a cold shower.

"No," Harry said at last, and even that sound was dragged out of him, as though he'd given up part of his heart to make it.

"I do that," Draco said, and paused to admire the way his breath stirred the small hairs inside Harry's ear, "because I want to make sure that my enemy can't take me by surprise. Of course I'm cautious and am almost never taken by surprise *anyway*, but there's always the small, slight chance. The day I start believing I'm perfect is the day I start thinking I'm infallible, and the day I start thinking I'm infallible is the day I'll fall to some petty and insignificant detail that my descendants will hide their faces in shame from."

A faint smile crossed Harry's mouth, as though he were thinking about being amused. Draco stroked the side of his throat, and then pulled his head back upright; he'd get a crick in his neck if he lay like that for long. Harry yielded, his breathing deep and peaceful, eyes fluttering now and then as if he really *had* been drugged. Draco felt another moment's regret that he couldn't take him to bed right now. He had the feeling that Harry would be extremely—*pliable*—to whatever he wanted to suggest.

But Draco would keep this mood in mind. He hadn't known Harry could be so brutally open to a lover. He'd remember.

"With the Minister," he said, and only a slight tremor raced through Harry's muscles as they tensed up again, "there'll be *lots* of publicly available material. And there'll be his enemies, who can tell me of weaknesses that he may not ever be aware he has. This will be an organized hunt, Harry. We have to make sure not only that he takes back the curse, but that he *regrets*, deeply and *sorely*, that he ever interfered with your life."

Harry heaved a bit at that, and when he opened his eyes, they had some sense in them. "But I want to be free of this," he whispered, "more than I want revenge."

Draco stroked his fingers over Harry's scalp soothingly. Harry arched his back, and gooseflesh

broke out down the sides of his neck. Draco made a resolve to remember that, too. Perhaps Harry had fallen into this somnolent state at least partially because Draco had started to run his fingers through his hair.

"I know that," Draco said. "But I want both. And believe me, if we can work on this together, it'll be better than a plan that I come up with on my own. Besides. Think of how he's likely to react when he knows that you *know* it's him, and that you're alive and dedicated to overcoming the curse, to remaining in the wizarding world, instead of killing yourself or fleeing. You don't want to find him aiming at your back again."

"I don't understand," Harry whispered then, and sat up, slowly, rubbing his arms as if he were cold. "Why did he cast it at all? Of course, he never liked me—nodded coldly at me in the corridors and all—and he didn't want to award me that Order of Merlin I got. But I barely came into contact with him for five years. It's not—I don't—I don't hate *him*, so why does he hate *me*?"

"Sometimes," Draco said softly, "you have no idea what's happening in another person's heart, but you're the center of the universe to them. They'd do anything to get even with you. You might go on about your days, uncaring, seeing them in a glimpse of the margins of your life every now and again, but meanwhile they always know where you are and where *they* are, and they're planning. And the fact that you don't respond to their overtures is just more proof positive that you *deserve* to be hated."

He was unprepared for the way that Harry's hand rose and caressed his cheek a moment later.

"That was you, wasn't it?" Harry whispered. "I'm sorry. For whatever it's worth, I'm sorry. And for whatever it's worth, you have your revenge on me, now, since you occupy pretty much the same central place in *my* life."

Draco blinked.

There was an old regret soothed, where he had least expected it to be.

And there was a sudden path to understanding why Harry had pulled away from him since they arrived at the Manor, in a way he hadn't expected it to appear, either.

Harry froze the moment after he said the words, and he would have withdrawn his hand from Draco's cheek if he thought there was any way to do it without inflicting more hurt.

Why did I do that? Stupid, stupid, stupid! Now he knows how much he means to me, and I've just given him license to destroy me whenever he likes.

He did cough and try to pull his hand back then, but Draco caught it first, and held it still. *He* moved, though, turning his head so that he could press a kiss to the center of Harry's palm. Harry thought he also felt a very slight brush from the tip of a tongue, but his head had begun to spin

for—various reasons—and he couldn't be certain.

"*That*," Draco said, in the tone of someone satisfied to have discovered a vast secret, "is the reason that I'm helping you, and the reason Scrimgeour was mad to cast the curse in the first place. He should have realized that you were too good to threaten him." His fingers curled around the edge of Harry's hand, and he kept it undeniably but gently in place, rubbing his cheek up and down against the palm. "You have a beautiful soul."

"I do not," Harry muttered, because he couldn't think of any other response that that declaration deserved.

Draco's eyes flashed open, and he pinned Harry with a gaze so intense that he couldn't move. This was unlike the helpless, captive sensation that he'd felt before, though. This made him feel awake, like flying on a broom always did, the keen cold wind flashing past his ears, the ground spinning beneath him, death and glory soaring at his heels.

"Yes, you do," Draco said, almost grinding the words out. "I've *seen* it, remember? And even in the midst of your own pain, you reach out to me, and try to make amends for the past, whether or not it can be made up for.

"That's the reason I'm going to help you, too, by the way. I've never known anyone like you, and I want to go *on* knowing you. I want to see you happy. I want to see you able to take your place in wizarding society again, if you want it. If you don't, that's fine, but you should be a recluse or live in the Muggle world *by choice,* not because some evil wanker of a Minister drove you to it." He leaned nearer again, one of his eyebrows rising. "Don't insult me again by suggesting that I draw back and try to save myself at your expense."

Harry's mouth was dry again, but for a different reason this time. He felt the way he had when Ron and Hermione had declared that they would come with him on the Horcrux hunt. There were some bonds that could not be parted, and it would be a desecration to try.

It still felt odd to him in some places, bewildering. He knew exactly why he was friends with Ron and Hermione. When had it started with Draco? *Why* had it started with Draco? Despite his claims that Harry had a beautiful soul, Harry had seen his, too, and knew it was at least as beautiful, and deep in ways that his never could be.

It was like the gift of a bit of soul to him, he decided, half-fretful even as Draco gazed at him and waited for his answer. He saw no reason for it, didn't know why he should be honored that way, and was inclined to throw it back in the giver's face because—because it made no *sense*, that was all.

But it was clear that, with respect to that piece of soul, he'd made at least one horrible mistake.

Hesitantly, he curled his hand around Draco's, and nodded. "All right," he said. "I'll accept your help, though I don't want you to go unaccompanied into danger, and I'll insist on playing an

equal part."

Draco nodded briskly. "Good. I want to talk to you about your relationship with Scrimgeour, first—"

Harry cut him off with another soft squeeze of his hand, and finished. "And please—um, I don't know if you've started, but don't—don't bother researching ways to take the piece of soul out of me." Draco's eyebrows climbed higher, and Harry found himself blurting, "I was wrong to say that I wanted it gone. It's too good a gift. I don't *deserve* it, but I'll try to. Um. Thank you for giving it to me."

He had never known that Draco Malfoy could smile smiles dazzling in their sweetness. It was his second grand revelation of the day.

Draco knew his hand was shaking as he reached out to touch Harry's chest, the place near his heart where the core of soul was conventionally said to be located—and thus the place where the fragment of his own soul was—but he didn't care.

He had never felt like this before, this expanding, exploding mixture of emotions, soft and gentle flame at the center of a whirlwind of fire. His eyes and his lungs hurt, and to hold back from embracing or kissing Harry was difficult.

He settled for touching his chest, and after a moment, Harry reached out and mimicked the gesture, laying his hand over Draco's heart. Their mingled heartbeats made the next moment something close to holy.

"All right," Draco whispered, because he couldn't think of any words more graceful to end this interlude. Anything would sound awkward and wrong. "Let's get started, shall we?"

Harry hesitantly smiled at him. Draco was torn with the sudden impulse to never confront Scrimgeour at all, so he could keep Harry here in the Manor and be the only one to see such smiles. He was greedy of them. He wanted to hoard them.

But it would be even better to win them fairly.

"Let's," Harry whispered.

Yes, much better.

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Chapter: 9

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Warning: this chapter is non-linear. One set of scenes happens in the present time of this chapter (a few days after Chapter 8), the others in the days between.

Chapter Nine—This Plan Might Work

Harry held the flask in front of his eyes for a long moment, staring. He licked his lips and looked towards the entrance of the Ministry, then back at the flask.

He knew it was probably the only way he could enter the building undetected. And the brilliant plan Draco had concocted absolutely *demanded* that he enter the building undetected.

But none of that could diminish Harry's discomfort at taking Polyjuice Potion—especially since that had been supposedly been how he entered the building as 'Albert.' And *this* Polyjuice had been brewed by Snape.

Harry wished he could take some time to think about this, but there *was* no time. Draco was waiting for him back at the Manor, and on the success or failure of this plan their actions of the next week or so depended.

Grimly, Harry slugged back the muddy mixture and forced himself to swallow when it would have stuck against the lump of fear and worry in his throat. He stood still as his body structure changed slightly, his center of gravity altered—he staggered as that happened—and his hair grew finer and paler.

He stepped out of the alley he'd hidden in, making sure to swagger as much as possible. Draco had demonstrated how he should walk in the past few days, too, as part of their planning. Polyjuice Potion could do a lot, from altering the voice to giving the person who took it a mangled body in place of a whole one like the dose Barty Crouch had taken, but it couldn't perfect unique mannerisms.

In the guise of Draco Malfoy, Harry Potter entered the Ministry. And as he did, he prayed that Draco had been correct in everything—from his estimation of Scrimgeour to the role Snape was willing to play in this.

"Tell me about your relationship with Scrimgeour."

Draco kept his voice calm and soothing, his gestures so smooth that it would be hard for Harry to look at them and mistake one for a blow or a sudden jerk of impatience. He understood the delicate, tingling mood that hung between him and Harry after their literal heart-to-heart in the dining room on instinct, though he had never experienced it before. He knew Harry would still

be half-stunned, reeling and looking for any excuse to draw back.

Draco did not intend to offer him one.

"Before the curse, you mean?" Harry asked in a musing tone. He was looking out the window of the room that had been Narcissa's conservatory, where Draco had stood the other day to watch him walking before Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared. He seemingly wanted to watch the garden more than Draco's face. That was fine. Draco knew he still had the other man's full attention. "Because now, it's uncomplicated. I want to kill him."

Draco acknowledged that with a small nod. "And you have every right to." Just *that* got him a glowing look—not a smile, but a turn of the head to show a face filled with light—and he caught his breath. Then he reminded himself how few people Harry had heard validating his perspective this past year. Just knowing that someone else agreed with him and saw the world as he did must seem like a miracle.

It was all perfectly understandable. That did not diminish the tenderness that carpeted Draco's mind with flowers. He shook his head undetectably, so that Harry would not think *he* had done something wrong, and continued. "But yes, I need to know what your relationship was like before that. I need to know why he would have done this. There are all sorts of reasons, most of them attributable to malice—"

"But that's just what I said downstairs," Harry interrupted, a hint of frustration showing through. "I don't *know* why he hates me. I never gave it a thought he might. He's the Minister; he had more important things to worry about than me."

Draco hesitated for a moment. He wondered if now was the right time to explain what Harry evidently still didn't understand, the fact of his own celebrity. And yet he thought they would continue to be tripped up by it if they ignored it. Besides, Harry might grant him the trust Draco needed to talk about it now.

"Harry," he said. Harry blinked to show he was listening. "Have you thought about what it means, for the Minister to be dealing with someone who saved the world?"

Harry folded his arms across his chest. *Classic defensive gesture,* Draco thought, with the part of him that had received Mind-Healer training and still thought like one sometimes. "He has a Ministry full of war heroes, since so many of the Aurors ended up taking an active part. He shouldn't be singling me out—"

"He always will have to," said Draco, as gently as he could.

"He shouldn't," Harry said, jutting his jaw, and Draco knew that if he let him get started, he would have an earful of nonsense that it was incredible anyone could believe, but which Harry especially couldn't afford to.

"Harry," he interrupted, and the tone of his voice made Harry pause, then shut his mouth carefully. Draco nodded in approval. Already they were more attuned to each other than they had been, and so it was no longer just Draco interpreting Harry's gestures in silence and wishing the git could be more perceptive. Their knowledge ran both ways, now.

"Will you listen to me?" Draco asked. "And believe what I say? Forget for a moment about whether it *should* be true, or whether it's ethically right. You've had experience within the last year of plenty of people making judgments on the truths you spoke, even though you *knew* you were right. Will you let me have this moment, free of any prejudgment on your part, to speak?"

After a long hesitation, Harry tilted his head slightly. The hum of the soul-connection bond between them was suddenly audible.

"Thank you," Draco said gently. "Now. There is a difference between the other Aurors and you, Harry. Maybe there shouldn't be—" *though none of them did half of what you did or took half the risks you took, whatever you may think* "—but that's the way others see it. Including the Minister. Do you understand? You have to deal with the gap they see between you and the rest, whether or *not* it's real. People think a great many silly things, and it takes years to change what they believe. It's simpler just to work around them."

"I see what you're saying." Harry's jaw relaxed. He looked down at his hands, and shook his head in wonder. "Where did the gap come from?"

Draco stifled a sigh. *Only Harry.*

And then he thought, *Yes. Only Harry. Only Harry could so misunderstand his role in the war and the world he helped to create, and Harry is the only person I would put up with the frustration of this for.*

He leaned forwards and said, "What you did was *symbolically* powerful. It doesn't matter if the Dark Lord was *actually* the greatest danger to the wizarding world or not. What you did was like—like cutting off a dragon's head after it had ravaged half a dozen villages and devoured several people. They would be so glad to see the evil dead that they would practically crown the knight who did it, in older times. You're like that knight. And yes, times have changed, and yes, the Ministry isn't a village, but the wizarding world still regards you that way."

Harry blinked, started to open his mouth, closed it again, and said, "*Oh*. I knew that was what it was like in the first days after I killed him. But I thought that fervor had died down. It's *been* nine years, after all." His voice sounded snappish, as though he couldn't believe that people were still talking about *that* old thing.

Draco concealed a laugh that even he wasn't sure would be joyous; it might have verged on hysterical instead. It was good to see that Harry wasn't *completely* unobservant. "It's not a small thing, Harry."

"But I just killed him!" Harry threw up his hands. "Harder things than killing happen every day. You'd think—" And then he closed his eyes and shook his head, sharply, several times. Watching in fascination, Draco thought he was seeing the way Harry had used to soothe his frustrations in the old days before the curse, when he hadn't been pressed flat by them and harried every single moment.

It's a good, common-sense way. God knows that he couldn't have talked it over with those friends of his and got any answers that mattered.

Draco carefully banished his jealousy from his mind. He was *not* looking forwards to the moment when Harry met with his friends again, whether the curse had been broken or not, but hopefully by then Harry would be so firmly his that Granger and the Weasleys wouldn't automatically sweep Harry away with them when they descended like a flock of vultures.

"All right," said Harry, opening his eyes. "If people *still* think like that, even though they *shouldn't*, then I suppose I can understand the way Scrimgeour reacted to me better. He *did* sneer, and when I got scut-work, I knew it came from him. Investigating boring or meaningless cases, or difficult ones that kept me far from the front page of the *Daily Prophet*—well, those last I didn't mind so much, but I knew he meant me to. I met him coming out of the Head's Office more than I should, since he's Minister and *should* have more important things to attend to." Harry's voice said what he thought of the man pursuing a sustained feud with him instead. "He'd always sneer at me, and then look away and try to hide a grin. He planted my assignments.

"And there were rumors, too, around the Ministry. About the latest fight I'd had with Ginny, or a time when I supposedly bragged to the papers about my prowess with a wand. I suppose he might have cast monitoring spells on my office and Ron's—I wouldn't really put it past him, not now." Harry sighed and buried his head in his hands. "But I still can't say what could have caused sustained hatred of the kind that was behind the Cassandra Curse."

Feeling he could indulge himself more now, Draco reached out and put a hand on Harry's shoulder. He didn't miss the slight shiver that went through Harry, or the way he shifted closer and bowed his head slightly, as though he wanted to shelter from a strong wind in Draco's shadow.

Draco felt another surge of possessive lust, and scolded himself. *You should be thinking of a plan that will begin your revenge on Scrimgeour, not thinking about how his earlobes will taste.*

And just like that, the beginnings of a plan unfolded in his head. Obviously, admiring Harry shook his brain into action. Draco leaned forwards, deliberately putting more pressure on Harry's shoulder, and then took up Harry's hand and kissed the center of his palm again.

The moment in the dining room was past, so the exact same connection didn't happen again, but Harry gasped, and his hand flexed weakly in Draco's grip. Draco concealed a grin. *Another weak spot, then, though I don't think it's as potent as his scalp.*

"I have a plan," he whispered. "But it'll require you to *really* trust me, since I'll need to talk to someone who has the necessary materials and who's never had any reason to love you."

"Whatever you think is best," said Harry, his eyes fluttering open slowly. He looked at Draco with what was either adoration or an acceptable substitute.

Draco chuckled silently, and then said, "So it's all right with you if we involve Snape?"

Harry strode through the Ministry as if he owned it, as Draco had told him he should. He waited boredly for lifts, now and then casting a *Tempus* charm to show that this was taking his valuable time, as Draco had told him he should. He had Draco's wand. He had Draco's manner of leaning on a lift or a wall, and he had Draco's cool stare when a wizard in a magenta robe, apparently under the impression that he worked for the Ministry, tried to order him to stop and take dictation.

That wizard stumbled backwards, squinting and then staring, babbling all the while, "I'm so sorry, Mr. Malfoy, didn't recognize you at first—" He waved his parchment as though in feeble defense, to show it had absorbed him completely, and then turned and fled.

Harry stared after him for a moment, but made sure it wasn't too long before he lifted his chin in a haughty manner and proceeded down the corridor. It had worked, just as Draco had said it would.

"Half of it's mood, Harry," he'd said. "Of course, having an important purpose *helps*, but if you *act* like you have one, then most people will leave you alone. Combine that with my dashing reputation, and—" He shrugged, as though the answer should be self-evident.

Harry shook his head slightly as he reached the outer edges of the Auror domain. It was interesting acting like Draco, but he wouldn't want to live like this. With Draco's chin so far in the air, how did he even *see* other people?

He knocked on a few doors as if he didn't know exactly where he was going—to betray too intimate a knowledge of the Ministry would be a giveaway, something he'd thought of on his own—though he silently cast the *Tempus* charm a number of times, to make sure he still had half-an-hour before the Polyjuice ran out. At last he stopped next to one desk, made a great show of reading the name on the wall, and asked, "Lila Ambernight?"

A great pair of distrustful dark eyes looked up at him. At least she didn't seem to recognize him immediately, which Harry supposed could be counted as a success.

But a small one.

Draco rather enjoyed the expression on Severus's face. This was the wildest story he had ever

told his mentor, and yet Severus would know that he was unlikely to create such a tale as a joke. That left him to assume it was reality, and then to deal with Draco's request.

Severus closed his eyes. Draco was on his knees, head in the fireplace that connected Malfoy Manor with the other wizard's home—a place so secret that not even Draco knew its proper name, thus giving him no way to Floo or Apparate there. The most he knew was that it wasn't in Britain, given the constant sunshine through the wide windows behind Severus. He'd had to arrange Floo contact by sending an owl, and it was always at least a day before Severus condescended to open the connection.

Then, of course, Draco was the one who had to kneel on the floor and put his head into the flames. Severus said he was too old for some things, and making a fool of himself just to *talk* to other people was one of them.

Draco remained silent, patient and enjoying the game for its own sake. It had taken him a long time to forgive Severus, both because he had saved Draco's life but done nothing else for the Malfoy family during the war, and because he'd vanished from the country before the trials of "Death Eaters," by reputation and Mark or not, could properly begin. So he gave no testimony for Lucius, and he did not help Narcissa stay in the Manor, and the younger Draco had considered those tantamount to treason, especially since he'd learned that Severus had never really worked for the Dark Lord at all.

But Severus had contacted him again, and endured the yelling, and given Draco a few experimental potions with the advice that he send him an owl when he could properly analyze and duplicate them, and that had been that. Draco had little enough intellectual companionship as it was, since most of the Healers considered him deviant at best and a punisher of the sick at worst, and many others held him in contempt simply for inventing Psyche-Diving. Potions wasn't his passion as it had been for a few short years during school, but he could still discuss it with pleasure.

"Let me make *sure* I understand," Severus said, rubbing his face again, with a finely tuned sarcasm in his voice that caused Draco to grin. "You claim that Harry Potter is under the Cassandra Curse, which means that everyone but *you* hears his truths as lies, and takes a violent dislike to him besides."

"Correct."

"And you managed to free yourself from the burden of the curse, and make yourself his one connection with the outside world, by—"

"By slicing off part of my soul and attaching it to his," Draco supplied calmly. "Yes. It flew into his core, and by now it should be indistinguishable from the rest of him, though such a gift is powerful enough to still connect both giver and recipient. I would never have done it for anyone else, even if they asked it of me," he added, seeing the shadows that were gathering in the back of Severus's eyes.

"I certainly *hope* not," Severus said. "The thought of Miss Parkinson or your father with a piece of your soul disturbs me more than I can say." He shuddered and stared off into the distance, an expression that Draco had seen more and more often in the past few years on his face. He guessed that Severus finally had time to look into his past, which he hadn't when busy with his duties at Hogwarts and in the Dark Lord's service, and often didn't like what he saw there. "Though there was someone I would have done that for, once," he said quietly.

Draco didn't ask. It was enough that Severus knew *his* person for whom he would make such sacrifices. "Do you believe me?"

"If you had chosen to lie to me about anything, it would not have been this," Severus admitted, and leaned back in the carved chair he usually took for these conferences. "So. What do you want from me?"

"I know that you usually keep Polyjuice Potion about," said Draco. "We don't have time to wait a month, but we need some that you've made and yet not dropped hair into. Harry will be going into the Ministry disguised as me."

Severus's lip curled. "I suppose it has not occurred to you that your reputation could be permanently tainted by what Potter does when in your skin?"

Draco was startled into a laugh. "I don't work for St. Mungo's anymore, Severus. And the Ministry isn't foolish enough to consider me completely trustworthy."

"You have not yet told me who is responsible for Potter's condition," Severus said mildly.

Draco cocked his head. "I was trying to protect you."

"Of course you were not," Severus said. "That is my price for the potion."

Draco nodded. It was risky, and this wasn't something that Harry had authorized him to tell Severus. On the other hand, Harry had agreed to trust him absolutely, so… "It was the Minister," he said.

Severus appeared genuinely startled. "Scrimgeour?"

Draco nodded again.

Severus narrowed his eyes further, and then said, "It appears that Britain has been…most interesting in the years since I left. I wonder sometimes if I should return for a visit."

Draco offered a small shrug. Severus sometimes mused like this, but so far he had never come, and Draco had given up hope of a visit in the near future.

Muttering, Severus stood and wandered out of the room. Draco waited patiently, only shifting now and then when his knees complained beyond endurance.

Severus came back with a flask of Polyjuice soon enough, the muddy color it tended to look when the hair hadn't been added yet. Draco extended his hand through the fire for it, but Severus held still, frowning, and gazed into his eyes. Draco met his gaze with some amusement. He knew that Severus was an excellent Occlumens, but he was the better Legilimens due to the nature of his profession.

Besides, if Severus was looking for what Draco suspected he was, he wouldn't find any answer in Draco's eyes anyway. There always *had* been certain truths that Severus was ill-fitted to acknowledge. What Draco shared with Harry was probably one of them.

"Do not get yourself killed," Severus said, as he at last extended the potion. "I would be most displeased if I lost the only one of my students who both knows my current location *and* has kept up his studies."

Draco nodded, knowing it was the only expression of concern that Severus would permit himself, and shut the Floo connection. That had been easier than he expected. At least Severus hadn't spent a great deal of time yelling about what a waste of breath Harry was and how Draco should have better things to do than associate with him.

Draco paused.

Well.

Perhaps he did see what he needed to, after all.

"What do you want?" Lila was trying to pretend she wasn't staring at him, but Harry had known her too long. She darted constant small glances at him even though she'd written ten lines on the parchment in front of her in the last minute.

"I know where Harry Potter is."

Her hand froze, and then her head jerked up, and she stared at him. Harry licked his lips, then reminded himself that wasn't something Draco Malfoy would do.

But that didn't matter. Draco's plan relied mainly on getting her attention until Harry had a chance to force her out of the Ministry. Since he was still under the curse for everyone but Draco, she heard the statement as a lie. But she would still wonder what he meant by that, and why he was talking to *her.*

"What do you mean?" she whispered harshly, eyes on him.

Harry raised his eyebrows, grateful that the Polyjuice would make it look like Draco's own cool gesture instead of his clumsy one. "I see I was wrong about you," he said. "I thought you could be trusted, even though I can't trust your superiors, because of your hostility to Dark magic. And this is certainly a tale involving Dark magic they haven't hesitated to perform. But I can live with being wrong." He shrugged and started to turn.

Lila's wand struck him in the middle of the back. Harry hissed in sharply, and then forced himself to control both his breathing and his reactions. This was *supposed* to happen. He could trust Draco. He wasn't alone and fighting for his life anymore, with no one in the entire world to care for his fate.

"You will tell me what you mean," Lila said into his ear, her breath so soft it hardly brushed his skin.

"Come with me if you want to know," Harry breathed, which was a hard statement to construe as entirely untruthful even with the curse, and then began to walk. Lila had to follow, or risk showing her wand and its position to the rest of the Ministry. She broke into a small trot to keep up.

Harry thought they would be stopped on every step, but they made it out of the Ministry and back into the alley where he'd originally hidden without anyone so much as glancing at them. He was sure that Draco Malfoy's presence in the Ministry would be reported to Umbridge and Scrimgeour, but for the minute, that was not a problem.

"Tell me," Lila demanded.

Harry turned to face her, grasped her wrist just above the wand, and said, "Oh, I intend to," as his other hand clasped his own wand in his pocket and activated, with a small tap, the Portkey Draco had given him.

The astonished look on Lila's face before they melted into the whirl of colors was a delight to see.

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Chapter: 10

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Ten—Or Her Mind Will

Draco rose to his feet at once when he saw the swirl of colors in the middle of the room that

indicated Harry and Lila were returning. Harry had warned him that Lila was a battle-hardened Auror and might be—difficult—when they were trying to make an ally of her, so Draco had his wand out already.

One of the two forming human shapes pulled violently away from the other. Draco aimed his wand at it, under the reasonable supposition that that was probably Lila, and cast the Body-Bind.

He was a second too slow; he hadn't known she could move this *fast.* In moments, she was behind the chair he had planned to place her in when she was frozen, and firing hexes at him around it.

Draco would have dodged just fine on his own, but a heavy weight hit him and propelled him to the floor, knocking first the breath and then all the impulse to move out of his body. The second part came less from the blow and more from the fact that this was *Harry* on top of him.

Harry didn't seem inclined to enjoy their respective positions, which annoyed Draco. He ducked a crackling blue line of energy, almost slamming his forehead into Draco's chin, and then swept his wand around in three interlocking circles. Yellow fire, almost too bright to look at, traced them, and bobbed away towards Lila's chair like smoke rings.

Since she seemed to be taken care of, Draco seized the chance to stretch his limbs luxuriously under Harry. He put out more heat than Draco had realized; that was one thing Polyjuice Potion didn't alter. Of course, Draco had to wonder how different the experience would be with Harry in his own form on top of him, but—

Lila cried out, causing Harry to jerk and dig an uncomfortable elbow into Draco's chest. Draco wriggled. Harry tossed him an apologetic glance, then rolled off him and extended a hand.

"It worked," he said, to Draco's raised eyebrows. As he pulled Draco up, he aimed his wand at the same time and floated Lila from around the chair. Her face was caught in a stark, staring expression of horror that Draco really didn't see the point of. Harry settled her in the interrogation chair, took her wand from her, and tied her with ropes.

"Just in case," he explained.

Draco nodded once, then settled majestically in his seat across from Lila. Harry paced back and forth, waiting for the Polyjuice Potion to flow away from him so that they could begin their real questioning. Draco studied him covertly and decided that the potion had actually changed Harry less than he thought. Anger that wasn't Draco's shone forth from the dear idiot's body like a jewel gleaming from beneath a sheet of water, and his angry strides and abrupt gestures altered Draco's entire look.

"I acted exactly like you told me to," Harry snapped, seeing his glance.

"I understand," Draco said. "And I suppose you didn't mistreat my body, either?"

Harry blinked. "What do you mean? If I'd wounded myself, the wound would still be there when the potion wore off. It's not as though it would appear on you."

Draco lowered his voice teasingly, compelling Harry to come towards him to keep listening. "Come on, Harry, you can tell me. How soon did you vanish into the loo and have a look?"

"Have a—" Then Harry realized he was implying, and reddened more than Draco was certain *he* ever had. "That's—that's not—that's not the kind of thing you *do* with another bloke's body!"

"It's the first thing I'd have done with yours," Draco retorted severely, trying to convey the impression that Harry had failed an essential test.

"Yes, but you're *curved* or whatever you said," Harry muttered, in the kind of tone to set Draco's teeth on edge. "That's probably natural."

Draco couldn't help it; he huffed, and it wasn't beneath his breath. Harry cast a quick glance at him. "What?" he added.

"Because I'm not straight and Gryffindor and perfect in every way," Draco began slowly, "you think I'm somehow inferior to you? Or that I'm a sexual maniac who can't control my slightest impulse?"

Harry felt trapped. Since when had this become a discussion of what he thought about Draco's sexual orientation? And he hadn't implied that he was inferior, just that he was different. And to be having this discussion while he wore Draco's face, and while he was now thinking about Draco's bits, did *not* make him any more comfortable.

"I never—I never said that," was the best he could manage.

"You implied it," Draco said, swift as a striking snake, and like a Slytherin—or like Hermione; Harry didn't want to start thinking of Draco as opposite to a Gryffindor—finding meanings in words that Harry didn't even know were there. He gripped the arms of his chair as if that were the only thing that kept him from launching himself at Harry. "That it's natural for me to be interested in the bits of every male I come across. That I can't control myself. You're taking something that I think any *normal* bloke would do, and implying that it only comes from my sexual orientation. You're saying that I'm abnormal."

"Well, you're saying the same thing!" Harry controlled the impulse to back away from Draco until he'd put himself safely against the wall, and the insidious whispering in his mind that said he'd known it all along, known that Draco couldn't be trusted, known that he'd eventually be attacked for something he couldn't help and didn't mean. "That I'm abnormal because I didn't go in the loo while I had your body and wank!"

"You have a reason to be abnormal," Draco said stubbornly. "You've spent a year under the Cassandra Curse and had all your sexual reactions twisted inside out and upside-down—"

"God, Draco, can we *not* talk about this?" Harry closed his eyes. With the spell he'd used, there was a strong chance Lila wouldn't remember any of this conversation even though she was hearing it, but he still didn't want to have it. The mere thought of discussing sex with Draco made him blush horribly.

"No, I think we should," Draco said, his voice rising a little. "We've gone too long without talking about anything, Merlin knows. I wanted to wait for you to be ready, to come to me, but I *know* that you trust me. So. Talk. I want to know more about your suicide attempt, and I want to know what you *really* think of my sexuality."

"I don't think you're abnormal!" Harry snapped, falling back on honesty. *As if this curse lets me have any choice.* "I *don't*, all right? I just—I don't know why you want me to know about it, or why you keep talking to me about it, or why you keep *touching* me all the time, or why in the world you *care* what I think about what you get up to in bed or in the loo!"

Draco's eyes were sky-colored. He opened his mouth, and Harry flinched, wary of what he'd say—but also conscious that he was handling this much better than he would have only a week ago, when he still didn't trust Draco as much.

But just then, Lila groaned.

Harry whipped away, more than glad to have an excuse to put off this conversation. No matter what Draco had to say about why his sexuality mattered, it couldn't be anything good.

And then he felt the ripple traveling through him that meant the Polyjuice Potion had lost its effectiveness and he was becoming himself again. He sucked in a sigh of intense relief. Maybe Draco had gained some self-confidence when he saw his own face staring at him, and once he saw Harry again, he would have second thoughts about acting as if this were *Witch Weekly Confessional.*

Draco silently cursed Lila in his mind, and for more this time than just being an Auror or just knowing about the Cassandra Curse—maybe—and helping to shield the Minister. He would have told Harry some home truths in no uncertain terms, if only he'd had a moment more.

But Harry was already training his wand on the witch, and saying, "Hello, Lila. You're currently in Draco Malfoy's house, and as I'm sure you can see, he's been sheltering me." He gave a slight nod to Draco, the agreed-upon signal that he should begin his part of the plan.

Despite himself, Draco was gratified to see that Harry still trusted him to cooperate. He smiled at

Lila and stood. "What Harry says is perfect truth," he said, and waited.

Lila narrowed her eyes. Hair ruffled, face still pale from whatever fright Harry's spell had given her, wandless and tied to a chair, she looked ready to bite through the ropes and rush them if only her teeth were sharp enough. "I may not be able to tell whether or not you're lying," she said, "but I can *hear* the lie in his voice."

"Tell me," Draco said, and began to circle closer, keeping her eyes mostly on him and her attention productively divided between him and Harry, "what did Harry say to you in the Ministry when he went there, disguised as me?"

"That he knew where Harry Potter was," said Lila, turning her head to follow him. One hand opened and closed, as if she were practicing the gestures of a spell for the moment when she was able to retrieve her wand.

"And that wasn't a lie, was it?" Draco asked, halting and staring straight at her. "He *did* know where he was, since he was standing right in front of you."

A strange expression washed over Lila's face. Draco concentrated, but he couldn't see the dark flicker in her eyes or about her temples as the Cassandra Curse worked. That disappointed him somewhat. He would have enjoyed seeing it function outside Harry's soul—and on someone who wasn't him.

"Everything else he said was," said Lila. Apparently the curse had decided the simplest way to make her continue think Harry was lying was to have her ignore the one truth he'd spoken.

"But that still means he spoke truth *once*," said Draco. "Doesn't it?"

Both Lila's hands closed into fists. "I don't know what you've done to me," she said slowly. "But rest assured, when the Ministry finds out—"

"No matter what happens here," said Draco, with a small shake of his head, "they won't find out." He gave her a grin that caused her to shoot him a look of immense dislike. That was all right. If they had judged the woman's character correctly—and Draco thought Harry had told him enough about Lila in the last few days to be sure of that—then she could dislike him all she wanted and she would still do the right thing.

As long as we can convince her it's right.

"And he spoke two more truths to you just after you woke," Draco continued, pushing, relentless. He wanted to use as many words as possible before he turned to Legilimency. "That this was my home, and that I've been sheltering him." He lifted his hand and gestured around the room. It wasn't the most comfortable drawing room in the Manor, but it was the grandest, with several pieces of antique furniture and paintings so real it looked as though someone not painted could step into them. "Do you doubt that this is Malfoy Manor?"

"It could be anywhere," Lila said. "You could have chosen one of your friends' homes to imprison me in."

Draco nodded to Harry. Harry broke the ropes on Lila with one snap of his wrist, then Body-Bound her before she could react and floated her across the room. Draco touched the prepared iron rod on his waist; it controlled the wards on the Manor and would raise and lower them on a moment's notice. Much simpler to repair such a breach than it would be if he'd torn a hole in the wards instead. He thought St. Mungo's was *still* not recovered from the hole Harry had torn in their most powerful wards with wandless magic when they'd tried to stop him escaping.

In seconds, they had Apparated from the drawing room to the front of the house, with the Malfoy crest clearly visible from several directions and the obvious wealth of a pure-blood family on full display. Draco faced Lila and smiled.

"We came from a room to the outdoors," she said; Harry had relaxed the spell enough that her jaw could move. "We could have come from everywhere."

Draco opened the front doors, and Harry Levitated Lila behind him as they trudged from the front of the Manor all the way back to the drawing room. Draco let Lila have a look in several directions, confirming this was not a parody or copy of the place they'd Apparated from, before Harry let the Body-Bind go and tied her to the chair again.

Lila had her head bowed, her jaw trembling. Draco watched her with a small, eager smile. This was a solution that could never have been tried any time that the Cassandra Curse was employed before, of course, because no one who was not the caster had ever broken it—and thus no victim before would have had the link to the outside world that Draco represented.

He glanced at Harry. Harry was watching him, but he looked stiffly away when he saw Draco's eyes returning the gaze.

I do have a position of such power over him, Draco thought, letting his eyes linger, because he could and because he wanted to. *I could betray him, and he couldn't do anything about it. I'm sure that's part of what he feared when I first started Diving into his soul. But still, he trusts me. I will do anything to keep that gift.*

In a soft, troubled voice, Lila finally said, "There must be—exceptions."

"Exceptions to what?" Draco asked, and this time he stalked behind her until his elbows were resting on the back of the chair and she couldn't see him without tilting her head at a supremely awkward angle. She did it, apparently not caring how ridiculous she looked.

"Exceptions to—to his lies," said Lila. "He must be able to tell the truth sometimes. Perhaps he has finally recovered the concern for others that he lost." She shot Harry a look of unalloyed

venom. He ignored it effortlessly, except for a very slight tremble in his shoulders. That reminded Draco of what he must have endured in the last thirteen months, and he felt his face soften once more.

"Then he could speak to you, and you would believe him?" Draco asked.

"He might start lying again at any time," Lila countered harshly.

"He has told you only truth since you came here," said Draco, but stepped back and nodded to Harry.

"I am under a curse called the Cassandra Curse," Harry said flatly. "It's among the Darkest of Dark Arts. It forces me to tell the truth, but everyone around me hears those truths as lies, unless I'm severely injured. I've uncovered evidence that it was Minister Scrimgeour who used the curse." He studied Lila, waiting.

Lila's mouth opened. Then she snapped it shut again, and said, "No. I mean—that's impossible. The Cassandra Curse is a legend."

"Have you heard of it before?" Draco murmured into her hair, stepping close again.

"No!"

"Then how can you be so sure that it's a legend?"

"If there were Dark magic like that, I would have *heard* of it! I conducted my own investigations when my sister died! I'm an expert on the Dark Arts!" Lila reared back and stared at him once more. "And even if it *were* real, I'd think it more likely that *you* put it on him! You're a Death Eater, and you hated him in school, didn't you? It's inevitable—it's not real—it—"

"Find evidence that denies it," Draco murmured. "Or tell me why you're so certain that everything you hear from his mouth is lies, when you have heard him speak the provable truth."

"It's all done with illusion," Lila said suddenly, and her eyes were glittering. "You cast glamours that made me *think* I'm in Malfoy Manor. You used auditory glamours on your voices to make it sound like Potter was telling the truth, but really, he's still lying—I—"
"Then we could have cast glamours that would have overpowered your suspicion, too, and never allowed you to suspect us," Draco interrupted, bored. He had thought the attempt to convince Lila via words wouldn't work. She was too stubborn, set in her ways and her hatred of anyone who might possibly have practiced Dark magic, and the curse was too powerful. That was all right. He rather preferred Legilimency as a means of solving problems. And Lila could still be useful to them as a test case for the difficulty of breaking the curse on someone else.

He drew his wand. Lila had her head bowed, lips moving as she rehearsed the "lies" and truths over and over to herself, trying, Draco knew, to separate out which was which.

"*Legilimens*," he said, cocking his head to come eye-to-eye.

In a moment he was within the darkness of Lila's mind. She was trying to fight him out, but she was even more untrained in Occlumency than Harry had been, and he slid by easily. He found himself in a rather simple web of signifiers, all of them leading straight back to two central points: Lila's hatred of Dark magic and the never-ending quest to avenge her sister.

Draco raised the imagining that represented his wand here in front of his eyes and cast, with as much care and concentration as he'd used the day he split his soul and gave Harry the missing piece.

"*Reapse memoria*," he whispered.

The darkness around him blazed with light. Draco laid his wand against his temple, or what he thought of as his temple in a convenient shorthand for indescribable mental actions, and concentrated hard.

Then he drew forth the memory of the moment when the Cassandra Curse had dissolved for him and he realized that Harry had been telling the truth all along—involuntarily as it was. He slung that memory into Lila's mind like a stone into a pane of glass, a hard grain of truth, seeking out the point where her distrust resided.

The memory bore down. Lila fought weakly for a moment to preserve her own mind's integrity untainted, but Draco had no patience for that. She had shown herself unwilling to acknowledge what they said; now she would *know*, as Draco had known. Let the moment come to her as a shattering epiphany. She was one of the people who had believed the worst of Harry the past year; she deserved a little pain and the humiliation of realizing how very wrong she was.

Draco curled his lip as he thought about that. Lila wasn't the one he wanted to take revenge on, but until he could reach Scrimgeour personally, she would do.

He watched her mind struggling to absorb or adapt what he had thrown at her, and hummed to himself. *Either her self-righteousness will shatter—*

Or her mind will.

And then the light shuddered around him, and became darkness again, but this time subtly charged with a splendid golden shimmer of memory. Draco smiled. It had worked. She shared the same glimpse into truth he had; he had torn the veil the Cassandra Curse cast inside her head.

He pulled back from her mind and opened his eyes, to find Lila staring at Harry with an expression of sickness on her face. Most of the mixed emotions behind that expression weren't guilt, he mused; perhaps she hadn't come into enough contact with Harry to have treated him horribly. Probably she was imagining the situation he had gone through and empathizing with

him, no longer detached enough not to.

"I'm sorry," she murmured then, in a tiny voice.

Tiny words, too, to begin the apology the Ministry owed Harry, but Draco savored them anyway. Then he cast a few more undetectable spells while Lila was still reeling from the shock. They would ensure that Lila, whether she believed in Scrimgeour's perfidy or not, would be unable to tell anyone but them about what she heard in this room. She was important as a test case and a silent ally in the Ministry; they didn't need her spreading rumors about Harry's true condition when Scrimgeour might hear them and be alarmed.

"It's real," Harry was saying, when Draco paid attention to the room again. "And we have compelling evidence Scrimgeour's behind it."

Lila's nostrils flared. The same stubbornness that Draco had despised in her and found frustrating in Harry shone in her face again, but now it was stubbornness on *their* side, wielded for their cause. Her hatred of Dark magic had turned her as firmly against the Minister as she had ever served him, Draco thought idly.

"Show me," was all she said.

Harry leaned against the wall when Lila had gone back to the Ministry—swearing that she was committed to their side, and set on creating a plausible excuse for her sudden absence—and closed his eyes. Shock still rang him like a struck bell. He couldn't really believe that there was someone else walking around in the world who knew the truth about him, and could perhaps come to his rescue.

Especially if Draco ever betrays you, his suspicion snarled, but Harry disregarded the words. That wouldn't happen.

He opened his eyes when a shadow fell on his face, and saw Draco half-smiling at him. "It went better than you expected?" he asked.

"By miles," Harry said. He pushed himself off the wall, feeling as near to joyful as he had in a long time. "I don't suppose you'd be amenable to contacting one of my friends and reasoning with them next?" He wanted Ron or Hermione—or both—back as soon as possible. He trusted Draco, yes, but his uneasy, constantly shifting relationship with him was nothing like the comfortable friendship he'd had with Ron and Hermione. And if the curse was torn open, then maybe they could really go back to the way they'd been before.

Draco's smile faded. "I don't think you'd want me to do to your friends what I did to her, Harry," he said.

Harry frowned. "Why? If it's just persuasion—"

"It wasn't," said Draco. "I had to force not only my memory of the moment when I realized you were telling the truth, but the emotions and the conviction of the truth itself, on her. It was *making* her believe what I believed. It stands a good chance of tearing the mind apart if it tries to resist too much. Your friends had more contact with you during the last year, and they've been more victimized by the curse. I don't think you'd appreciate my ripping their minds open as I did with Lila."

At the moment, Harry was too upset to admire the concern Draco appeared to have for his friends.

"What?" he whispered. "You never told me there was a risk of *hurting* her."

Draco blinked once, apparently thrown, and then a look of exasperation crossed his face. "Harry, you don't care about her anyway," he said, as though reasoning with a small child. "What's the harm?"

"I didn't—" Harry shook his head, anger and some other emotion he couldn't identify rising in his throat. Now that Lila was gone, the memory of the conversation he'd had with Draco before she woke up was creeping back. "I don't want anyone else to suffer just because I've suffered," he said at last.

Draco took a step towards him. "That's too damn bad," he said, "because Scrimgeour will be *wailing* in pain before I finish with him."

Harry gripped his wand for a moment. He didn't want to talk about this, he *didn't* want to talk about this—

But he didn't think he could avoid it any longer.

"Why?" he whispered.

"He hurt you—"

"Not *that*," said Harry, and he said it in a forlorn enough tone that Draco paused and listened to him. "Why do you want to take revenge on Scrimgeour? Not just force him to remove the curse, but *hurt* him? What does it matter to you?

"Why do you care what I think of your sexual orientation? It's your own business. Why do you want to touch me? What—" Harry couldn't think of a way to phrase the question less bluntly. "What do you *want* from me?"

He stood there in vibrating silence when it finished, and held Draco's eyes, and hoped he hadn't just ruined everything.

Draco had been patient. He'd been good. He'd had more self-control than he thought anyone could have expected from him.

But seeing the true frustration in Harry's eyes, the uncertainty, the misunderstanding, the complete disbelief that someone like Draco could ever want him for himself—

Draco's self-control fell away, and the hunger burned through. He felt a smile molding itself across his face. He knew what that smile looked like, even without benefit of a mirror.

It was time Harry Potter, who spoke the truth, understood it as well.

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Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

And maybe *this* is the chapter that the most people have been waiting for.

Chapter Eleven—Come Back Again

Harry watched Draco warily. He did not—quite—want to draw his wand. Still, Draco's sudden fixed stare, and the way he was stepping towards Harry, as if he were a cat stalking a bird, didn't inspire confidence.

"If it's a complicated answer," Harry said, to fill the silence, which had grown too long for him, "then I'm happy to accept only part of it now, or wait until you have the words, or—" He began to edge towards the door that led to his own wing of the Manor. Draco's eyes had taken on that same sky-color that they had before Lila interrupted their strange angry conversation.

"Harry," Draco said softly.

The voice held Harry. It was like one of the touches Draco had given him in St. Mungo's put into audible form. It promised answers, and it promised something—else. Deeper. Harry didn't know what it was, but he knew that he *wanted* to know. He stood still, and allowed Draco to come up beside him, and lay his hand along his cheek.

"I told you, once," Draco said, "that a straight man would turn bent to keep you. And you know that I'm curved."

Harry licked his lips, and wondered if he should make a remark at this point about how strange he still found Draco's description of himself. Even as most of him yearned for answers, part of him wanted to snap the tension. That way, it wouldn't be so disappointing later when Draco reversed himself and abandoned Harry just like everyone else had done so far.

But in the end he stayed silent, and Draco went on, his hand wandering restlessly up and down in the air next to Harry's face, never touching it, but coming so close that his fingertips made the hairs on Harry's cheek buzz.

"I didn't quite know what I wanted with you myself, at first. You frustrated me, in hospital. You intrigued me. You made it impossible for me to know what you were about to do next. I hated the fact that I couldn't see into your soul, and that you kept me out with no effort.

"I know now that wasn't your fault—"

"Doesn't that dim your fascination with me?" Harry interrupted, because he couldn't *help* himself. Draco's answer was turning out to be stranger than he had anticipated. The feeling settling over him was too much like the hypnosis on the day they'd discovered Scrimgeour was to blame for the Cassandra Curse. He just wanted to stand there and listen to Draco's voice, no matter what happened. He knew now what charmed snakes in a basket must feel like.

It wasn't to be borne. He had to walk free of this, somehow. No matter what happened between them, Draco couldn't be allowed to control him so completely.

Draco turned a slow look on him, one that shut his mouth so hard Harry's teeth clipped his own tongue. Then the hand that had hovered above his cheek drifted and touched him in the hollow of his throat where his pulse beat.

Harry's breathing sped up, but a haze of tingling calmness had settled over his mind. He had a simultaneous vision of all the ways Draco could hurt him, and the conviction that he never would.

"Not at all," Draco whispered, angling his mouth so that his breath brushed Harry's ear. "Not. At. *All.*"

Emphasizing words as separate sentences was a trick that Harry had heard before, had *used* before as an Auror when he wanted to intimidate suspects. And yet he still shivered, and swayed towards Draco, whose fingers were stroking up and down in an absent-minded way along the cords of Harry's neck, as if he knew he could touch the skin any time he wanted and was only touching it at the moment because it was in front of him. Harry shuddered, trying to control the rapidly accelerating urge to touch in turn.

"I saw what you had become under the curse," Draco continued, and his other hand came into play now, dipping around the back of Harry's neck and toying first with the hair, then with a

gathered pinch of skin. "I saw what you *could* become, again, if you were free of it. I admired the strength you'd had to have to survive at all. I saw all the possibilities for you, and I knew that I wanted to savor them. I never could have done that if I'd let you escape."

"I don't understand." Harry's voice was too hoarse; he'd been breathing through his mouth, and that had dried his lips. He licked them cautiously and tried again. "I know I'm not very social or friendly now. I spent enormous amounts of time distrusting you when I shouldn't. I tried to reject the shard of soul that you gave me. Why would you put up with all that, for the sake of what I *might* be in the future?"

And never will be if I don't get out from under your control over me, said one part of his brain.

And can become only with you, said another. Harry thought it came from rather lower down the evolutionary scale.

Draco's eyes sharpened, and Harry didn't know how he stood the gaze. It was like suddenly having the sun take personal notice of *him*, of all the small creatures that ran around beneath it every day.

"Because I savor it *all*," he replied calmly. The calm was only a burned surface, though, Harry knew; the voice beneath that still flowed like lava. "The man you are now, just starting to wake up. The man you became through the medium of the Curse. The man I think you'll become after a short time more as my guest, and my partner."

Harry blinked, letting out a tiny breath. He might have mistaken Draco's meaning. He might have stepped past a door he thought he was entering into another room entirely. "Your partner in hunting Scrimgeour, you mean."

Draco's gaze sharpened still more, and now the sun had not only looked at Harry, but descended.

"No, Harry," he said simply. "My partner in *all* senses of the term."

And then he leaned in and kissed him.

Draco had barely held himself in check while he was reassuring Harry. The temptation was spread out in front of him, and he had to fight to keep from *taking*. The touches on Harry's cheek and nape and neck hadn't been enough; they were the absolute stopgap measures to soothe his own desperate desire while he was talking to Harry and still didn't want to frighten him off.

But now—now he couldn't hold back.

He had thought his need would ease, a little, when Harry gasped beneath him and his tongue entered Harry's mouth for the first time. It didn't. It grew fiercer, and Draco clung to Harry's shoulders, suddenly knowing what he must feel. The sheer anticipation of what would come once they reached the bedroom was shuddering, impatient, massive, and Draco didn't think he would

be able to stop once he started.

For now, though—

Harry was darting his tongue in startled directions, as if he couldn't decide whether to engage with Draco's tongue or escape, as if he didn't know what the other tongue was *for* and what it was *doing* in his mouth. Draco slowed it with a single soothing stroke that showed Harry just how good this could feel, and then dug his fingers into Harry's hair and dragged them up across his scalp, remembering how that had drugged him in the dining room a few days ago.

Harry moaned and trembled.

The sound and the motion both inspired Draco and fed his hunger. He didn't think he could be blamed for what he did next. Their limited contact wasn't *enough.*

He anchored his left hand in Harry's hair, stroking and scraping and curling his fingers, keeping Harry anchored as he reached down with his right and started to unbutton the other man's robes. He was literally trembling himself at the thought of touching more than just Harry's hands and neck. He had never seen Harry undressed more than that except when he'd taken the wound at the Ministry and Draco had healed his back. Part of that was certainly Harry's reluctance to make himself vulnerable in front of someone else, but he wouldn't need that right now, would he? Draco wanted to touch and take and taste. He'd made a declaration of his good intentions, and Harry had accepted them. It was all very simple now. Even if Harry had never had sex with a man before, he had certainly had sex. He would know what to do.

And then Harry's hand caught his right wrist, and held it in such a crushing grip that Draco had no choice but to relent.

He pulled his head away from the kiss, gasping in air, but less because he had not been able to breathe than because he was so close, *so close*, and was being denied yet again.

"What more can I tell you?" he panted at Harry. Harry's eyes were glazed, but with caution as well as desire. Draco envied him his superhuman control for a moment—and then reminded himself in what kind of school that control had been learned, and retracted his envy. "I want you in all the ways there are."

Harry's head was whirling. His body felt more alive than it had in a year. That was silly. He'd certainly been able to wank when he was under the Cassandra Curse, and sometimes he'd been lonely enough to close his eyes and imagine that it was Ginny's hands touching him, instead of his own.

But now he was hard, and eager, and it was just—

It just didn't make *sense.*

"You can tell me—" *That isn't my voice. That doesn't sound like my voice. The only time I ever sounded like that was when—*

And Harry cut the images of oral sex with Ginny out of his memory, because the way he was now, poised on the edge, they would probably make him come.

Draco's fingers curled into his hair, and Harry cried out. He *wanted* to do this, there was no question of that. But there was still so much he didn't understand. Draco's declaration probably made sense to *him*, and in one way it explained the mystery Harry hadn't been able to understand: why Draco was still bothering with him when fame was a long distance and a long danger away, and when Harry couldn't make him any immediate return.

But in another way, it didn't explain anything. Harry had to stop Draco before he made a horrible mistake. His desire for Harry was founded on an illusion. If he found that out later, he would leave in a fury, and Harry knew that would destroy him more thoroughly than stopping right now would.

His body disagreed with that conclusion, violently. Harry closed his eyes and clawed for the tight restraint he'd developed under the Cassandra Curse, when he'd sometimes felt just as helpless as this before the onslaught of fear or terror.

He found it. He drew in a choked breath, and laid knowledge of reality like a knife against his throat.

"I can't be what you want me to be," he whispered, eyes closed, because he really didn't want to see Draco's face when he realized the truth. "I'm no match for someone like you, Draco. You're beautiful—"

Damn it, I didn't mean to say that. But it was true, and if there was any moment when Harry's curse of truth-speaking should be a gift to him, it was now.

"And braver than I've been all my life, to break off a piece of your soul like that, and more clever and creative than I ever could have been, too, to create a profession like Psyche-Diving out of nothing. You're more comfortable with your sexuality. You said it earlier; mine's been turned inside out and upside down by the curse." He tried to laugh. It was like trying to laugh with a throat full of cinders."You think I'm strong, but I'm weak, or I wouldn't go all faint around you like this." *Why bother trying to hide that, either? He's already seen it.* "I just want—I wouldn't want you to sleep with me, convinced that I'm this strong and shining creature, and then wake up and realize your mistake. For your sake, but for mine, too. I'll never be what I was. I'll always be scarred. Please, just realize that." He drew one more choked breath. "For my sake, but for yours, too."

Silence. Draco's hands hadn't moved, and his breathing had slowed down.

Deciding that he could bear to look on Draco's face now, which would be filled with mingled

disgust and gratitude for his escape, Harry opened his eyes.

Draco leaned in and took Harry's mouth in another kiss.

He made this one slow and determined and so persuasive that it would have lit fires under the feet of Muggle saints. He stroked his tongue across Harry's, and then took a grand tour, laving his palate, his teeth, his gums, getting used to the taste of him, soaking it in like medicinal water. Harry gathered breath for a protest at one point, but Draco stroked it out of his mouth, and then leaned back to see the effects of that.

Harry's cheeks were flushed, and his eyes were bright and confused. Draco smiled.

"Such confusion, love," he said, and his voice was a match for his kiss. He had done that on purpose, so that his words wouldn't give Harry the chance to think any more than his touches did. His fingers tugged on Harry's hair, and Harry's eyes rolled back, his neck dropping boneless against Draco's fingers. Draco dipped his head and ran a lazy tongue across Harry's neck. He couldn't stop smiling.

"And that's because you can't see yourself the way you are." He spoke to Harry's robes, nuzzling along his collarbone, but made sure that his mouth was clear of the skin so that Harry didn't have a chance to mishear him. "I thank you for the warning; it shows that you do care about me. But it's also made the extent of your blindness oh so very clear. I can't quite trust anything you say about yourself until I've cleared your mind."

"Draco, I'm not—"

"You're still brave," Draco said quietly, and began to unbutton Harry's robes. They fell away, revealing a shirt that Draco quickly slit; these were clothes he had lent to Harry, and he'd spent years learning the quickest ways in and out of them. And then there was bare chest, and Draco laid his palm against it. The skin shuddered with the racing of Harry's heart.

"No one else I know—not me, not any of the other vaunted heroes of the war, not your friends—could have survived under the Cassandra Curse. And you achieved the impossible. Not easily, but you achieved it. You did what no other victim of this curse in history has done, and survived until you got the help you needed."

"I didn't know—"

"You're clever." Draco pushed Harry's robes off his shoulders and revealed an expanse of his skin that was a brilliant red, as if with sunburn. Draco couldn't tell which emotion, arousal or embarrassment, made it glow like that. From the feel of the erection against his hip, of course, he had a few guesses. He soothed the skin with his hand, and then leaned down and followed the path of his palm with his mouth. Harry was trembling, and when Draco glanced up at him, he could see the tendons in his neck standing out so starkly it looked as if they hurt.

"You made a plan to survive in the Muggle world, and one to get free of the Ministry," Draco whispered. "You knew they wouldn't let you go willingly when your solve rate was so high—a consideration that most other people wouldn't have had the presence of mind to make. Your fear didn't overthrow your reason. I can't say how much I admire you for that, Harry."

He continued to unbutton the robes, which had bunched around Harry's groin and legs. Harry mumbled something, but made no attempt to stop him, even though Draco courteously paused and waited in case he'd changed his mind. In fact, his hips surged restlessly upwards, once, as if to tell him to get on with it. Draco kept his chuckle silent as he pulled the robes and trousers free, and then the pants. He knew how important every small sound and motion was at the moment.

Harry's cock was just as beautiful as he had thought it would be, though the extraordinary purple-red color told Draco that Harry was more viciously balanced on the edge than he'd expected. He slipped his hand around it.

"Draco!" Harry cried, half-strangled, his hand flying out but halting short of Draco's fingers. "I don't—I'll come—I can't—"

"I know that," Draco said, and began to stroke. Harry shook his hair out of his eyes and stared at Draco as if he was some strange creature descended from heaven and Harry couldn't comprehend why he was standing here in the same room.

"As for the rest of what you said," Draco said, watching not the motion of his hand—he could *feel* what he was doing, after all—but Harry's slowly relaxing face in which pleasure dawned like surprise, "your sexuality is a challenge to me, along with everything else. And you're beautiful." Harry started to shake his head, but Draco moved his other hand back into his hair and tugged, and then Harry had better things to think about, caught between two sources of stimulation he obviously enjoyed a great deal. "Yes, you are. You haven't had enough people around you who tell you that, evidently. I want to fuck you until you can't breathe. I want to touch you until you're squirming away from me because you're too sensitive to handle it anymore, and then I still couldn't help myself. You're gorgeous, Harry. That's it." Harry's hips were bucking under him, pushing into his hand with all the force Draco had hoped to feel, wild and needy. "Come on, come for me, now, forget about all the ridiculous blocks and obstructions that you've built up in your mind, *come* for me now."

Harry did.

He felt it attack him like a sweeping bolt of light, like a purifying fire that burned out so much of the anxiety and hurt and fear he'd been carrying that he couldn't help himself. He thought he was laughing as the pleasure raced through him, but he felt tears on his face, and then he *heard* the sounds he was making, and he supposed they were indistinguishable from either true sobs or true laughter.

Hope had come back again.

And it was all right for him to feel it.

He fell forwards, and Draco was there to catch him, hooking an arm around his back and supporting him. Then he continued to stroke Harry's spent cock and belly, while he covered his face with light, relentless kisses. His smile and his eyes were alight, and he had no more secrets in either of them.

That, more than anything, convinced Harry that what he had said was true.

The distrust of Draco had vanished, and suddenly he was freefalling through a haze of sun and sky. It wasn't necessarily safe, and he might feel scattered and confused and bashful when he came back to himself, but for right now he was incapable of doubt.

And wordless, but that was all right. He moved his own hands at last, reaching out and putting one on Draco's groin to show him what he wanted. Euphoria blazed across his skin as Draco's look of surprise melted into lazy contentment.

Never taking his eyes from Harry's, he unbuttoned his robes and unzipped his trousers with a few economical movements. And then he was holding his own erection, and Harry was gazing at it with a need like starvation.

"May I?" he whispered.

Draco tried to speak, but his voice was high and strained, as though he was struggling against a lack of breath in his lungs. "Harry, for this you never need to ask *permission.*"

And he guided Harry's hand to his cock, and they gripped it and stroked it together.

It was one of the most sensual experiences Harry had ever had, probably because the physical sensations without were complemented by intense emotions within. Warm skin under his fingers joined romping relief in his head. His blunt nails caught on soft ridges, and he felt something better than laughter bubble up in his throat. He leaned forwards to kiss Draco, and he knew that things had changed, that he had someone to trust, that he—

That he wasn't *alone* any more.

Draco came, and Harry thought it wasn't because of the kiss, or even the stroking, but from the fact that Harry drew back and smiled at him just before he did it. Of course, Harry considered, looking down as warm liquid absolutely soaked his fingers, the stroking probably had *something* to do with it.

He leaned in again after that and kissed Draco again, just because he longed to find out what his mouth tasted like when he wasn't distracted by touching another man's cock for the first time.

There won't be a first time ever again. But there will be a second time, and a third time, and…

Harry's thoughts faltered there. He didn't think he could quite understand the magnitude of the gift that had been given him. In some ways, it was greater than the shard of soul.

"Thank you," he whispered against Draco's lips. "I don't know how I can ever mean as much to you as you mean to me right now, but I'll try."

Draco turned his head to the side, deepening the kiss and lifting his free hand to cradle Harry's face. His fingers were shaking—and not with sexual frustration anymore, since what just happened had damped that rather effectively. What filled him instead was the deep longing not to mess this up, not to frighten Harry off or disappoint him or let him slip away out of carelessness. Draco wanted to mark him, clasp him close and hold him there, do *anything* to show other people that Harry Potter was his and they weren't to interfere.

Harry pulled out of the kiss and leaned his head against Draco's shoulder for a moment, awkward because of the position they were in, he naked and Draco half-naked and both of them wet, but utterly trusting.

Draco closed his eyes. This happiness was pure, and complete, and though he knew part of it was the result of an orgasm-infused brain—and Harry would probably also shy back a little once the endorphins wore off—he couldn't care.

The whole of his life from the time he could remember it had been a war: struggling to learn the lessons his parents set him, struggling to best Potter in school, struggling to survive when Voldemort set him an impossible task, struggling to develop Psyche-Diving and then earn the useless respect of his peers, and, lately, fighting his way through the Cassandra Curse and the frustration it engendered wherever it went.

He hadn't realized that Harry Potter could bring him peace.

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Chapter: 12

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twelve—Dawn of a New Era

Harry opened his eyes slowly. For long moments, he only knew that light was falling over him like a dream of peace, and he didn't want to wake further. He wanted to lie here and hope the feeling would continue.

And then he realized it would. It had reason to.

He could feel *hope* again.

He lifted his head, eyes blinking in the intense sun. The window next to his bed was open, the curtains whisked away, which explained why he had been woken—

No. It was the window next to *a* bed, but not the one where he had slept since he had come to the Manor.

And there was a warm shape behind him, which half-rolled over when Harry moved, and the arm around his waist hooked him more firmly. Harry drew a deep breath, shivering with possibility, and finally rolled over in turn to see who held him.

He knew who it would be, of course. The memories had returned and locked into place like the notes of a composition. But there was a difference in remembering the moment when he had opened up fully to someone for the first time in a year, and seeing the face of that man now.

Harry half-wondered if he would be disappointed. Maybe fears and doubts would fill him. Maybe he would suddenly find it necessary to remind himself that he wasn't, as far as he knew, bent. Maybe he would be suddenly shy. After all, even though he knew that he and Draco had come up and fallen into the bed without having any further sex, he *was* naked; Draco had insisted on that, and spent long moments admiring Harry with his eyes half-lidded, as though to show him that he was more than worthy of attracting Draco Malfoy's attention.

Harry observed his own emotions from a detached distance, wondering which ones would dominate.

And then he saw Draco, and he realized that it could only have been one. The light made Draco's pale lashes glint like brushstrokes, and his face was wonderful, the tight lines softened to show the strength underneath. This was a *portrait* of hope, Harry thought, and reached up to brush his hand gently along said portrait's jawline.

Draco caught his wrist before Harry could touch him, and made a deep, satisfied sound, perhaps what a lion would have sounded like if lions could purr. Then he opened his eyes and said, with a faint smile, "All that you expected?"

"Not everything," said Harry. The hope had stopped leaping in him like lightning, the way it had yesterday. Instead, what he felt was a settled, steady burn. He held Draco's gaze, and it was—not hard. Still not the easiest thing in the world, still lacking in the confidence that he would have felt before he spent the year under the Cassandra Curse, but much more than he could have done twenty-four hours ago. "I want more than what we had."

Draco exhaled, and Harry was startled to realize that he could read relief in that sound. Draco turned his head to the side and tongued Harry's palm like a cat seeking cream. His voice had

sunk. "Oh, you'll have more than that."

He drew Harry into a kiss. Harry went clear-eyed this time, and wondered if it would be as overwhelming as the one yesterday.

It was different. Harry could feel the exact way that the jabs of Draco's tongue in his mouth awakened his groin this time, as though Draco weren't nudging his cheeks and lips, but buttons that introduced different levels of arousal when pressed. Harry swallowed around Draco's tongue, which got him a moan, and then rolled on top of him.

Oh. Harry's eyes drooped shut and he had to stop moving for a moment, even his part in the kiss falling still. He had been naked yesterday while Draco touched him, but he'd felt skin to skin only on their cocks. Now there were—nipples, and—hair, and hipbones, and—roll just a little bit to the side, yes, and—

Harry found himself rocking back and forth with no conscious plan to do so. But it would have been a waste to have laid on top of that gorgeous body and done *nothing.* He wondered now, idly, what Draco had felt when Harry fell on top of him to protect him from Lila's curses.

I put an elbow in his stomach. I don't think he was this happy. Draco's hands had risen to frame his face and rake through his hair, and Harry's muscles tried to go limp. He shook off the temptation. *I want to make him happier, and it's time I knew a few of his weak spots. He's controlled our encounters for far too long.*

And with that thought, a new determination took root in Harry, right beside the one that said he was going to get the curse removed and the one that said he was going to go on feeling hope. He was going to go forwards alongside Draco, neither ahead nor behind. That meant sharing his confidence. It meant actively *wanting* a part in the sex, and not fearing his own desires. And it meant showing Draco that he wasn't some patient that he had to be careful of, not any longer.

Draco sank his fingers deeper, wanting to see the drugged, languid haze in Harry's eyes again, but Harry moved his head to the side, and shook it once. Then his gaze met Draco's, and locked.

Draco stared. There was calmness there, but other emotions, too. Draco wondered if he was staring into the eyes of the Auror.

He didn't object when Harry pulled the hands out of his hair, kissed both palms, and then laid them on either side of Draco's hips. It was harder to lie still, though, when Harry began to explore his body, lingering on everything that made him twitch, his tongue rasping as he coated Draco's abdomen with kisses, his fingers light enough to tickle as he slid over the ribs like a snake seeking a soft resting place.

Draco had expected this, but not so soon. He had thought they would have a few more meetings of the bodies where he coaxed Harry past his barriers and into the open, and taught him to see that sex was something he could enjoy again.

But apparently, when Harry decided to overcome his hesitations, he did it in a big way.

He lifted his head at one point, to regard Draco, as if he were asking a mute question. Draco couldn't read the exact terms of that question, but he nodded, trying to convey that Harry had his permission for anything. He couldn't imagine Harry hurting him.

Unless accidentally. He's never been with a man before, and he might do something painful.

But Draco didn't really believe it, and besides, he could always tell Harry to stop if that was the case. And a moment later, when Harry's mouth closed softly but firmly around his cock, he *really* didn't believe it. His chest inflated, and a small snort of breath escaped his nose, but otherwise he tried to hold himself still, not wanting to pump his hips into Harry's mouth too soon.

Even if the pleasure he caused *was* rather begging for it.

Harry could feel his own emotions arguing against this, if he really listened to them. There was shame, which said that sucking cock was something that only happened to weaklings or—or people who were gay, which in the common terminology of the Auror Department was almost the same thing. There was trepidation, as to what this meant and whether he would hurt Draco. There was uncertainty, urging him to hold back for a little while and try bringing Draco off with his hand instead.

And there was fear, sharp as a wall of razors, slicing down the middle of his mind and asking what he would do if Draco rolled over, said, "Thanks for the fuck," and walked out of the bedroom. He had what he wanted from Harry now, after all. What reason did he have to stick around?

But Harry pushed the emotions away, and if the rebellion he chose against them—sucking cock—was an odd one, it was still *his* choice. He eased his mouth around the head first, pacing himself as he sank down, sucking gently and not straining his jaw or his tongue, tucking his lips around his teeth and keeping them always covered. He couldn't imagine Draco would enjoy the odd scrape of a tooth any more than Harry had when Ginny used to do this to him.

Ginny. You're betraying Ginny! gibbered the most fearful part of his brain, trying to find any excuse for him not to make himself more vulnerable.

She's gone, she has someone new, Harry answered himself, and shut his eyes, and concentrated on making Draco feel good.

It was an oddly silent process, though Harry could glance up if he wanted and see the pleasure washing Draco's face blank and slack. Then it dawned on him that Draco was *trying* not to make any noise. Perhaps he thought Harry would take any sound he made for one of pain, or perhaps—

Perhaps he feared to make himself vulnerable first, when he hadn't turned Harry into a moaning mess with a few glides of his fingers.

Harry grinned to himself, and then began moving his tongue in quick, light jabs, while his hands dropped lower and toyed with Draco's balls. That was another new thing; without the protection of the orgasmic haze that he'd had yesterday, he almost cringed from touching them, but they weren't disgusting under his hands, the way he once would have viewed another bloke's bits as being. They were still warm skin, taut, wrinkled, and Draco shifted and gasped and thrust deep, once, which made Harry's jaw ache but which was worth experiencing again anyhow, so he sucked some more and tugged again and—

His mouth was suddenly flooded.

Harry reared back in surprise, and most of it trickled out on the sheets. He thought he swallowed some of it, too, but he couldn't be sure. The taste wasn't *too* awful, he supposed. He wouldn't want to make a regular diet of the stuff.

Except that he might be able to, for Draco's sake.

He felt so strange, Harry thought, as he raised his eyes to Draco's face. There were still the fears, silenced for now but not forgotten. There was the unexpected strength that had led him to do this in the first place, which he thought was *far* more than he should have got from just being held and stroked to orgasm, but which he wanted to follow. And there was the uncertainty about the future, which for once was not crippling. He didn't know what would happen tomorrow, or today, but he was confident that he could handle it, whatever it was.

"You *could* warn a bloke, you know," he said, and then tried a cautious smile to see what would happen when he did. His face felt stretched shiny and taut and very new, like the skin around a burn.

Draco stared up at Harry in a daze, and realized two things at once: he should have let the sounds he was making through, because Harry had obviously had no idea that Draco was that close to coming; and Harry was the most wonderful and amazing and *astounding* person he had ever known.

"I'll be sure to do that next time," he said in a hoarse voice, flavoring it with wonder, and caught the surprise that flashed across Harry's face before his eyes lowered. That reassured him a little. He wasn't somehow at the mercy of an unaffected Harry, though he had been so busy attending to Draco that he hadn't tried to touch his own cock, which still curved red against his belly. He could still be turned on and shocked by Draco.

"So—there will be next times?"

The dear voice trembled, and Draco could *feel* the courage it must have taken him to ask that question. He knew only one way to answer that.

He hauled himself upright and caught Harry around the shoulders, pulling him down, pulling him deep, rolling him under him and kissing him *thoroughly*, so that there could no doubt about what he felt. He scraped Harry's skull with his fingers again, and this time Harry allowed his eyes to roll back in his head.

"There will be next times and next times and next times," Draco whispered into his ear before he began to slide down Harry's body. "This isn't some quick tumble, and this isn't some infatuation based on sex, either. I *want* you. If you don't want me as much right now, that's fine, but you *will*. I want you to."

"It takes a lot just to let me have sex," Harry said, propping himself up on one elbow to watch Draco as he descended, his green eyes wide and far too serious. A curl of dark hair, turned almost red by the sunlight, fell across the lightning bolt scar. "And I still think of myself as a straight man acting bent, for your information."

"I won't demand that you be perfect all at once," Draco said, and held his eyes. "I would *never* demand that."

And then he sank and began to suck.

Harry let out a startled, full-throated cry that was mostly, "*Yes!*" Draco was glad. He was glad that Harry had emerged from his shell of caution, but he would hate to have him treat this thoughtfully all the time, soberly, cautiously, as if he could never bring himself to feel pleasure.

And pleasure was what Draco gave him as he teased, most of the time just lightly enough to make Harry whine and shift, after that first initial suck. He put his hands to good use, fondling skin that Harry didn't even know about yet—because Harry Potter had probably been too heterosexual and too uptight to let his hands wander much between his erection and his entrance.

If he had been, he wasn't now. Draco looked up and saw the curve of Harry's neck against the pillows, as taut as it had been yesterday, his skin shivering and sweating and shining. He wasn't at all inhibited in sounds, needy grunts and broken sobs working past his lips as he writhed, and then he came and Draco felt his mouth work apart in a hungry snarl. He *owned* this, this sight of Harry against the pillows like a bird fallen from heaven, wings broken by joy.

Not always, not entirely, but at this moment and like this, Draco owned him—and needed the sight of him.

He lowered his head to rest on Harry's belly when they were both done. He breathed in the scent of sweaty skin and semen, and licked a strip of wetness up Harry's abdomen, then blew cool air on it, causing Harry to stir restlessly. A moment later, Harry's hand descended and hesitantly stroked his hair.

Draco shut his eyes. He had never felt anything like this. The sunlight bonded them in warmth.

His own limbs were trembling as though with a second orgasm.

Whatever this was, he welcomed it and wanted it with all his heart, and unlike the momentary sight of Harry at the height of pleasure, he would not let it leave him.

"I feel like I've been asleep for a year," Harry said, as they sat at the breakfast table and a smiling, whistling Batty served them large glasses of orange juice, plates of ham and bacon hefty enough that Harry doubted he could eat it all, and bowls of porridge that seemed to slide more smoothly down his throat than ever before.

Draco smiled at him. "And now you're awake?"

Harry nodded. He didn't want to stop looking at Draco—who sat in a chair next to him instead of across from him, as was more usual—and his hand kept stealing out of its own volition to stroke Draco's cheek, or slide through his hair and hold some of it to Harry's nose and lips, or glide along his arm. The best explanation Harry could give was that he *needed* to do this. He shifted closer.

Draco pulled back his chair from the table, and Harry hesitated, wondering if he had made some mistake. Perhaps men didn't touch like this when they got up from the bed. But Draco only turned to face him, and started eating with his right hand only, so that Harry could more easily reach his face and neck.

"Thank you," Harry said, and resumed his touching, this time rubbing his thumb along Draco's earlobe to learn the texture of it. Draco closed his eyes. His voice had returned to the same piercing, husky tone he'd used yesterday when he was trying to convince Harry of his interest.

"Does this mean that you accept we *can* be lovers, and that what I want from you is neither simple nor over?"

"Yes," Harry whispered. His hand had wandered to the back of the other man's neck, and he was fascinated by the differences between Draco's hair and his own. His curled tightly and crisply there; Draco's was wavy, as though someone had partially flattened it but then hadn't managed to make it lie still.

Harry felt very strange, as though something could go wrong any moment but probably wasn't going to. It wasn't quite solemnity, since both joy and terror weren't far away, but it was like that.

"So *new*," he said.

"Yes," Draco said softly, and regarded him full-on for a moment with the same sun-like intensity that had shocked Harry yesterday. This time, he tried to return the gaze, and had the satisfaction of seeing Draco blink before he turned away to finish his porridge.

Harry had already finished eating, and he leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. Draco accepted it,

then put down his spoon, pinned Harry to the back of his chair, and leisurely kissed him on what felt like every square inch of his face.

Harry's hands twitched with the need to touch, but Draco kept him at bay until he was groaning impatiently and his fingers actually opened and closed like lobster claws. Then Draco sat back, with a sound half huff and half laugh, and met and held his eyes.

"I think we still need to talk about some things," he said. "I'm glad that you've recovered enough to touch me, but that's not the only thing that should bring us together, or *keep* us that way as we hunt Scrimgeour." He spoke more seriously than Harry had ever heard him, even when he was talking about the shard of his soul buried in Harry's core.

Harry was distracted for a moment. Was *that* why he felt so fervently attracted to Draco? Was the soul-shard creating compatibility between them that didn't exist otherwise?

And then Harry realized that he didn't care. That might have been the start, but it had gone far beyond that on his part, and on Draco's, too, from the way his eyes gleamed like iron as he waited for Harry's answer.

"I know," Harry said. And since Draco had moved the conversation from touching, which was easy and delightful to do now, to more serious matters, it was his turn to do something daring. He flung himself off the cliff before he could change his mind. "I'm ready to tell you why I tried to commit suicide."

Keeping his eyes locked on Harry's, Draco lifted his right wrist and kissed the scar above the vein.

Draco was enormously relieved. He had thought he would have to tug and coax Harry even now. Sex was a bodily instinct that could always be relearned, but Harry had been far more starved of trust under the Cassandra Curse than physical contact, and Draco wasn't sure how skittish he would be outside bed.

He was conquering his skittishness, what there was of it. He'd led them immediately to the room where Draco had met with Shacklebolt, as if he didn't want the distraction of windows that would show him the sky and gardens. He sat down in a chair, looked straight at Draco, waited for a moment until Draco nodded, and then began.

"I didn't expect the effect that the Cassandra Curse had on other people in the Ministry," Harry said. "I knew they'd hate me and think I was lying—at least, I knew that once I met it the hundredth time—but I didn't realize that I'd be assigned to so many cases alone. And of course, they thought I was glory-mongering, and when I said that I hated the hard cases, they only heard me saying that I desired more. As it went on and on, I realized I'd become a precious commodity to the Ministry, in exactly the wrong way. If I simply vanished from the wizarding world into the Muggle one, they'd hunt for me, and haul me back—not for any altruistic motives, but simply to keep their solve rates up."

Harry shut his eyes and cut his lower lip with his teeth. Draco feathered his fingers over Harry's wrists and waited.

"But if I were crazy," Harry whispered, "and vanished from St. Mungo's, then they wouldn't bother. I'd be more an embarrassment than a benefit to them even if they found me. And they'd have to pay for my medical treatment, since no one looking at my history would believe stress from cases didn't have something to do with my collapse. So I decided on suicide that would be stopped at the last moment. Whether I survived or not, the Ministry would turn its back on me."

"Whether you survived or not," Draco said quietly, and his fingers pressed a bit harder than he'd intended, stretching and wrinkling the scarred skin. Harry nodded and opened his eyes. They still didn't have the depth of regret in them that Draco would have liked to see.

"Yes," Harry whispered. "I hoped I would be found—I dropped plenty of hints around Ron and then cut my wrists relatively near his office—but if I didn't, I was…resigned to that. I didn't welcome death. I just didn't mind it."

Draco said nothing, but hauled sharply on Harry's arms. Harry yelped as he staggered to his feet and then sat down again on Draco's lap. Draco embraced him and bowed his head, whispering the words he spoke next, low and fierce and sharp, into the hollow between Harry's neck and shoulder.

"Never do that again. If you suffer the temptation, tell me at once. I want your promise that you will." No matter what Harry might think, such apathy was its own temptation, and he might go back to it as a relief from the cacophony of emotions he'd been forced to feel.

"It might be my only option—" Harry began, his shoulders tensing.

"*No*," Draco said, and though he whispered, he knew his word had the force of a scream. Harry stopped. "Trust me," Draco said to him, and shook him a little. "Trust that I'll rescue you, that I'll come for you, no matter how hopeless the odds." He shifted and put one hand over Harry's heart, causing the soul-shard to start purring. "I did it once, didn't I?"

Harry's breathing deepened. Draco might have thought he was falling asleep if he didn't know better. Then Harry slipped a hand under his chin and brought his head up so they were face-to-face. Harry's eyes shone with subdued happiness.

"Yes," he whispered. "I promise."

"Yes," Draco whispered back, and then kissed him. He felt his need surge in him, unsatisfied by two times with Harry, and started to move him so that they could reach each other's waists.

Then he felt a warning stab from his wards, and leaned back, blinking in confusion. Harry moaned in protest and sought his mouth again.

Draco closed his eyes and reached out, telling the wards to bring him images of the people who waited outside the gates—

And then Harry pulled away from him and said, his voice trembling, "What are Ron and Hermione doing here?"

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Chapter: 13

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirteen—Human Again

Moments after he had asked his question, though, Harry knew the answer.

His mind flitted to the way that Batty had hummed around their breakfast—not something she should have done after seeing Harry with her master—and then to the letters to Ron and Hermione that he had left on the table near his bed. He grimaced, his eyes sliding shut. He was almost certain that Batty had taken those letters after she had seen them kissing last night, and posted them to his friends. They would have had time to travel a fair distance if she sent them yesterday evening.

And of course Ron and Hermione would show up, not believing the letters but determined to discover what Draco might know. Harry was also sure that Batty had left information attached to the letters so that they could be tracked back to Malfoy Manor. Or maybe he'd put references like that in the letters himself; he could no longer remember.

"Harry?"

Draco's voice brought him back, Draco's voice and Draco's hands gently straying up and down his wrists, rubbing on the scars. Harry let his eyes fall open again, and his smile return, so that Draco wouldn't panic, then said, "I think it might be my fault that they're here."

He explained, as concisely as he could. Draco's lips tightened, and Harry thought he wanted to ask several questions, such as, "Why did you write letters to your friends when you could have come to me?" or "Why didn't you tell me at once that Batty was making unpleasant remarks about me?"

But perhaps he sensed that it would be stupid to ask Harry questions like that now. He just inclined his head and murmured, "We have two choices, then, since I doubt they'll leave us alone

any time soon, and I don't want them to get fed up and go to the Ministry. I can go out and face them alone. Or you can come with me." His thumbs rubbed over the scars on Harry's wrists again, which seemed to be his favorite gesture. Harry wondered idly if he believed the wounds would break open again and drain him of life.

They wouldn't. Harry had promised, though it was still a fragile, wondrous thing to him that Draco cared about him enough to secure a promise against killing himself. After all, Harry's death would have solved some of Draco's problems as well as his own.

"I'm coming with you," he said.

Draco cocked his head. "Are you sure? You can trust me not to hurt your friends, Harry. I might find them irritating, but they're important to you. I don't want to cause them pain."

Harry nodded. "I know. But even if you can persuade them to leave, they might still be suspicious and ask the Ministry to investigate. There are—several courses that I can take, even though they'll still believe that I'm under the Cassandra Curse." He steeled himself for what he knew would be an unpleasant exercise any way he looked at it, and slid off Draco's lap.

Draco caught his wrist again. "You are not to hurt yourself unnecessarily," he whispered harshly.

Harry couldn't help himself; he laughed. "Believe me, Draco," he said, "I know enough about pain by now to not want to suffer *any* of it unnecessarily. But I also know that it isn't the worst thing in the world. I'll survive, especially with you at my side." He tugged at Draco's hands in turn. "Come on, now. Can you Apparate us to the gates of the Manor the way you did with Lila?"

"Yes," Draco said. He stood with an odd expression on his face. Harry shrugged it off. He would have time later to find out what it meant, just as he would conduct investigations into Draco's many other peculiarities. What bound them and hovered between them still half-terrified him, but he knew he had very little choice except to adapt to it. What hovered between them was *also* too powerful not to last years.

Years with Draco. So strange to think about.

But he put that aside, all but the firm nugget of trust that said Draco would come with him to the front gates, and not harm Ron or Hermione, and not abandon him. If they *were* to have years, he couldn't learn all the truths he'd need in a day.

Draco kept a close eye on Harry as he wrapped his arms around him and dropped the wards so they could Apparate. Sometimes he forgot just what Harry had managed to survive—Harry seemed so emotionally fragile in the wake of the Cassandra Curse, and he had gone so sweetly helpless under his hands when Draco touched him in just the right way—and then Harry would make some casual remark that reminded him. Suffering had become so much a part of Harry's life that Draco doubted he noticed it any more.

Someday, he vowed to himself as they vanished, *I'll make joy the normal condition, and he'll never think about suicide again.*

They appeared at the front of the Manor, but behind the gates, which separated them from Harry's friends. Granger had just drawn back her wand as if she was about to try her spells against the wards, but she dropped it and stared openly when she saw them. Beside her, Ron Weasley's face was grim and shadowed, and he nodded. He seemed to have expected what he saw more than Granger had.

"Good morning," Draco said, keeping his manner as cool and effortless as possible. Harry tugged in his arms, and reluctantly, Draco let him go. He would have preferred to keep his body turned and stand between Harry and any danger. Harry moved up beside him, resting one hand lightly on Draco's shoulder. Draco didn't let his face show it, but that pleased him immensely. He echoed the gesture in his own way, letting his hand lest rest on the small of Harry's back.

"Harry," said Granger, and her eyes filled with tears. Her hand reached out, hovering tentatively, then dropped when Harry made no movement to come to the gate and take it. She sucked in her breath, swallowed the sobs, and wheeled on Draco. "How could you take him away from St. Mungo's?" she hissed. "You *know* he's sick, that he needs care—"

"I am *not* sick," Harry said, only a fine tremble under Draco's palm telling him the extent of Harry's frustration. "I'm under a curse. Draco was the only one who managed to see through it, because he gave me a piece of his soul."

Draco wondered for a moment if that was the wisest piece of information to spread around, and then decided it would work, since it solidified his claim to Harry.

Besides, from the look on Granger's face—half-sorrowful and half-weary, as if she were dealing with a problem that had lasted years and was simply too much for her—she didn't believe him anyway.

"I know that you *think* that, Harry," she said, the sound of patience lost and dragged back and kidnapped once more behind her voice. "But that's not true. You need the help of the Healers. And if they say that you need to spend some time on the Janus Thickey ward, that's what you need to do."

"I was the Psyche-Diver assigned to his case," said Draco, not bothering to raise his voice. A quiet but piercing tone could make all the difference in the world. "*I* certainly didn't give permission for him to be moved."

"Oh, shut it, Malfoy," Weasley said. His own wand was out now, and it didn't waver like Granger's had done. "I know all the excuses. You failed to treat Harry, and then you kidnapped him so that you could continue working on him in private. Do you even *realize* how sick that is? Couldn't you accept his madness and pass him on to a Mind-Healer who would be able to give him the gentleness he needs?"

"Stop *insulting* him."

Draco looked down at Harry, pleased, but wary as well. There was no crack in his voice, but something dangerous: the same smoothness that had been there when he discovered Kingsley Shacklebolt in Draco's study. He'd drawn his wand and had it pointing at Weasley. He'd also stepped forwards to cover Draco with his body.

Draco would once have rejoiced in the sight of Harry Potter choosing him over his best friend. And the disbelieving, miserable look that passed over Weasley's face was even better. But all he could think of now was the pain that it would cause Harry when he shook off his anger and realized exactly what it meant, that he'd put Weasley on the wrong end of his wand.

He caught Harry's wrist and rubbed his scar again, shaking his head slightly when Harry looked at him. "They can't believe you, remember?" he whispered. "And it's through no fault of their own. We *know* who to blame."

Harry took several deep breaths, evidently blowing out his fury. His trembling shoulders eased down, and he lowered his wand. But then he shook his head and said the last thing Draco had expected. "I want to say the words that built up under the Cassandra Curse. I know they can't retain their truth, but if I don't say them, it feels like they'll tear open my chest and lay waste to my lungs."

Draco rubbed the hand on the small of Harry's back in circles. He would have nuzzled Harry's face to convey his happiness and pride, but he thought it was too intimate a gesture to perform in front of relative strangers. "Then say the words," he murmured. "It's about time that you felt comfortable talking to someone besides me."

Harry nodded and turned to face Granger and Weasley.

He was just in time to catch a spell from Granger, who had worked it nonverbally and with such slight movements of her wand that Draco hadn't detected it. It crackled towards Harry like an inverted blue lightning bolt, but spent itself uselessly against the wards. Draco felt cold brush across his cheek. If the spell had struck, it would have rendered Harry more helpless than any Body-Bind and less aware of his surroundings, just an inanimate object to be transported wherever Granger chose.

From the shaking of Harry's body, he'd recognized it, too. But Draco, craning his neck to catch the expression on his lover's face, knew the shaking came not from fear or pain, but rage.

Granger asked for this. Draco kept silent, other than moving his hands in circles of support, while Harry launched all the built-up anger and torment directly at his friends.

"It *is* a curse," he said, his voice building from a snarl into a roar. "The Cassandra Curse. I tried to tell you. Not that you could listen, with the curse blocking your ears to the truth of my words

and making you dislike me. The only time it yields is when I'm so badly injured that I would die otherwise."

"Harry—" Granger began, in a tear-choked voice that Draco didn't pity one bit. She'd had her chance to listen.

"Shut up, Hermione," said Harry. He was standing taller now, and Draco wondered if he realized that he was confessing the imprisoned truth not only to his friends but to Draco as well. Maybe he did, or maybe he didn't care any more who was listening as long as he got to speak. "Don't you remember the day someone cursed me in Knockturn Alley, so badly that I would have died if you hadn't happened along? What did you remember as you were struggling to heal me? I saw your face. You were free of the curse for those few moments, weren't you? You could tell that something changed, couldn't you?"

Granger shook her head, but she seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Harry whirled on Weasley. Draco noted with vicious satisfaction that the other man's blue eyes were no longer steady; shadows darted across his face like clouds swept by a strong wind.

"And you, Ron," Harry continued relentlessly. "You were the one who found me after I tried to kill myself. I was so badly wounded that you would have lost me if you hesitated and thought it was a prank. How did you feel when you were healing me? How did you feel when I was being wrapped up and transported to St. Mungo's?"

"That was just—I mean, my best friend tried to commit *suicide*, no matter how mad he seemed!" Weasley said loudly. "I can't—you have to understand—"

"But you could have thought it was just a plea for attention," Harry said, and his voice was laced with acid and fire. "That's the way that you think of it now. I'd got bored flirting with the front page of the *Daily Prophet*, so I came up with a new tactic to earn sympathy. That's what you think, isn't it? Be *honest*, Ron."

Harry knew he shouldn't be enjoying this as much as he was. Apart from anything else, there was a battle going on behind Ron's eyes, just as there was behind Hermione's, the struggle to remember. And they weren't to blame. He should remember that it was the curse, always and only the curse, that had changed things between him and his friends.

But he'd spent a year telling himself that—not letting himself strike out at the world even when he was on the edge of screaming with frustration, because no one around him knew what they were doing or realized how much they were hurting him. Indeed, in their eyes, *he* was the one hurting *them.* He had to be calm, had to be patient, had to repair the relationships as much as possible so that he could have his friends by his side if he ever discovered who cast the curse and forced them to take it back. Or, at the very least, if he had to vanish into the Muggle world as he'd finally planned, he wouldn't leave his friends with such horrible memories of him as he might have, as long as he kept the arguments to a minimum.

And now he was tired of that. So tired. And his relationships with Ron and Hermione wouldn't be the same anyway; he could admit that to himself when he thought about it. If they were true friends, they would understand his outburst and excuse it when the curse was gone. He deserved the chance to shriek if he wanted to.

From the way Draco leaned against his back, he understood and approved.

"Harry, I—" Ron said.

Harry almost gave in then, seeing the honest confusion in his friend's eyes. But he remembered the spell Hermione had tried to cast against him, and his resolve hardened. That was a spell the Aurors used to bring in the most hardened, dangerous criminals, the ones who couldn't be trusted not to destroy themselves and a handful of other people just for fun. Either the effect of the curse had strengthened or she had progressed to thinking he was more than just a liar and an attention-seeker. Either way, he couldn't trust them right now.

"Think about it," he said, and stepped as close as he could to the gate without leaving his position against Draco. "*Think* about it, Ron, not shove it to the back of your mind the way the curse wants you to." He cocked his head, wondering if he could use this conversation as a tool to open their minds after all, and not just relieve his. "If I hurt myself again," he said, lifting his wand, "what would you think, I wonder?"

Draco's hands tightened, on his hip and his arm, holding him firmly but undeniably still. Harry tilted his head back to look at him, and Draco ducked his head so that his lips were less than an inch away from Harry's ear.

"Remember your promise," was all he said.

Harry thought about protesting for a moment. He wouldn't have tried to kill himself, just cause himself a great deal of pain so that the curse would be fooled and ease its clutch on his dearest friends for a moment—

Well. Maybe there's not such a great deal of difference, after all.

He turned to face Ron again, intent on expressing himself about some of the more stinging insults Ron had given him in the past year, and found Ron with his hackles almost bristling, his eyes darkened with hatred. He was looking at Draco, though, not Harry.

"It's worse than I thought," he breathed. "You didn't kidnap him from St. Mungo's just because you were infuriated that you couldn't cure his madness, you took him so that you could *fuck* him."

And Harry lost his half-recovered hold on his temper.

The wards protected Ron from his magic—at least for the moment, until Draco lowered

them—but not from his words.

"You wouldn't know a thing about it, would you, Ron?" he asked, and the level of sharpness in his voice startled even him. "You have *no clue* what it's been like for me. To have everyone turn away from me. To lose my fiancée. To know that I couldn't come to you with problems the way I could in school, because you'd turn me away as a liar and someone unfaithful to your baby sister. To work the hardest cases the Department had to offer, and then to catch a few hours' sleep, and heal myself of any wounds I'd taken—because no one else would touch me unless they were almost fatal—and stagger out to do it all over *again.*" He laughed. It hurt. "You should at least have objected to the insane schedule they assigned me in the name of Departmental efficiency. No one else could have stood the kind of stress they put me through. And they all thought I was lying whenever I asked for a holiday."

"You can't—Harry, listen—"

And Hermione tried to say something, too, but Harry wasn't *having* it. He was going to get this out if it killed him.

"There was no one to touch me. Do you know how often I just wanted a touch from someone that wasn't a blow? Do you know how often I talked to the dead? Sirius and Dumbledore were more real to me in the last year than you and Hermione were, because at least they would *listen* instead of *judging.* And do you think it was *easy*, being abandoned, no matter what the reason? If I'd stayed on the Janus Thickey ward, I doubt that you and Hermione would have bothered to visit often. A few quick and guilty, furtive trips, and then you'd try to forget. And you'd be relieved, deep down."

"Harry, that's not true!" Hermione's eyes were shiny with tears in a way that he'd never been able to ignore when he was in his right mind. But none of them were, none of them *were*, Harry thought, taking comfort from the way Draco's hands held and anchored him, because there was nothing else.

"Do you know what it's like to hope that you *do* die when you try to kill yourself, even if the suicide attempt was a desperate last-minute plan, because not waking up has a lot to recommend it? I remember now. There *were* moments after I cut my wrists when I hoped that I'd die, Ron, that you wouldn't be in time. It would just be so much *easier.*

"I know it's not your fault. I *know*. But telling that to myself just killed me faster. There was no one to blame, except the caster of the curse, whom I didn't know. There was no one to communicate with. I didn't *talk* to anyone.

"And then Draco came along, and he was the only one strong enough, the only one who cared enough, to fight his way through the curse and rescue me. I owe him more than I can say, and you *dare* take that tone with him?" Harry could feel his head coming up, his eyes flaring, his magic ruffling his hair out like a lion's mane. "He didn't bring me here to fuck me. It doesn't matter to *you* whether we're sleeping together. Even if you were sane and my friend still and

wanted me with you instead of back in St. Mungo's, it wouldn't be your business. I'm not sure if I'm straight or bent or curved or anything else, and I'm terrified out of my mind half the time about it, but I'm still going to go *right* ahead with Draco.

"And no matter whose fault it was, things between us are never going to be the same again. Take *that* away with you and chew on it."

Draco understood his part in the unfolding drama very well, though he doubted anyone else had the same level of comprehension. Granger looked destroyed by what Harry was saying; though she wouldn't take it as the literal truth, the tone behind the words would come through, and the Cassandra Curse might even exaggerate it. Weasley had shut his eyes and was shaking his head slowly back and forth, as if that would suffice to shut out Harry's words.

And Harry had needed to say those things, and he sagged back against Draco now with a little sigh, as though his words had been a hot gas floating him upright and he needed to rest now.

Draco thought it wise to end the encounter. Harry had spoken more fully than he realized, and told Draco more than he might have after a morning of coaxing. They needed to retire and consider the way they'd deal with those revelations.

First, of course, Draco would need to remove the memory of what had happened from Granger and Weasley. They couldn't be allowed to leave the Manor reporting that Harry was there. Even if they warned everyone they met not to bother Harry, word would reach Scrimgeour, and both Draco and Harry would be in more danger than before.

Besides, Draco had a plan in mind to let Harry's friends help Harry, even if they didn't realize they were doing so.

He drew his wand, aimed it past Harry's head, and murmured, "*Obliviate."* Thanks to his control of the wards, his spell pressed through them where Granger's hadn't managed, and blanketed their minds in silence. Granger's eyes glazed. Weasel's jaw went slack. Draco sneered, not at all surprised that Ron had had the stronger reaction.

Harry twisted around to look up at him. Draco expected accusation in his face, but after a moment of staring, he simply nodded, as if to say that he accepted they had to do this, and better Draco wield the Memory Charm than him.

"All right," he said. "What will you tell them?" His hand settled on the side of Draco's neck, as though he wanted to renew his touching of the morning.

"This," said Draco, and spoke in the stern and reassuring voice he knew from experience worked best with victims of Memory Charms. "You saw convincing proof that Harry wasn't here, but that I believed him to be in Scotland. Concentrate your search there. It's the only way you'll ever find him before he goes too wild and does himself, or the Ministry, irreparable harm. Be sure to tell everyone you meet, so that *someone* can reach him and help him." He was particularly proud

of how earnest he managed to sound on those last words.

Granger and Weasley nodded mechanically, and then turned away and marched to the outer limit of the wards preventing Apparition. They were gone in moments. Draco watched, narrow-eyed, until he was sure they wouldn't turn back, and then put his wand away.

"They'll draw attention," Harry murmured. "Scrimgeour's attention. What *are* you planning, Draco?"

"To make myself seem even more like an ally of the Ministry than I did previously," Draco murmured, close to his ear. "And to focus the Minister's attention on Scotland. Meanwhile, I have *our* next move planned. Lila's good as a start, but she's not enough. There's someone else I plan to target in order to change her mind."

"I don't think you'll ever get Umbridge to like me," Harry complained, making a face.

Draco laughed. "Not her. I was thinking of a certain Department Head who's flirted with me in the past, and who I'm more than happy to return the favor to—since it'll get me into her office. Of course, there's the complication that I wouldn't be so much flirting with her as altering her mind…"

"Good," Harry murmured. "I wouldn't want to have to be jealous."

Draco stroked his shoulder for a moment, and asked, even though he knew it should wait until after he'd confronted Batty and punished her, "Did you mean what you said? About not knowing if you were straight or bent or curved?"

Harry turned to face him, his head lifted and his eyes forthright.

"I don't know what I am," he said. "A straight man acting bent, for right now, if I had to choose. But I *want* to stay with you, Draco. And not just because the sex is fantastic, or because you're the first person to touch me since this curse forced me into exile. I've been happy yesterday and today, and I know that I couldn't be as happy with anyone else."

Draco caught the back of his neck and pulled him into another kiss. Harry gave as good as he got, even striving forwards to press his mouth more and more deeply against Draco's, making satisfied little moans.

Harry accepted Draco's plan to use his friends. They'd caught Batty's disaster in time to turn it into an advantage. And Harry was happy.

Life was so sweet at the moment, Draco mused, that he didn't know how he'd stand it.

But he would find some way, because Merlin knew he deserved every bit of this.

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Chapter: 14

Thank you again for all the review!

Chapter Fourteen—Draco the Magnificent

Draco wasted no time. The moment that he and Harry stepped through the door of the Manor, he summoned Batty.

Batty appeared in front of him, took one look at his face, seized her ears in her hands, and began to drum her head into the floor.

Draco sneered and slid one arm around Harry's waist. He darted a look at his lover, but Harry was watching Batty punish herself without apparent concern. Draco wondered if he had had a house-elf after all, though from what he remembered of Granger's war against their "enslavement" in Hogwarts, he doubted it.

Or maybe he just enjoys the sight of someone who tried to hurt him suffering.

Draco realized he was stroking the waistline of Harry's robes in approval, and made himself stop. If he once opened Harry's clothes, he was likely to forget all about Batty's punishment. He kept his hand in contact with the warm, giving flesh as he spoke, though. He also didn't want to go too far with the punishment and make himself appear some kind of monster in Harry's eyes.

"Batty," he said, and was proud of the way his voice emerged, sliding and slithering like a serpent around cage bars smeared with grease. "Did you post letters that Harry Potter had written to his friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger?"

Deprived of any possible opening that would let her lie, Batty wailed out a confused mixture of protests and denials and how "Batty always has the best intentions towards Master Malfoy, always, always, always!" Draco heard her out, because interrupting a house-elf in this mood meant receiving the same tirade again, louder than before.

Harry did give a slight wince during the wail, though. Draco wasn't sure what bothered him—the helplessness of the creature or the mere pitch of the sound—but he acted at once.

"Batty," he said, "silence. You will answer my questions only by nodding or shaking your head, is that clear?"

Batty calmed at once, and, nodding, peered up at him through large eyes leaking with tears.

Draco didn't miss the venomous glance she darted at Harry through those tears, though.

Even now. Draco's mouth tightened in exasperation. He had planned to use a punishment that his father had often inflicted on an elf named Dobby when Draco was a child, but this was too much. Batty had done her duty, as she saw it, and obviously part of that duty was protecting Draco against Harry and everything Harry's presence in the house implied. Even if Draco forbade her from hurting Harry, she would find some way around the orders. A house-elf's overriding imperative was to do what was best for their master's family, whether or not the master's family *said* so. That was one reason they could be trusted to take care of children.

And it was the reason he could not trust Batty now. If she sincerely believed Harry was a danger to Malfoy blood or property or prestige, Draco could make all the protestations in the world, and she wouldn't believe him, instead thinking that he was blinded by infatuation. She would act against Harry again, and next time, it might not be a strike that Draco could understand or turn to his advantage so quickly.

He pulled Harry closer to him. Harry glanced at him curiously. Draco ignored that. He wanted Harry, as well as Batty, to understand exactly why he was doing what he was doing before he did it.

He was grateful that he hadn't been required to speak that sentence aloud. The words he did say were more than enough.

"Batty," he said, "I want you to understand that your attempt failed. Harry Potter's friends did come here, but they did not take away the impressions that you wanted them to take away. Harry Potter is still safe here, and always will be. You know that we're lovers."

"Master Malfoy should not touch a half-blood whose paternal line is younger than the benches in the Malfoy gardens!" Batty screamed, standing to her full height and disregarding the order to keep silent. She punished herself immediately afterwards, pulling on her ears until new tears shone in her eyes, but she kept screaming. "Master Malfoy must find a suitable partner, someone with clean blood and clean magic who will be good to him!"

Draco snarled, but Harry put a hand on his arm and leaned to whisper into his ear. Draco noticed with some satisfaction that this caused Batty to writhe and squeak harder than ever. She wouldn't have many more chances to watch him being intimate with Harry, but he liked to imagine her reaction standing in for that of Harry's friends when they were once more confronted with the reality of Harry's new life.

"I think it might be the curse," Harry whispered. "I was never around any house-elves in the last year. But why shouldn't it exaggerate their reactions towards me and make them incapable of trusting my good intentions?"

Draco snarled again, this time cursing himself. He should have anticipated that and taken proper precautions to protect Harry.

The sense of protectiveness he felt towards Harry really was astounding, he noted, attempting to think about it in a detached manner. He knew that he would take hexes for Harry, plot and plan and intrigue and quit St. Mungo's for him, but the all-consuming emotion that ate his attachment and spread across his mind like a red-black stormcloud when he thought of Scrimgeour or any of Harry's other enemies was more than that. It was hard to think rationally, or to look at Batty and feel something other than wild hatred.

"You're not going to punish her on my account, are you?" Harry asked.

"She put you in danger," Draco murmured, turning and speaking almost into Harry's mouth. "I can't forgive that."

Harry's eyes lingered on his for a moment, and then he nodded and stroked the back of Draco's hand with two fingertips. Draco felt exultation cut through the protective storm like a beam of sunlight.

He trusts me. He trusts me to know what's best and what's right, and not to go too far.

"Batty," he said, and smiled as the house-elf immediately straightened. That was the tone he used to give her regular orders. Perhaps she hoped that the crisis had passed, and that he was going to forgive her or even get rid of Harry. It was the kind of thing his father would have done, Draco knew. Lucius held to many rules of cold courtesy, but considered hospitality an obligation to be dispensed with as soon as possible. He had once shoved the wife of an annoying neighbor who wanted to beg him for a favor into the Floo without her wig.

"*Accio* cloak," he said, and the garment zoomed towards him before he had lowered his wand completely. Harry looked hard at him, but said nothing, and Draco was glad. Batty would fuss enough for all of them.

"Master Malfoy is to be leaving the house now to dump the filthy half-blood's body in a ditch?" Batty was bouncing gently on the balls of her feet. "Batty knows many good ditches. Batty will go with him!"

Draco flung the cloak. It drifted in the air and settled gently over Batty's head. "I'm giving you clothes," he said.

Batty began to scream like someone being burned alive.

Draco tapped his wand on his throat, casting *Sonorus*, and spoke so that his voice could be heard not only above Batty's cries but all across the house. He wanted other elves who might have a grudge against Harry because of the curse to hear and understand him. None of the others were so devoted or so mad as Batty, but that only made it imperative that he do this, so that danger would not come from an unexpected direction. "No one living under this roof is to act against Harry Potter, directly or indirectly. From this day forward, he is to be accepted as a full member

of the Malfoy family and given rights that are equal to mine."

Harry's face was brilliant red, but he had an expression that Draco suspected he had perfected during ceremonies where he was being given the Order of Merlin and other awards he didn't want. He nodded, as if he agreed fully with everything Draco said.

"Batty, I've given you clothes," Draco repeated, turning to look at the struggling mess of limbs under the cloak. He felt no pity. If Harry's friends had been inclined to go to the Ministry before coming to the Manor, they could easily have lost everything. "Go from me now."

Batty vanished with a wail, and Draco felt the pang a moment later as she separated from the wards that controlled the entire household. She was gone, and he had no authority over her any longer. On the other hand, she was so devoted that this was as good as a death sentence to her.

He tapped his wand against his throat again, murmuring, "*Finite Incantatem,*" and then faced Harry. "Do you understand why I had to do that?" he asked.

Harry grimaced. "I think so. But it's never pretty."

"I wouldn't require you to find it so." Draco put a hand on his shoulder. "Come. We should plan my movements in the Ministry."

Harry folded his arms behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. He'd retreated to the wing that Draco had given him—and how strange was *that*, to be given a whole wing of someone else's house? But not so strange now that he understood where Draco was coming from—the moment Draco left for the Ministry. He didn't feel comfortable lying in the other man's bed when he wasn't there. Besides, this room was the quietest and least distracting place he'd seen in the Manor so far, without Draco's wonderful view of the gardens, and he needed to *think*.
So.

He had a lover. He had hope again. He had shed some burdens when he yelled at Ron and Hermione, and expelled some of the anger. He knew who his enemy was, and had a powerful ally at his side, plus the less powerful ones like Lila and the woman Draco was visiting this afternoon to try and convince.

Harry smiled, wryly. By any objective measure, he was doing better than he had been in a year.

But there were still some dangers that he had to face on his own. Draco could protect him from snooping Aurors and rogue house-elves. He couldn't save him if Harry's own strength failed and he collapsed into a sodden, dependent heap reliant on Draco merely to move.

Harry felt his fingers tighten behind his head. He let them. He even let himself think about how different the tense motion was from the combing that Draco did, the way he tugged and pulled on the strands to send shivers of sensation racing down Harry's nerves. He had to *think*.

He had to keep some part of himself separate from Draco, or the other man would swallow it all.

It wasn't that Harry didn't appreciate what Draco had done for him. And he no longer misunderstood his motivations. This wasn't a shallow desire. The numerous ways Draco had helped him alone proved that. But—

But.

Draco was magnificent, might as well admit it. He could say that he admired Harry's strength to bear up under the curse all he liked, but Harry thought he might understand his own strength better. It was a stoic, passive, grinding thing. Harry could clench his teeth in a rock and hang on against the waves trying to batter him. He was no longer sure that he had the kind of power that would enable him to stand up and run away from the waves. Draco did.

His was a leaping strength, brilliant as lightning, savage as storm unleashed. Harry flushed to find himself thinking such poetic words, but then, he was no longer capable of feeling neutral about Draco. Might as well admit that, too. Harry wouldn't call what he felt love, or even a crush—how could it be, when he was still straight as far as he knew?—but it was something far stronger than casual regard. Draco Malfoy was his best friend in the universe right now, and his lover. Maybe Harry didn't need to find words for him other than that.

But he had to fight to get back on his own feet, to make sure that he contributed as much to the battle as Draco did.

So far, the plans had all been Draco's. Harry had followed them with some protests, because there had been aspects of cruelty or impetuosity to them that he hadn't liked, but he had followed them. That couldn't happen forever. Draco would get tired of supporting his dead weight in the end. Harry *had* to do something, had to take an equal place at Draco's side.

And that was for himself as well as Draco, Harry finally admitted. He distrusted the way he weakened under Draco's touches even as he yearned for it; the fact that he couldn't keep his hands away from Draco at the breakfast table that morning was something Draco probably viewed with satisfaction, but to Harry it had seemed like an addiction. Hell, *thinking* about the man had made him start to harden. That was frightening. Harry had to fight off fear by giving himself less cause to be afraid.

He had to be stronger.

Harry's hands clasped together, hard, behind his head.

He thought he knew a way to do that, if Draco would lend him a Pensieve.

"Draco!" He could hear the laughter barely concealed under the surface of her voice, just as the flush was barely concealed by the thick glamours caked along her cheeks. "I didn't expect you today."

Eugenie Figg-Warwick, the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, leaned back in her chair and watched him with half-lidded, appreciative eyes as he came in. Knowing that she would look for it, because he had acted like this when he first met her, Draco allowed himself to strut. His hair dangled down to his shoulders in fine strands when he did that, and he could show off the shape of his shoulders and torso and neck. Ordinarily, he was too amused by the act to think about anything deeper when he did it, but now he found himself wondering what reaction Harry would have to this display.

Maybe no more than an innocent widening of eyes, he thought. *He still doesn't know his own physical responses around a man very well.*

With some regret, he tucked the thought away. He couldn't afford to be thinking about Harry more than as the general reason he was doing this when he faced Eugenie, or he could lose the contest. She was no Legilimens, but she kept so many secrets that Draco never knew when he might find himself at a disadvantage. And she had been a Slytherin, on top of it.

With a wave of her wand, Eugenie cleared a chair for him. Her office was crowded with paper and clocks, her favored way for keeping track of the magical creatures the Department regulated. On the walls, werewolf heads, mostly asleep, projected from numbered faces that kept track of the phases of the moon. When a werewolf went rogue, the head would wake up and howl. A name flickered across each, but in faint colored letters that moved too fast for most people to see. Only Eugenie was supposed to have access to the Werewolf Registry that listed each lycanthrope in Britain.

In practice, of course, Draco knew some…other people who had read it.

More clocks, though none as numerous, hung around and between the lycanthrope ones. Some were made of webbing, and kept tabs on the Acromantulas that the Department had discovered living in the Forbidden Forest not long ago. (Draco was almost certain that bunch was the half-giant's fault). Still others had the delicate curves of shells, for the seafolk. And there were more, made of flint and metal and bone, which Draco had never looked closely enough at to identify. It didn't do to take his eyes off Eugenie for long.

She was a large woman, not fat but strong with muscle. And her personality made her seem larger still. She always sat with one knee folded on top of the other and her hands clasped on both, and she always wore plum-purple robes edged with silver lace. Draco thought that was purely to distract attention from her cool, calculating gray eyes. Her hair was black streaked with gray, and writhed in complicated curls around her ears. Maybe it had been meant to imitate the Acromantula clocks, and maybe not.

"Eugenie," he said, and she gave that girlish giggle which Draco had learned the hard way was another defense against detection and people taking her seriously.

"I'm ever so pleased that you call me by my first name now, Draco." She gave him a narrow, heavy-lidded look. "Is there something that I can help you with?"

"Yes," said Draco, and made his voice just a touch breathier, letting his eyes linger on the nape of her neck and the curve of her cheek, her finest features. Eugenie was dangerous, but he was more so. Above all, he knew how to feign attraction. "I—I wasn't going to ask you this, but I find myself compelled to."

Eugenie flushed again, but she wasn't foolish enough to fall into the trap right away. "Something about your troubles with Harry Potter?"

"I would go to Umbridge for that," said Draco. "I've already spoken to her about the problem, in fact, and his constant harassment of me." *If only she knew how much I wish his harassment was continual.* "No. I came to you for something else." He looked down at his hands, and then let his eyes rise in a deliberately flirtatious manner, just delicate enough to catch her interest. "Something only *you* can help me with."

Eugenie was cautious; on the other hand, she had wanted him for a long time. She leaned forwards, her hand resting an inch from his elbow, an invitation he could take if he wanted. "Yes, Draco?" she asked, and turned her head, blue highlights glinting in her eyes. Draco had never been able to determine if they were natural or the product of a well-placed glamour.

He took the hand and kissed it. With his wand up his sleeve, his eyes on hers, his lips against the warm wrinkled skin of her knuckles, he murmured, "*Legilimens.*"

He found himself inside her mind at once.

And then he found himself engaged in a desperate battle.

Eugenie was not a Legilimens, and he knew that, but it appeared that she was an Occlumens. And in the mind of an Occlumens, the darkness was not the simple blankness Draco was used to when peering into the minds of his mad patients, but a shaped and controlled set of responses, obedient to the will of the mind's owner, not the mind's invader.

Powerful coils wrapped Draco's awareness and tried to drag it into oblivion—a particularly nasty tactic that he knew meant he would lose his senses and sit in Eugenie's office, slack-jawed and drooling, until they took him away to the Janus Thickey ward or some worse place. He struggled once, but couldn't get clear of the coils. He grimaced, and reduced his presence in Eugenie's mind until he was a mere slip of light and wind, melting out of the serpents' grasp.

They returned, lashing after him, and trying to slam the walls of thought shut so that Draco could get *no* grip. He dived instead, pulling a storm of memories after him, pretending he was searching for just one thing but so quickly that the serpents couldn't tell what it was. He passed through numerous small swirls of outrage, and knew Eugenie would be directing her Occlumency to smash him now. If he returned to his body at all, it would be with a raging headache.

But Draco didn't mind. Anger as keen as exhilaration, and hard to differentiate from it, raced through him. He concentrated on Harry as he dived and dived, passing through Eugenie's childhood and her first love affair, and wrapped himself in his own coils of determination and tenderness. Once again, his desire to defend and protect welled up around him, and it was like a dragon with wings spread and fiery breath flaring, more than a match for the serpents of Eugenie's will pursuing him.

He let the emotions go out all at once, the conviction of unassailable truth in Harry's words, the sensation when the curse had cleared to reveal his soul's core. Beauty and power spiraled out from him, piercing Eugenie's prejudices like fists driven through glass. Draco shivered with pain, much as his hands would have if he actually plunged them through a window, but he drove on, searching for the moment when he knew he would wreck Eugenie's disbelief.

It actually came faster than it had with Lila. Eugenie could defend herself, but all her strength was concentrated on shoving him out of her mind, and not protecting this weak point. Besides, she had no reason to think that he would defend Harry Potter, while Lila had known of their association by the time Draco undertook the task of "persuading" her.

Draco called back the light of his memory and scattered the last of her darkness. The snakes shriveled and died. Eugenie's Occlumency defenses shivered and lay down. She believed.

Draco could have done anything he wanted to her mind, but the temptation had ceased to be beautiful, now that he only wanted to know one mind inside and out, and that with the owner's express consent. He withdrew, and fought to keep from gasping as he opened his eyes. Pain gripped his temples in a cage of iron and made yellow and red swarm in front of his face. That had taken much more effort than crushing Lila's resistance; he'd paid for swiftness with exhaustion.

He looked with more respect at Eugenie. He had not thought she was concealing a secret as dangerous to him as that. It was just as well that he had chosen her for their next target. If Scrimgeour had enlisted her to hunt Harry instead, she could have been a problem.

"Merlin, Draco." Eugenie pulled her hand from his to carefully touch the side of her face. "You could have *told* me."

"With the consequences of the telling being what they are?" Draco didn't bother to keep his flirtatious tone as he leaned back in his seat. Neither of them needed it. "I think not."

"Well," said Eugenie, and Draco knew she was considering the information about the curse he had planted in her mind. "Yes. I can see that." She folded her hands and stared at him evenly. If she blamed him for hurting her, the desire for vengeance had been buried. Draco reminded himself not to turn his back on her, however. "What do you expect me to do about it?"

"I want—" Draco began, and then the door opened and someone stepped into the room behind him.

He twisted, and found himself looking into Scrimgeour's eyes.

"Ah, Eugenie." The Minister smiled. "I'm afraid that I need to borrow Mr. Malfoy for a moment. I was told when he entered the building, but it took me some time to track him down. I understand," he went on, facing Draco when Eugenie gave a faint nod, "that we have a common enemy in Harry Potter."

Draco, his head pounding, some of his normal defenses in shreds, knew that this could be the moment when he managed to condemn Harry and himself to death, or soared above it all to fool their enemy.

What to do was never in doubt, of course.

He smiled and leaned closer, dropping his voice. "We do indeed, Minister. Shall we talk in private?"

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Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fifteen—Calling Up the Strength

"We can talk in private here, Mr. Malfoy."

I would say that we can. Draco managed to keep from glancing around as he settled into the padded chair in front of the Minister's desk, but it was difficult. The privacy wards were so thick around the room that they actually appeared as glittering traces in the air if he concentrated hard enough. Scrimgeour had several kinds of modified wards that Draco had never seen before, and that put him *right* on edge. He had no idea what would happen if Scrimgeour cast a spell at him behind them.

Maybe this is the way he trapped Harry, Draco thought, even as he forced himself to arch his back, clasp his hands behind his neck, and show nothing of his raging headache. *Just asked him in here for a report, and then cast the Cassandra Curse. No one else would feel Dark magic from behind these spells, either.*

That, obscurely, comforted Draco. For one thing, he knew he could use certain curses if he needed to, curses that might make the difference between life and death. And it also reassured him that his opponent wasn't actually as confident as he pretended. If he were, he wouldn't have

needed all these wards around his office in the first place.

"Minister," he said, as Scrimgeour sat down behind his desk. He had locked the door, and that completed many of the wards that had hung open until now. They began to hum at once, and Draco could see bits of light racing along them when he squinted from the corner of his eye. "What is this about?"

"Relax, Mr. Malfoy," said Scrimgeour, with a negligent wave of his hand. Draco had always thought that he looked like a lion, and that was even truer up close, where his mane of hair flared impressively around his head. He had a severe stare, but not as severe as Draco knew his own to be, or as he imagined that Scrimgeour would look when confronting Harry. Of course, he was also extremely unlikely to let anyone else see that stare he would use when confronting Harry. "It's nothing bad. Given your recent troubles with our renegade Mr. Potter, I thought you might like to know that we're close to capturing him."

Draco made himself sit forwards and lower his voice hopefully, instead of reacting the way he wanted to and drawing his wand. "Really?" he asked.

"Oh, yes." Scrimgeour lifted his head, and the smugness in the motion made Draco long to erase the smile from his face, simply and permanently. There were so many ways that he could do that: mention what he knew about the Cassandra Curse, name Harry in a friendly tone, cast a curse that would force Scrimgeour into a public confession of all he had done and all he knew concerning his treatment of Harry…

But, no. I considered that punishment before, and decided that it's not painful enough, remember?

With regret, Draco forced himself to pay attention to the pompous idiot's words and not his own fantasies. Scrimgeour was talking about the tale that he had assigned Harry's idiot friends to carry, he realized slowly. The Ministry believed that Harry was hiding somewhere in Scotland or the Hebrides, and they were close to locating a man whom they believed matched his description and had run from their Aurors.

"And of course no one would run from the Aurors unless they had done something illegal," Scrimgeour concluded triumphantly.

Or unless they had good sense. Draco forced himself to fold his hands and use a patient expression. "Then you aren't aware of the latest news that I was about to tell Eugenie?" he asked. He might as well let Scrimgeour know about the close connection between them by using Eugenie's first name. He would have to have been blind not to have sensed it by now, given the close terms he'd found them on in Eugenie's office.

Scrimgeour sat up at once. "I have not," he said. "Why did you not come and tell me at once?"

Draco gave him a cool look, which he knew completely concealed the fact that he had just

decided on a new tactic and was running with it—a tactic that might or might not be a result of the headache battering behind his brows. "We have hardly been friends," he said. "And I was under the impression that you still regarded me with suspicion from the unfinished business that my family has with the Ministry." That was the polite way of saying that his mother had fled to France just ahead of the Aurors.

"None of that matters." Scrimgeour waved his hand again. "I *must* know this news, Malfoy. It is imperative that we catch Potter."

Draco let his eyes widen innocently, simply because he knew that would madden Scrimgeour. "But why is that? I was under the impression that the Ministry hardly cared about what happened to him anymore. I mean, he's mad, isn't he? So why isn't St. Mungo's looking for him, so that they can put him back in the Janus Thickey ward?"

Scrimgeour curled his lip. "As much as it pains me to admit it when I don't personally like Potter," he said, "the Ministry is responsible for his medical care, since he went mad on the job. We should be the ones to find him. St. Mungo's doesn't have the resources, and frankly, since you resigned from Psyche-Diving, it's probably lost the one person whose mind is devious enough to track Potter. It's a compliment, Mr. Malfoy, I assure you," he added, when Draco opened his mouth.

Draco took a deep breath and ended up inclining his head. *Nice save.* If this were a Quidditch match, he would have applauded Scrimgeour's acting like a professional Keeper. Of course that was a plausible reason for the Ministry to look for Harry. And St. Mungo's, which Draco knew from experience was perennially low on both funding and competent staff, would have been happy to accept the Auror Department's help.

"Tell me the news," said Scrimgeour, acting the part of the man who had done some distasteful duty for the good of his country, and not wanted a countryman to help him. Not, his posture said, because he wanted to hunt Potter down and lock him away forever. But it had to be done, whether he personally thought it was fair or not, and that meant that he would do his duty.

Strange that someone like this can so persistently misjudge Potter, Draco thought, as he stared into Scrimgeour's eyes and prepared to risk it all, since of course he had no actual news of Harry being elsewhere. *But maybe it's the actor's disease. Someone who lies all the time starts thinking that all other people are liars.*

"It's just a rumor, mind," said Draco, and let his voice drop into the realms of caution. "And it's so incredible, I probably wouldn't have believed it myself, but it came from sources I trust."

Scrimgeour made a shoving motion, and then leaned forwards as Draco glanced around once, pretending to reassure himself that the privacy wards really were as thick as they'd looked.

"I heard a rumor of something called the Cassandra Curse," said Draco. "That Potter has been under it the entire time, and that's the reason he's gone mad. That he hasn't actually gone mad at

all, but that he's been damaged by the curse, and he's conducting a long-range plan to get back at the Ministry the only way he can, since of course no one will actually believe him."

Scrimgeour's face turned the color of cheese curds. But that was the only visible sign he showed. The next moment, he closed his eyes and gave a sigh of sorrow that was just *slightly* too exaggerated. Someone with less experience than Draco had with lying might even have believed him.

That's right, Draco thought, watching him.*You think your secret's out now. And with any luck, you'll react the way I want you to, and panic, and step up your efforts to catch Harry.*

At least, he thought that would be the effect. His brains were more than slightly scrambled, still, by the headache and the successful Legilimency on Eugenie.

"Ah, yes," said Scrimgeour. "That was the nonsense that Potter was babbling on about the morning that he tried to commit suicide, apparently, or so Auror Weasley told me. I'm afraid that it can't be trusted, just like anything else he says." He shook his head ruefully. "How very far the Hero of the Wizarding World has fallen. And I never would have seen him end up like this, if there were something I could have done to prevent it."

Yes, Draco thought, staring at the man and extremely glad that he wasn't a Legilimens. *You would have seen him end up mad or dead, or locked up permanently in a ward where everyone* knows *they never take anyone except people who are incurable.*

If there were any more doubt in Draco's mind that Scrimgeour had cast the Cassandra Curse, or that he remembered doing so, it was gone now. The man's reaction when he heard the name of the curse had been too extreme. He would have frowned slightly, perhaps, if he had remembered hearing of the curse in the way he said he had.

Unless he's anticipating my reactions and fooling me, because he wants me to think that he knows about the curse for some reason of his own…

Draco shook his head sharply, dismissing the suspicions. Unless he wanted to distrust his own instincts now, which wasn't *on*, then he had to accept that they were telling him the truth. And it had been the truth that Scrimgeour didn't want anyone to think that rumors of the Cassandra Curse were anything but madness.

He forced himself to shrug. "You're probably right, sir. It was certainly the case that Auror Potter couldn't tell the truth to save his life when he was under my care, if you'll excuse the pun."

"I reckon that you're right glad to be rid of him."

A testing thrust, that one. Scrimgeour wanted to see his true attitude towards the man he would believe had frustrated Draco and tricked him.

Draco lifted his head and let just a bit of balked pride through. "Well, sir, a curse would have explained why I failed to treat him—the first patient I have ever failed to cure—if he were under one."

"But he wasn't," said Scrimgeour softly. "Surely you would have found evidence of that if anyone could, Psyche-Diver Malfoy?"

Flattery. Someone probably told him that I drove myself *half-mad trying to get any respect from the soft-hearts at St. Mungo's.*

"I like to think so," said Draco, and stared at his hands.

"I would not have you doubt yourself," said Scrimgeour, and his voice warmed. "You are the one who created the profession of Psyche-Diving from nothing, after all. You should be proud of your accomplishments, not disappointed that one man managed to defy your codes—the same man who defies all codes ever laid down."

He is a better manipulator than I gave him credit for, Draco thought. *But not quite as good as I am. Of course, no one is that good.*

He let himself seem to brood a moment longer, then stood. "If that's all, Minister, then I should return home and continue to contact what clients for Psyche-Diving that I can. My decision to leave St. Mungo's may have been…precipitous. I am having trouble finding sane people who are quite as eager to have their souls examined."

Scrimgeour smiled. "I am sure that you will find many more in the future, Mr. Malfoy." He hesitated, then leaned forwards, a fatherly kind of worry written all over his face. "Might I suggest, if you return to St. Mungo's in the future after Potter is again incarcerated there—"

Draco laughed. Scrimgeour paused, then laughed himself at his own slip. "I am clearly too accustomed to thinking in Auror terminology," he said.

Tell yourself that, Draco thought, eyes half-lidded as he let his chuckles subside. *Just tell yourself that.*

"That you stay away from him, if Mr. Potter *does* return to the corridors of the Janus Thickey ward?" Scrimgeour nodded to him. "It would be best. Best to avoid temptation. Best to avoid continued harassment of yourself by Potter. Once a mad patient fixates on one idea, as I'm sure that you have had opportunity to notice, he does not tend to let it go, and I'm afraid that Mr. Potter may attempt to make sure that you are on his side, or whatever he was truly trying to do to you."

Draco bowed his head a little. He thought *this* was probably Scrimgeour's version of a subtle warning. Scrimgeour was saying that he had talked to someone in St. Mungo's about Draco's behavior around Harry. It might have been the mediwitch who had tried to kill Harry and whom

Draco had terrorized in return; it might have been a Healer who had looked in through the observation window one day and seen them lying locked in a partial embrace. Draco didn't know for certain, and it didn't really matter. He already knew that Scrimgeour was his enemy, so to him the tactics were just part of the game and not at all worrying.

Scrimgeour's greatest victories were accidental. For example, it was out of the question for Draco to go back to Eugenie right now and explain why he had wanted to convince her that the Cassandra Curse was real, since Scrimgeour would watch him on the way out of the Ministry. And that meant Eugenie would have time to think about the charge, and turn it over in her head, and perhaps react in a very different manner than the one she would have used if Draco had been there to guide and shape her first impressions.

Ah, well. It could not be helped. Draco thought he might have a way to convince her later, though it would require contact by owl instead of personally.

And then there were his ideas for ways to use Lila when Scrimgeour began hunting—as he surely would—in panic for the source of the rumors about the curse.

All in all, Draco thought as he bowed and then departed the room lightly rubbing his temples, *I did not do too badly. I do not know why I doubted myself.*

Harry was waiting when Draco came home. He knew that he needed to make his request right away, or he would lose his nerve altogether. So he steeled himself, and said, when Draco lifted his head to see him standing in the entrance hall not far from the doors, "I'd like to borrow a Pensieve if you have one. Please."
Draco closed his mouth, raised his eyebrows, and then said, "Don't you want to hear what happened at the Ministry? I saw the Minister himself, and he's cleverer than I thought he was, but still not as clever as he thinks he is."

Harry considered it, but then he felt his courage slipping away. He had never known himself to be so weak. He wondered for a moment if the curse had left actual scars on his soul, but he thought Draco would have told him if they were there. "In a little while," he said. "The Pensieve first."

Draco surveyed him closely for a moment more, then nodded and drew his wand. "*Accio* Pensieve," he called, and Harry heard a distant whizzing sound. Draco studied him again while it came nearer, and added, "I'll be going with you into whatever memories you pull out, of course."

Harry straightened and glared. He thought it was enough that Draco knew what had happened to him, without seeing the damage so close and at first hand. Besides, he had to show that he could stand by himself, without Draco accompanying and coddling him all the damn time. "No."

"Harry," Draco said. "Be reasonable."

"I am," said Harry, and forced his voice to calm so that he wasn't shouting *quite* so much. "But

you've done enough, Draco. I want to do this on my own. And I don't—" He shook his head, because he couldn't say that he didn't trust Draco with the memories. If there was anyone in this room whom he didn't trust, it was himself. "I don't want you to see my weakness and think worse of me than you already do," he said. His voice didn't shake. That was reason enough to be proud.

Draco crossed the room in two strides and hooked his arms together around Harry's waist. Harry closed his eyes as he heard the Pensieve settle on a table nearby. He was going to collapse or melt into the embrace in a moment, and he couldn't have that. He shook himself and stepped out of it, Draco letting him go only reluctantly. Those warm hands sliding down his hips nearly undid Harry again.

"You—you can't," Harry managed to say, though it was a little breathless. "Or else I'll never know if it was my own strength that let me face them, or yours."

"You're very strong," Draco said quietly, a caressing tone in his voice that Harry had never heard before. He reached out and stroked the skin under Harry's ear, as if he thought that was a place Harry might not mind him touching. "You don't need to worry about that. I've never thought you were weak, Harry."

"Yes, but *I* do," Harry said plainly. "And to be worthy of someone like you, to match you, to hold your interest—"

"You already hold my interest—"

"To be an equal to you," Harry finished, with no small amount of determination, "I have to enter these memories on my own. Swear that you'll stay here."

Draco closed his eyes, as if he were wondering why he should agree to this mad idea. But then he nodded, still keeping his eyes shut, and stepped away from the Pensieve.

Harry gave him a shaky smile, which of course he couldn't see. "Thank you," he murmured, and then faced the Pensieve with a long, slow release of breath. After all, he'd hardly ever had a good experience with the things.

But he put his wand to his temple anyway, and drew out a long, thin, silvery strand of memory which seemed to keep on coiling, like a stubborn hair, long after he was ready for it to be over. He dropped it in the Pensieve at last, and watched in nervous anticipation lest it overflow the bowl. But it didn't, and he relaxed and bent over the surface, sticking his head beneath it before he could change his mind.

He found himself again in the flat he had shared with Ginny, seeing her swing around to face him with accusation in her eyes, and misery behind the accusation, the day he had first begun to lie—at least, to her ears. He looked past Ginny's face, painful as it was and as much as it commanded his attention, and watched his own eyes instead.

He saw the stunned shock in them, and the desperate scramble for an explanation. He watched himself try to contact Ron and Hermione, and have a version of the same scenario repeated with them.

The Pensieve showed the truth. Harry would find it much harder to fool himself when he was watching memories here. He knew that. So he scanned every line of his face, every blink of his own eyes, every motion from the way he turned his shoulders to the way he lifted his head to how he scrambled back from the hearth, the Floo powder falling through his numb fingers, as he realized that all his best friends seemed to be against him.

He saw many things.

He did not see the weakness he had feared, the ignoring of an obvious option which someone*intelligent*, like Draco, would have spotted at once. He had done the best he could under this instance of the operation of the Cassandra Curse. He could criticize himself, yes, but he could not condemn his behavior.

He shuddered limply with relief, and then the memories continued, and Harry tensed up again, searching for the moment when he could have done something differently and had not—

It did not come.

Confronted with his past, the march of his failures and his increasing desperation once more, made Harry ache, but he knew it was also giving him the strength to move forwards and stop brooding on what he had already done. The future was more important than the past, wasn't it? So he should focus on that—how he would punish Scrimgeour, how he would get his friends back, how he would live with Draco and the strange demands that odd relationship would place on him. He had done what he could. Now it was time to live.

He watched in silence after that, wincing now and then but always nodding, accepting that he had exhausted his choices and finally made the only decision he could. And that had been a good decision, hadn't it? It had led him to St. Mungo's, and the only ally he had that he really trusted; Lila and the woman Draco had gone to convince today didn't count.

It had led him to Draco.

Harry forced himself to watch the memories of Draco touching him in St. Mungo's, though they made his face burn, and sighed. Yes, even then he'd been reacting to that touch, and more than was warranted. He could say that he was lonely, but no one else, save perhaps Ginny, could have got that reaction from him, of helpless wonder and hunger for more. He was *trembling* when Draco cupped his cheek, for God's sake.

So he had to make plans that Draco was a part of. Harry still wasn't entirely sure why Draco wanted to be a part of them, but this wasn't about Draco; it was about him. He needed Draco, so he would accept him.

His own reactions to Draco were still embarrassing. Well, as time passed, maybe he could get used to that, too.

He pulled free of the Pensieve at last, and faced Draco in silence. Draco said nothing at all until Harry had scooped up the memories from the Pensieve again and pressed them gently back into place in his mind.

"Well?" he asked.

"I've decided I could have done nothing differently," Harry said, and kept his voice calm and simple. Strained lines of worry gathered around Draco's eyes. *Really, he worries that much about me? But I'm going to be all right now.* "Suicide was a desperate plan, but the only one that would have worked. I was watching the memories of my past under the Cassandra Curse. I wanted to know where my weakness set in. And—it wasn't weakness. Or I think it was only perceived."

He shook his head. "It's still going to take me some to time to accept that. But I think I've made a good start."

Draco again crossed the distance between them swiftly, but this time Harry knew he was coming and didn't mind so much. He *was* slightly surprised when Draco took his mouth in a kiss, but maybe this was Draco's way of dealing with his worry.

Feeling very much as if he would laugh and cry both at once, Harry leaned in and returned the kiss with interest. He'd be all right. He'd get there.

In the meantime, he was very interested in getting somewhere else, and started to tug Draco in the direction of his bedroom.

Draco drew back, smiling slightly, almost self-deprecatingly. Harry tilted his head, wondering what he'd say.

"My turn to take a risk," Draco muttered, and then raised his voice. "I suppose it's too soon to ask if you'd let me make love to you?"

"How many times do I need to *say* yes?" Harry retorted, wondering if Draco thought the times they'd made love already didn't count.

"I mean—differently," Draco said, and his voice cracked. "All the way. Fucking, except I'd prefer not to call it that."

And Harry blinked, and couldn't think of a thing to say—caught between courage and the promise of pleasure on one side, and doubt and the mental murmur of *But I'm straight* on the other.

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Chapter: 16

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Sixteen—Questions and Answers

Draco tried his best to restrain himself when he saw the way Harry was staring at him, absently licking his lips every now and then. His instincts were shrieking for him to lunge forwards and kiss and bite and nip. Do everything that he could in order to convince Harry.

He *wanted* this. It wasn't so much physical lust as a pulsing ache that seemed to be located just beneath his sternum. After the way he had seen Harry confront his memories, he wanted to get as close as possible to someone who had that kind of courage, who would face his own terrors so unflinchingly. He had wanted to share Harry's mind and soul; now he wanted to share his body. The desperation he could feel coursing through his veins wasn't very attractive, but fuck attractive. He wanted to be inside Harry. It was the only way of expressing this desire that he knew of.

Harry was watching him with uncertain, wide green eyes, though, and Draco thought he might know why. He let the silence endure as long as he could manage, and then gave Harry a small smile. "Or you could fuck me," he suggested. "Believe me, either would be—satisfactory." He didn't think that having Harry inside him would be quite as good as the other way around, the way he was feeling right now, but on the other hand, who knew? It would join their bodies, and if Harry made love that way as well as he did with his hands and his mouth—

"It's not who's doing it," said Harry. "It's the action itself." He paused, and his voice had gained strength when he went on. "I'm still straight."

Draco laughed in spite of himself. Then he half-panicked, wondering if that had been the smartest thing to do, but Harry drew up and gave him an offended look before his fear could go very far.

"I'm going to assume that you didn't mean that the way it sounded as if you meant it," Harry said, his voice gone cold.

"How did it sound as if I meant it?"

To Draco's dismay, Harry slipped out of his arms and retreated, putting some distance between them. He tried to step closer. Harry narrowed his eyes and moved to the side again, probably so that he wouldn't seem to be backing away from Draco.

"As if you doubted what I said," said Harry. "As if you're about to tell me that I'm bent, even though *I'm straight.*"

"I wasn't about to say that," said Draco. "But you could be curved, like me. Have you ever thought of that?" His hands felt oddly dry. The distance between him and Harry stretched like a strained tendon. All he really wanted to do was hold him again, and then do his best to share the immense connection.

"So far," Harry said, his voice still cold and still controlled, "I haven't really done anything with you that I haven't done with Ginny."

Draco snorted in spite of himself. "Unless you're about to tell me some extremely interesting things about your girlfriend—"

"*Fiancée.*"

"Of course, of course." Draco put up a hand, irritated with himself for forgetting that. It had been in Harry's St. Mungo's file, and he had known all along that it was the word Harry preferred to use when he was speaking of her. Sexual frustration was addling Draco's brain more than he had realized. "Then I think that what we have done is different in some very important ways."

Harry only looked more stubborn than ever. It was endearing, but Draco so wanted to fuck that look off his face at the same time.

"I just—I'm not comfortable with that," he said.

"Do you think you'll ever be?" Draco asked quietly. If Harry wasn't, then he wanted to know immediately.

Harry blinked, as though he hadn't expected such a sudden cessation of Draco's resistance. "I don't know," he said at last. "But it seems—" He paused, and half-shut his eyes, obviously fighting for words.

"What?" Draco made sure to pitch his voice low and seductive, the way he'd used just after they awakened together. "You can tell me, Harry. You can tell me *anything.*"

Oh, really? Harry snarled, in the privacy of his own head. *I can tell you anything, when I've already seen that you laugh at me for it?*
But he bit his lip and held still. He didn't really think that Draco had meant to do that, for one thing. He still didn't understand, but on the other hand, how could Harry expect him to unless he explained? He had had more than enough experience this past year to know that, no matter how hard he wished it, no one was just going to cut through his "lies" and his body language to find the truth of his thoughts.

And that was so even with someone who could hear his words as the truth.

"It's too much," he said at last. "It would be like—if we had met in a more normal way and you'd managed to break the curse without Psyche-Diving. This is like your asking me to let you into my soul *now*."

"I won't do you any harm." Draco's voice was soft and eager. "I *promise*, Harry. And if you want to do it the other way around, I have no objections at all."

Harry met his eyes. It didn't really look as if Draco had any objections, no. In fact, Harry reeled a little from the force of the desire in that gaze. He had no idea at all why Draco Malfoy was sticking to him so relentlessly—just general admiration for his strength wouldn't equate to respect, let alone *this*—but he suddenly doubted, for the first time, that it would be easy to convince him to stop.

He swallowed. Suddenly his own throat was dry with excitement, and he could feel his cock twitch at what those eyes promised.

"Maybe you wouldn't be able to stop yourself from doing harm," he said, to defend the more vulnerable part of himself from his instincts. "I've heard it's painful, the first time with another bloke, no matter what you do."

"There are spells." Draco's voice had softened again. Harry couldn't understand how he was still hearing it. "I would promise—Harry, I would be as gentle as I could. I would use all the magic you needed. I would take as long as you needed."

Harry swallowed again. "Why? If you want me as strongly as you say you do, I mean," he clarified, when Draco looked at him incredulously. "How could you hold back?"

"Because I want this again, and again, and again."

And there was the sky-look, storm-look, sun-look, in Draco's eyes again. Harry had to believe that it was directed at him now, that he was the actual reason for Draco wearing that light on his face, because there was no one else. He turned away.

"And because I never want to hurt you again, if I can help it." Draco's voice had altered again, now to a soft, lulling stroke like the smoothing of waves on a shore. Harry wondered absently if it was the sort of tone he had used on his mad patients. "There will be times I hurt you and don't mean to, of course. But in a situation where I know I might and can avoid it? I don't think you can comprehend how much I want to see you growing stronger and laughing and surviving unhurt."

Harry shivered.

"How much I want to see you finding joy."

Draco had crossed the floor towards him, and Harry turned to find him *there*. Immediately his mouth was taken in a kiss, and Draco's hand smoothed down his spine, then ran back up again, which rucked up the robes but made a bone-deep shiver of desire rise from Harry's flesh.

I don't understand how he can make me feel this way. No one has, not even Ginny. And I've only known him properly a few weeks. There's nothing in our previous history that would have led to something like this—

Yet, for the first time, Harry was coming to think that maybe his lack of understanding didn't matter. Indifference towards every nuance would have killed him when he still labored under the Cassandra Curse without an ally, but maybe it was all right to let go now, to relax, to trust that Draco would, actually, care for him.

Just not fully, not right now.

"Not yet," he said, when he pulled back.

Draco didn't bother to conceal his look of disappointment, as if he had understood that Harry wouldn't castigate him for it.

"But soon," Harry said, since he wasn't sure that he could resist the combined force of Draco's want and his own hunger, and then stretched up to kiss him again. "In the meantime," he added, when he pulled free once more, "we can do other things."

Draco's eyes flared, and his hands began working on the buttons of Harry's robes. "Don't mind if I do," he murmured.

Malfoy. There are rumors abroad in the Ministry about the Cassandra Curse. Your doing?
Draco smiled thinly and put the letter down on the table. Eugenie had owled him, only three days after he'd sent her the owl explaining why he'd told her about Harry and what he wanted done. This cryptic response was par for the course with her. She would be trying to feel him out, to see what he wanted before she committed herself, so that she could decide what benefit it would offer her.

"Good morning," someone said behind him, or so Draco reasoned out after he listened past the enormous yawn that interrupted the words.

"Good morning," he echoed, twisting around so that he could watch Harry saunter in. He had made it clear that Harry didn't have to wear full robes around the house if he didn't want to in the last few days, and Harry was only wearing a shirt and a pair of pants right now. Draco averted his eyes so that Harry wouldn't see how his mouth was literally watering. "I've heard from Eugenie."

"*Have* you?"

Draco felt a thrill at the change in Harry's tone, and the way he suddenly looked. He had been ready for something like this, but not until later. It seemed that a few days of regular meals and sex—well, of handjobs and blowjobs, at least—had done Harry better than Draco expected. The man looking back at him now resembled a tame cheetah kept on the end of a chain, ready to spring forwards and hunt.

"Yes." Draco passed the letter over to Harry, and watched, as he had expected, the green eyes narrow and the scarred brow furrow. Harry was relearning his political instincts quickly, but he was still an Auror, and not someone who had worked directly for the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. And Draco knew Eugenie much better as a person.

"What does she want?" Harry asked, handing the letter back and helping himself to a plate of scones.

"If I'm not mistaken," Draco said, tapping the letter against his chin, "and I almost never am—"

That won him a snort.

"—then she's telling me that the rumors are indeed spreading, and she wants to know why I told her and only her, if I was going to put the rumor out there anyway." Draco shrugged. "She could be responsible for spreading the word herself, of course. But I doubt that. She's still looking for the angle that will benefit *her*."

"Can we trust her?" Harry asked through a mouthful of bread. Draco reached out, caught his chin, and tilted his jaw gently closed. Harry rolled his eyes at him and chewed a little more slowly and thoroughly.

"Of course not," said Draco. "Not the way that we can trust Lila, at least. But she's still predictable in the way she asks. The clue is figuring out what she *could* want before she decides she wants something else, and then giving it to her."

"And how do we do that?"

"We take you to meet her, of course."

Harry stiffened, and wide-eyed alarm flooded his face.

"Oh, not in the Ministry," Draco said airily. He knew exactly what would have surprised Harry most. He congratulated himself on how well he knew his partner. "Somewhere else. We stage a crisis that only the Head of her Department can solve, outside the Ministry, and then we meet her, and then we promise that you'll use your influence on her behalf."

"*What* influence, exactly?" Harry's fingers hooked like claws and drove down onto the table.

"The influence of being a madman and a known liar who tried to kill himself, as far as everyone else is concerned? There's nothing I can do for her right now, Draco, and not for a long time. I think she's smart enough to realize that."

"You still don't understand," said Draco. He squashed the impulse to reach out and cradle Harry against him. He needed to be calmer and more rational right now that he would feel if he once touched his lover. "Your influence isn't the sort that can decay that easily, Harry. The *Ministry* thinks of you that way. Not everyone else in the country."

"The story of my suicide would have been reported in the *Daily Prophet.*"

"And even then? How would it look against the cases that you solved in the past year, along with the defeat of the Dark Lord? Your prestige is of the kind that doesn't decay, Harry. Eugenie will understand that she can't do much with your help right now. But when your name is cleared and Scrimgeour has been brought down—"

"You mean to make sure that everyone knows about that?"

Draco checked a sigh. While Harry's blindness to most Ministry politics was endearing, there were times that Draco couldn't help feeling how much easier it would be if Harry *were* the kind of person to understand the limits of his fame and try to take advantage of it.

"It would be sort of hard to explain why we were attacking the Minister otherwise," he said dryly. "Besides, Harry, do you really *want* him to have any public credibility left when this is done? *I* don't."

"I just—" Harry stopped, frowning. Then he said, "After we make him pay for this, I just imagined that he would—go back to his normal life. What reason is there to make him suffer for years and years?"

Draco reached out and slid a hand down the side of Harry's neck, because he had to. "Can you really ask that?"

"But that would be vengeance, not justice." Harry's gaze was turned inwards as he brooded. Draco, who didn't like being exiled from Harry's attention for that long, took his shoulder and turned Harry to face him.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly. And that is what this *is*, Harry. The moment he cast the Cassandra Curse on you, he moved outside the boundaries of justice. We have to do this on our own—even with Eugenie's help, it's still on our own, since we're not exactly moving through official channels. You realize that, don't you? You realize that no one's going to pop out of the woodwork and help us out of the kindness of their hearts?" He paused a moment, then added, "If there's something that you can't bring yourself to agree with in my methods, Harry, you have to tell me now. Because you know that I've never been very good about listening to other people where ethics are concerned."

Harry breathed in silence, his eyes locked on his hands. As he watched, they curled around the edges of his knees until the fingers were digging into the skin. Since he wasn't wearing either trousers or robes, it hurt.
Draco's hand descended in an open-palmed smack on his knuckles. Harry sat back with a yelp and a glare. "What the hell was *that* for?" he snarled.

Draco watched him with storms building in his eyes, but Harry knew well enough that this wasn't a look of sexual desire. "I told you that you're not allowed to hurt yourself again," he said. "I insist."

"Yes, don't you just," Harry muttered, and sighed. "I don't *know*, Draco. I thought my sense of right and wrong was permanently warped from living under the Cassandra Curse. Even the thought of how much pain I would cause the people who loved me by suddenly vanishing into the Muggle world wasn't enough to make me stop doing it, after all. But now—if I can afford to be ethical, shouldn't I? That's the kind of person I was before the curse, and that's the kind of person I still want to be."

"Is it unethical to take vengeance on Scrimgeour?" Draco's voice had a ballast weight of heavy patience at the bottom.

"That's the problem," said Harry, with an unhappy little laugh. "I was thinking it wasn't. And then I considered the actual consequences. Now I don't *know*."

Draco turned Harry to face him. His voice was soft and earnest. Harry shook his head a little and tried his best to listen to the words and arguments behind that tone, instead of just melting when he heard it and agreeing with whatever Draco said.

"Harry, you have to understand *all* the factors here. I've already slammed the truth into Lila's and Eugenie's minds. I can't take that back. And they know about you. Even if we tried to vanish now and work on Scrimgeour on our own, they'd still know, and God knows what they'd do with that knowledge, unguided.

"Then there's the fact that Scrimgeour still believes everything he ever did about you, even if you've changed your mind about *him*. He won't back down. If you go towards him with open hands, he'll still fire curses. I *won't* see you hurt because you underestimated his hatred and his fury.

"And then there's me."

"Of course there's you," Harry muttered, but any rancor that might have been in his voice had long since thawed. "What are you but the determining factor in my life right now? Even if I wanted to escape you, I couldn't."

Draco's eyelids lowered, and he looked extraordinarily pleased. He picked up Harry's left hand

and turned it over to kiss the palm before he went on.

"You have to understand one thing about me," he said. "This is as unusual for me as it is for you. I don't exactly find myself with new friends or new lovers every day. And then I want to *help* you. That's rare, too, when I'm not getting a favor for it in return. And I haven't had anyone in this country to love since my mother fled and Snape made it clear that he's never coming back to England—at least, not for some years."

Harry was still stuck a few words back. He blinked and swallowed.

"You—love me," he said.

Draco narrowed his eyes, and looked more pleased than ever, as if he were glad that he had taken Harry by surprise with that declaration. "Yes," he said.

"I—you just didn't say that before," said Harry, feeling obscurely as if he had to explain his own startlement.

"Well, now I have," said Draco. "And, actually, I *did* say it the first time we made love. You were simply, understandably, too involved in other things to listen." He cocked his head. "Surely you can understand *now*?"

Harry watched him in silence, his head reeling, his own breath coming harsh and quick.

For someone like Draco to love someone like him…

No, wait. For someone like Draco to *love*, there would be complications that Harry could hardly imagine. The few pure-blood wizards and witches he knew in the Ministry, the Weasleys excepted, were so undemonstrative that he found it hard to imagine them hugging or kissing someone else. Remnants of a crumbling political system, as Hermione had explained to him. They'd once sought to differentiate themselves from Muggleborns, who were thought to be too expressive, with that kind of coldness and distance.

Harry couldn't imagine Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy raising their son to be anything but like that in public, no matter how he might be in private with his family. And then there was the fact that he would have very few experiences of love outside his family, either.

When he did come to that kind of love—

It would be with someone he thought he could relax around, someone he could trust with those most guarded parts of himself.

Possessive did not begin to cover it.

Harry shivered, not sure if he was chilled or warmed by his realization. He reached up and took

Draco's head between his hands, staring searchingly into his face, trying to find something that would either validate or crush his conclusions. Draco bore the scrutiny, though now and then he raised his eyebrows as if to say that he was getting tired of it.

"You really can't leave this alone, can you?" Harry asked. Then he wanted to wince. The reverent tone in his voice was—well, it was wrong. Harry couldn't really excuse any breach of principles because of love, could he?

But from the way Draco looked just then, he was coming to think that he would have to be prepared for that, at least if he wanted to stay with Draco.

The comprehension that Draco had been waiting for was in Harry's eyes. He shook his head, making Harry lower his hands, and then caught them and kissed both palms, then both scarred wrists. Then he folded them back into Harry's lap and kissed his lips.
"I can't," he said when he pulled away. "Thank you for saying that. You saw me at the end of sixth year, Harry. You *are* like that for me, important to me like that. I'll risk whatever I need to, do whatever I have to, in order to keep you safe. And leaving Scrimgeour able to rise up behind you again and stab you in the back won't work for me."

Harry watched him, but there was less of a brooding darkness in his eyes than Draco had expected. "You know," he said after a moment, "I don't think that we're so different after all."

"Oh?" Draco licked his lips and shifted closer. Harry licked his lips in reflexive response. Draco was delighted. *How many other gestures can I get him to copy, I wonder?*

"No," Harry said. "I risked my life without hesitation whenever someone I cared for was in danger. Of course, I did that for innocent bystanders, too—"

"Don't make the mistake of thinking me *innocent*," Draco drawled, "whatever else you do."

"Oh, I know," Harry said, and gave him a stunningly sweet smile. "But I can see, now, why you need to do this. It's my impulse, too. I didn't stand around waiting and worrying when a basilisk threatened Ginny in our second year. And I sure as fuck didn't hold back from killing it when it turned out I had the chance."

"Someday," Draco said, suddenly remembering how little he knew about Harry's life except for the last year, "you must tell me about that."

Harry waved it away as if it were only one incident in a lifetime full of exciting incidents. That, of course, only made Draco the more determined to hear about it. "So. I'll insist on having some input into this. But you can hurt Scrimgeour all you like, so long as you don't kill him—"

"Of course not," Draco said. "People don't suffer when they're dead, unless you make them into Inferi."

Harry rolled his eyes to show what he thought of *that* idea, and then continued. "And I'll do what has to be done to promise help to Eugenie. Now, how soon do you think we can come up with that excuse for her to leave her office?"

Before Draco could answer, he leaned forwards, and Draco was graced with yet another sweet, warm kiss.

"By the way," Harry added softly, "I love you, too."

Draco wanted to know how he was supposed to concentrate on meeting Eugenie and making elaborate plans after *that*, but with the force of the superhuman control and calm he had always known he possessed, he turned his attention to it.

He did insist on toying with Harry's fingers while he did it, though. And reveled in the new openness and peace that had crept into Harry's face, even if he did have to do it silently.

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Chapter: 17

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Um. Do not kill me for this chapter.

Chapter Seventeen—Obstacles

Dear Draco,

I think that what you propose would be acceptable.

Draco drew a soft breath of relief and sat down to write the reply. It had taken nearly a week of delicate negotiations to get around Eugenie's initial demands—which were for power and prestige that not even Harry in all his restored glory could have granted her—and down to something Harry was willing to do *and* which Eugenie wanted. But now things were settled, and if all went well they would meet her later this afternoon. Draco had already chosen the place, a field halfway between Wiltshire and the Ministry where a wizarding home had once stood, but which had been abandoned years ago, with just enough wards remaining in place to keep it from the sight of Muggles. It was a neutral ground that Eugenie should feel comfortable on. Just in case, though, he would let her choose the time.

"Hmmm….Draco?"

Draco turned with a fond smile. Harry was lying in bed still—he regularly shared Draco's now, with no need to retreat to his own wing—and had sprawled over on his side, one hand patting the blankets in a fruitless search for him. Of course, he might have had more success in seeing his target if he had opened his eyes, Draco thought.

"Right here, love," Draco murmured, and took just a few moments more to sign the letter, seal it in its envelope, and cast a spell that let one of his several owls know he had a parchment that wanted delivery. The eagle-owl who responded was a handsome creature his mother had named Hippolyta, and Draco saw no reason to change it. He stroked her beak for a moment before he gave her Eugenie's name. Hippolyta leaped and soared out the window. By that time, Harry had roused himself enough to creep across the bed and drape his arm around Draco's shoulders.

"You're finished now," he whispered, halfway between a seductive lover and a sulky child. "Come back to bed now."

Draco laughed and let himself tumble backwards, turning over in a moment so that he was lying on top of Harry. His legs sprawled, his hair went in every direction, and he knew his elbows were digging into the mattress in a fashion that wouldn't make him look attractive from many angles.

And still, he didn't care.

"What you do to me," he murmured to Harry, dipping his head so that he could nuzzle his face into the dark hair. The scent he had grown used to in the past few days—slightly musky, the scent of a sleeping Harry—rose up and surrounded him. "Even if you're *not* ready to let me make love to you fully yet."

It was the question he asked, in that certain way, every morning. And, as always, Harry tensed for a moment before he answered with the same playful lightness. "I may not be ready for that, but I can't *tell* you how ready I am to be sucked, if you're in the mood."

Draco was. He satisfied himself first, however, by turning Harry over and licking and nipping the back of his neck. Harry indulged him, even softly sighing in enjoyment. He didn't understand Draco's fascination with marking him that way, and had even asked what good it did, when no one would see it anyway, because Harry went nowhere outside the Manor and his hair hung over his nape all the time. Draco had said it was the *principle* of the thing. Anyone who came close enough would know that Harry could not possibly have reached that part of his body to put the mark there for himself, and that was all Draco required.

He pulled Harry back over when he was done. Harry was already breathing fast, his eyes half-shut and his face flushed. He tried to touch Draco's chest, but his hand was trembling so badly his fingers skidded off his muscles. Draco caught the hand and kissed the shaking fingers one by one.

Little by little, Harry's resistance was breaking down. He no longer seemed embarrassed by most of the things he was learning about himself, the sexual responses that he had never suspected

existed until Draco coaxed them out of him. It wouldn't be long, Draco was confident, before Harry wanted to be fucked, or wanted to fuck Draco.

And sometime soon after that, he might even admit that he wasn't straight.

An impatient shove on his chest reminded him of where they were. Draco kissed Harry's hand one more time and then slid down his chest, eager to see what new noises he could pull from his lover this morning.

Harry was happy in a way he had never thought he would be.
He still wished the Cassandra Curse hadn't been cast, of course. How could he wish otherwise, when he knew it had caused many people pain and not just him, and when he had come close to dying several times? But he was more inclined than he had been to regard it as a test, a trial by molten iron to forge him into the man who was Draco's lover.

Draco's eagle-owl descended while they ate breakfast, and after Harry had spent more time absently admiring Draco's laughter and the way his jaw moved when he spoke than eating. Draco opened the letter at once. His eyes sped along the words, and crinkled at the edges.

"Pleasing news?" Harry asked, trying to drag his mind away from the bedroom and into the serious business of politics. He would probably never be as good at them as Draco was, but this *was* his future they were discussing. The least he owed it was a bit of attention.

"Yes." Draco nodded. "Eugenie chose to meet us in the place I suggested, and at two." He peered critically over the top of the letter at Harry. "I reckon we can do *something* about your hair by then."

Harry laughed. Everything seemed so much *easier* now that he had accepted Draco loved him—even if he wasn't always sure about the reasons why, even if it didn't seem sometimes that he would ever be ready for more than the blowjobs and handjobs and frotting they shared right now—and stopped looking for conspiracies and desires to hurt him where they were none. He shrugged. "Since you managed to tame the mess that's your own, you must have interesting techniques in your repertoire somewhere. Or did the house-elves manage that the way they manage everything else for you?"

Draco flipped a spoonful of cereal at him. Harry ducked that, and retaliated with a handful of marmalade. Draco cried out in true distress as it landed in his hair and dripped down his face. Harry lost his self-control then, and started laughing—

Hard enough that he didn't manage to duck in time when Draco flung a piece of buttered toast at him, so it caught him in the face. He was still trying to lick the butter away when Draco leaned around the curve of the table, caught his shoulders, and descended on him.

Because they were still mostly naked, the wrestling match that followed was pleasurable in unexpected ways, causing Harry to gasp and grunt and spread his legs in surrender as he never

would have to a determined enemy.

But, thank Merlin, he thought, staring up at Draco's half-pained, half-pleased face above him, while the carpet made the mark on the back of his neck prickle and sting, *I've got over believing that Draco is one now.*

The field where they were to meet Eugenie wasn't very impressive. Draco, who hadn't chosen it for its impressive qualities, didn't care. He swished his wand idly through the nettles and tall grasses as he walked. He had already cast a spell to ensure that none of the plants could get a grip on his cloak. Though the house-elves would be able to remove all such nuisances the moment he returned to the Manor, Draco would not look less than impressive while he met Eugenie.
Harry had already quartered the field twice, checking on the piled stones of the tumbledown house and the sparking, hissing remnants of the wards. He had rolled his eyes when Draco accused him of fussiness and paranoia, and returned to the task each time, silent and intent. In truth, Draco appreciated Harry's Auror instincts. There was no one and nothing to challenge them here, but there was always the small off-chance that another group of wizards might have chosen to enter the field for some other purpose this afternoon, and it gave Harry a place to put his energy.

Both of them heard the muffled crack that signified Apparition coming from the other side of the field. Harry wheeled around at once and leveled his wand in that direction. Draco stepped up beside him, close enough that he could hear his lover's steady breathing. "Patience," he whispered into Harry's ear, curving an arm around his waist.

"I'm *plenty* patient," Harry whispered back, but he did relax, leaning against Draco.

A swirl of lavender robes announced Eugenie. Draco had never thought her unintelligent, and she proved it by coming into view with her hands in the air, almost ostentatiously devoid of weapons. Harry muttered several sensing spells anyway, which would presumably tell him if she had turned her wand invisible. He gave a low grunt of satisfaction when it was done. Draco caressed the back of his neck, letting his fingertips linger in the marks of his own teeth, and then stepped away from him.

"Greetings, Madam Figg-Warwick," he called.

"Oh, call me Eugenie, Draco." Eugenie smiled wearily at him as she stepped over a clump of weeds and came to a halt with most of the field still between them. "You do it in the letters. No need to vary this meeting much from those, is there?"

Draco nodded, pleased again. Eugenie was a woman of business. He had no objection to the same tone prevailing here. Eugenie was powerfully placed in the Ministry, a trusted confidant of Scrimgeour. For what she could offer them, a brisk bargaining was fine.

"No, I don't think so," he said. "This is Harry Potter." He gestured at Harry, though Eugenie had

already turned in that direction, and she would have to have been blind not to recognize Harry, as many times as his face had appeared on the front page of the *Daily Prophet.*

"Hello," Harry said. His voice was clipped, and he had his head lifted high and held stiffly to the side, the way he did when he was nervous. Draco understood. This was his first time in weeks willingly showing himself *as* himself to someone else.

"Hello," said Eugenie. There was no malice in her tone, and only open curiosity and a little sadness in her face. Draco relaxed. The Cassandra Curse hadn't renewed its grip, then, and he had done a good enough job smashing the truth into her mind that Eugenie hadn't looked for alternative explanations, either. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Potter. I hope that we can enjoy working together closely in the future."

Harry made a little motion with his head. It might have meant almost anything. Draco decided to step into the breach before one of them could say something unfortunate. He was really the only one present who could act as a bridge between the two worlds represented.

"You said that you were willing to help us in return for some considerations at a future date, Eugenie," he said. "Why don't you detail them for Harry, just so that he can express his level of comfort with them?"

It was a formality, since Harry and Draco had already spent hours in discussion over the letters, and Draco would never have promised her anything that Harry was truly uncomfortable with. It was best to be as honest as possible from the beginning, though. And talking by letter was truly no substitute for a face-to-face conversation.

"Very well." Eugenie locked her hands together in front of her like a child told to recite at school. "I asked for Mr. Potter to speak for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures in future meetings planning the course of the Ministry. We have received little funding compared to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the past several years. Since Minister Scrimgeour was the Head of the Auror Office before he took Fudge's place, he tends to favor his own people."

Harry nodded at once. "I have no trouble with that," he said, and a small, bitter smile touched his lips. "Even if I return to the Ministry, it will never be in the same capacity that I once enjoyed."

Eugenie smiled. The smile looked a bit frayed about the edges, Draco thought, as if she didn't believe Harry would keep his promise. *Well, she'll learn the truth soon enough.*

"I would also ask that you safeguard several of my people who need to travel out of the country on dangerous missions during the next year." Eugenie wrinkled her nose. "We have a consistent success rate in stopping those who would smuggle in forbidden magical creatures, but then we're faced with the problem of getting those creatures back to their native lands."

"Will one guard make that much of a difference?" Harry asked. Draco smothered his proud smile

as best he could. He hadn't even needed to nudge Harry in the ribs to remind him to ask that question.

"When he's Harry Potter, he will." Eugenie waved a hand. "My people receive training, Mr. Potter, but nothing can keep up their morale *all* the time. Knowing that I was able to hire the best Auror in the Ministry to travel with them…they're likely to fight better just from having you around."

Harry grimaced, but nodded. Draco knew he disliked the idea that people would value him so much more than an ordinary fighting wizard, however true it was. "And the final consideration?"

"That you'll spend a few afternoons coming to talk to me." Eugenie's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "We don't have to have lengthy conversations. Once again, the appearance of friendship with Harry Potter is just as valuable as the actual thing, which I have no reason to anticipate receiving."

Harry hissed between his teeth, but managed to bend his stiff neck enough to approximate a bow. "I agree."

"In return for that," said Eugenie, and clapped her hands with an echoing sound, "I'll help spread the truth in whatever capacity I can, back you against your enemies, and do research on the Cassandra Curse. The wizards who invented it probably experimented on magical creatures first, as was the normal practice at that period of history. There may be something in the records of my Department that can help us."

"More than good enough," said Harry. He glanced at Draco, asking without words if Draco would tell her who their enemy was now.

Draco nodded. He had held that information back from Eugenie, not sure how she would react to it, but they were in deep enough now that continuing to do so would hinder more than help her. "The person we suspect of being our enemy, and of casting the Cassandra Curse on Harry, is—"

"Minister Scrimgeour," Eugenie said softly. "I know."

Draco blinked. "How—"

And then Apparitions sounded from every corner of the field, and Draco whirled around, reaching for his wand, cursing himself for not linking the sadness in Eugenie's eyes to how long the negotiation with her had taken. Eugenie would have had no reason to hold back and be so fussy, unless someone else was courting her at the same time.

"I'm sorry about this, Draco," Eugenie said from behind him, somehow loud enough to cut through the sound of Aurors appearing and shouts for Harry and Draco to surrender. "But he offered me a better price."

She was gone by the time Draco whirled on her. Beside him, he heard Harry make a roaring sound, halfway between pain and anger, at the same moment as three voices called, "*Expelliarmus!*" and their wands shot away from their hands.

Draco turned around again, and was just in time to tackle Harry as he tried to surge away from him and towards their enemies. Harry measured his full length in the dirt, and Draco sprawled on top of him. He whispered fiercely into his lover's ear, "No, I won't let you do something that could hurt you!"

"You might as well let him up, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco climbed to his feet with his own slow dignity, making sure to offer his hand to Harry and keep it there, on his arm. Harry was shaking, but Draco couldn't tell if it was with fear or fury. Scrimgeour strode across the field to meet them. He stopped walking a moment later, however, and shook his head.

"You really aren't as clever as you think you are, you know," he murmured.

That conversation we had in his office. Draco's heart was beating so fast it left streaks of color across his vision. *I mentioned the Cassandra Curse. He must have chosen the simplest explanation, and decided that I heard about it from Harry—and* after *the fact, or I would have dismissed it as a story.*

Yes, he had not been as clever as he thought he was. He wanted to blame the headache from Legilimizing Eugenie, but he really had nothing to blame but his own foolishness.

"How did you remember casting the curse, since you did it?" he asked calmly. He didn't bother trying to raise his voice enough to reach the Aurors. Scrimgeour had no doubt prepared them to hear all sorts of wild things from both Draco and Harry.

Scrimgeour shrugged slightly. "It had to be done," he said, his face like iron. "I don't regret it. And though *some* casters forget their part in the spell the moment it's cast, that's only in cases when there's a danger of their changing their minds later and deciding the curse was not necessary. I know it was."

"Bastard," Draco whispered, in a tone he had last used to his father.

Scrimgeour lowered his eyelids and sighed. "Mr. Malfoy, I find this hostility troublesome. You should thank me for removing an obstacle from your life. You would have found nothing but pain and difficulty if you had stayed with Mr. Potter. That is what he brings to everyone around him." He faced Harry. Draco had never seen such pure hatred on any human face. "Mr. Potter. How…pleasant…to see you again."

Draco glanced at Harry. He was standing too still, his eyes never wavering from Scrimgeour. Draco recognized that stillness. He'd seen it when Harry was controlling himself in hospital,

preventing the natural reactions that would only have made Draco dislike him more.

It made Draco burn to see him falling back into it now, so soon after Draco had promised him that he would never need it again.

He stepped forwards. Scrimgeour lifted his wand warningly.

"If you believe that I'll abandon Harry for any consideration you can offer me, you'll need to think again," Draco said lightly. His fear had fallen silent now. Instead, plans divided in his head like fertilized eggs, his mind racing after something he could use to get out of this situation.

"Oh, I never intended to court you out of this," said Scrimgeour. "Some people are susceptible to such offers, Madam Figg-Warwick being one of them. Malfoys are not. My solution is simpler, and, I think, in the end more elegant. *Obliviate!*"

Harry watched as Draco's features fell slack, the rage and calculation draining away like yolk through a hole in the bottom of a dragon's egg. He closed his eyes.
And then Scrimgeour was on him.

A hand closed around his wrist, squeezing hard enough to press tendon to bone. Harry went to his knees with the pain, but refused to scream. He would maintain his silence from now on.

He thought it was the only way he could be expected to survive.

Scrimgeour squeezed one more time, then bent over him. Harry could feel the loathing that shook his body, as well as hear the words whispered in his ear. "Did you really think that you could escape forever? Well, yes, perhaps you *were* arrogant enough to think that." The hands moved to his shoulders now, and pressed down. Harry wondered, through the haze of pain, if his bones would fracture. "You have always been arrogant. It is not the thing I dislike most about you, Potter, but it comes close.

"You couldn't simply enjoy the glory that you were given. You had to want more. This is your fault, you know. If you had rested content in your place, if you had not aspired to political power that you were never fit to wield, then I would not have been forced to come between you and your friends. There would never have been a suicide attempt, or a hunt."

One of the hands on his shoulders let go, cupped his chin, and wrenched his head around so hard that Harry's eyes sparked with tears. Scrimgeour pointed his face at Draco, who was swaying slightly on his feet and blinking. Harry knew the Memory Charm must have been a powerful one if it was directed to wipe out the weeks of Draco's association with Harry. He only hoped that Draco would not be affected by it in the same way he had seen Lockhart affected.

On cue, Scrimgeour whispered, "And there would never have been an innocent man pulled into this. I don't like Malfoy, but he's done some good and no evil to the wizarding community in the past nine years. But you couldn't leave that uncomplicated life the way it was, could you, Potter?

Oh, no, you had to ensure that he would be dragged down with you, that you—"

Harry had been waiting for the moment when Scrimgeour would have sunk so far into tormenting him that his grip would relax. It was a fleeting moment, signaled only by the way Scrimgeour's fingers fluttered, but that was enough.

He kicked out, hitting Scrimgeour's bad leg, and then rolled over when the Minister cried out and fell to the ground. He was on his feet in the next moment, hand extended, drawing on the wandless magic that he hadn't used since St. Mungo's, trying with all his might to call his wand back from the Auror who had it—

And Scrimgeour hit him with a Blasting Curse in the small of his back.

Harry went down with a cry. He knew something was broken, though he wasn't sure what; he only knew that when he tried to move, pain like a cascade of hot water filled him. He lay still, tears running down his face, and listened to Scrimgeour say, "Try that again, and Malfoy is *dead*."

Harry tilted his head back in surrender. It was so easy. Despair was already descending on him, familiar iron claws, black wings, breath of frost, like a dragon in reverse. He didn't resist when the Aurors came forwards, roughly dragged him to his feet, and Apparated away from Draco.

He was so cold.

Draco came back to himself slowly. He was standing in the middle of a field, halfway between the Manor and the Ministry, that he recognized from the negotiations he'd seen done there during the war. His wand was at his feet. No one else was in sight.
He couldn't remember what he was doing there.

Draco bent over slowly and picked up his wand. His head hurt. He touched it, and recognized the cutting pain that came in from his temple along with the slight haze fluttering at the corners of his vision. He'd been *Obliviated*.

Some bargain gone sour, I would imagine, he thought, and shrugged. He always kept multiple copies of every less-than-legal transaction he engaged in. He would know who it had been, and take care never to deal with them again.

Of course he had the nagging feeling that it had been more than that, that he had something *important* to do, but that was the usual side-effect of a Memory Charm and Draco had learned not to mind it. His attackers had been gentlemen, at least, to leave him unhurt and with his wand nearby. They could have tossed it into the weeds and grass, and Draco would have spent hours trying to locate it.

Moving slowly in consideration of his aching head, he Apparated back home, wondering absently why it seemed as if someone should have come with him, and why the Manor echoed so

emptily when he did finally enter it.

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Chapter: 18

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eighteen—Different Kinds of Strength

"This will be your last home."

Harry blinked around the room Scrimgeour had shown him to. It was a bit larger than a closet, and it was a corridor away from Scrimgeour's office—a corridor that Harry had never suspected was there. Since the Ministry was underground, it was easier than it should have been to keep rooms tucked out of sight and confused among the walls and doors.

The room itself had no features. The walls and ceiling were bare stone. The floor had a few rugs on it, less to provide color than to provide the minimum amount of protection necessary from the cold, Harry thought. When the door shut, there would be space beneath it for air to flow, but otherwise nothing could pass in or out.

"This is the place you will die," Scrimgeour said, with a confidence in his voice that Harry could have wished to echo. "Very sad and very sorry about it, of course—"

Harry concealed a snort. He could not imagine someone less likely to be sorry about his passing than the Minister.

"—but that is the way things have to work out." For a moment, Scrimgeour hesitated, as if he imagined that Harry would walk into the room on his own. Harry couldn't imagine something he wanted less. He stood where he was, and wasn't surprised when Scrimgeour shoved him, on whatever place in his back the Blasting Curse had hit.

Harry went down in silence, luckily catching his head on a rug instead of the stone. He stretched out a hand to hold his balance, and it slid on an imperfection in the floor and opened a shallow cut across his palm. He cradled it to his chest as he sat up, folded his legs beneath him, and turned around to face Scrimgeour.

The Minister held such hatred in his eyes that Harry wondered he could contain it all without screaming. He hadn't harbored half that level of hatred when he was still trying to figure out who had cast the Cassandra Curse on him, before he had made plans to flee to the Muggle world on his own and met Draco.

Draco.

Harry told himself, brutally, that the pain welling up in the middle of his chest meant nothing, rather like the chance that he'd had at another life and a different kind of love meant nothing. He hadn't fought hard enough to retain them, becoming confident and complacent—or he'd dragged Draco into his life where he had no right, because he had known how dangerous it would be. Either way, he didn't have the right to complain now.

He had been here before. He recognized every breath he drew, every moment of the black smoke creeping through his head. This was the same apathy that had confined him in the moment when he conjured the iron jaws and ordered them to bite through his wrists. He didn't care if he lived or died.

He cared that Draco was out of danger. He cared that he would never get to reconcile with his friends. But those were pale and fluttering imitations of emotions. What did they matter? Even if he cared about them more, his survival wouldn't make any difference. Draco had no reason to seek him out. He might encounter people who would tell him that he had associated with Harry Potter for the last few weeks, but without the love they had shared, without the memories of what he'd seen in Harry's soul, what should inspire him to go searching for the truth? He would probably shudder at his own madness and decide that he was well-rid of Harry Potter.

Draco wouldn't want me to think like that.

But the Draco I knew is dead.

Something spun and clattered to a stop next to him. Harry opened his eyes, wondering what it was; he couldn't believe that Scrimgeour would have thrown him his wand.

He understood when he made out the gleam of a serrated knife next to him, easily sharp enough for him to cut his wrists open.

"I think you know what this means," Scrimgeour said softly, holding his eyes, "without my having to explain it to you."

Harry gave a tiny nod. There were spells that, with a bit of work and patience, could tell how someone else had died if there was a question. They could not read the minds of the dead or reveal the motives of a killer, but they were sufficient to distinguish between murder and suicide. Scrimgeour wanted him to kill himself so that there would be no chance of his being linked to Harry's death.

He's not stupid enough to let his political career, which he did all this for, be threatened just because he'd like to slit my throat with his own hands, Harry thought, staring steadily into the yellow eyes that he had looked into for years and never suspected anything from.

Scrimgeour crouched down in front of him and spoke with quiet intensity. Had he only watched the scene from a distance, Harry thought, then he might have believed the Minister to be offering advice or encouragement to a new Auror recruit.

But no recruit had ever heard such words hiss past their ears, words that were meant to kill their souls.

"I am going to bring your friends to visit you in a short time, Potter. We'll tell them, of course, that we caught you roaming about and are sheltering you until we can persuade St. Mungo's to accept a dangerous, runaway patient back. They're still under the influence of the curse. In fact, the only people who aren't have no reason to care about you. Can you imagine the way Weasley and Granger will react? What they will say, how they will mourn the death of their friend? I should think their mourning when you commit suicide will be tinged with relief. Who *wouldn't* rather see you dead than deal with the monster you have become?"

Harry closed his eyes and opened them again. His hand rose to touch the mark on the back of his neck, the one he had understood demonstrated Draco's love and possessiveness; that was the only reason he had allowed Draco to bite him at all.

His fingers brushed over it. It was still there.

His hand then lowered into his lap and clenched into a fist. Scrimgeour had been watching it, perhaps because he thought Harry had a second wand hidden in his hair, but he relaxed and smiled when Harry took it out again. Harry thought, clinically, that it was quite the most hateful smile he had ever seen.

"Rest," the Minister murmured. "Your friends will come to see you soon. Of course, if you want to solve our mutual problem before then, I would not object, and I believe it would be the best thing for you, as well." He nodded slightly, then rose to his feet and turned towards the door.

Harry lay back on the rugs and shut his eyes, not listening to the door slam. He could feel the immediate tingle of wards surrounding the room. He didn't think they were less powerful than the wards that covered Scrimgeour's office, which Draco had described to him and which he'd seen for himself every time he went to receive an assignment from the Minister.

He knew a struggle was coming—the most severe struggle since his first days under the Cassandra Curse, when he had believed there might still be a way out. Then, he had trained himself to accept that nothing conventional would work and he needed a plan his remorseless magical enemy could not counter.

Now, he had to convince himself, against the deep, attractive pull of the apathy that he *wanted* to give into, to survive, and find a plan that Scrimgeour could not take apart before it began.

He locked his hands behind his head, and let his fingers brush Draco's bite mark once again.

Draco scowled. The problem had long since passed his definition of "strange" and gone straight into "highly inconvenient."
"*Batty!*" he shouted.

Still she did not appear, and neither did any other house-elf who could tell him that she was sick with one of the strange illnesses that sometimes required house-elves not to use magic. Draco narrowed his eyes and rose from the dining room table, stalking towards the kitchens. He had still eaten an excellent breakfast, but Batty was the only elf he owned who could get his toast a perfect light brown and who *really* knew how to poach eggs. He would have her attending at the table again, or he would have a good excuse. At this point, she had better be dead.

He opened the door to the kitchens, and paused. His house-elves were cowering in the corners of the large room holding their ears, the way they did when they knew they would be ordered to punish themselves in a moment. But his swift glance revealed no Batty holding her ears, no Batty on a pallet of rags, and no corpse. The house-elves usually held off on attending to the corpses of their own kind until ordered, or they might be accused of helping the dead ones escape their masters' control.

"Where is Batty?" Draco snapped. He focused on another house-elf who usually spent most of his time cleaning the abandoned wings of the Manor. "Perry. Where is she?"

"Begging Master Malfoy's pardon," the elf whispered, and then knocked his head several times against the wall. Draco narrowed his eyes further. *That* gesture wasn't usual unless an elf had to give a master bad news it knew he would dislike. Perhaps Batty was sick after all, or had died in a place other than the kitchen. "But Master Draco gave her c-clothes and ordered her off the property."

Draco stared. He had encountered other signs that something was not right: the fact that he had quit his employment at St. Mungo's to become a private Psyche-Diver (though the Healer he had corresponded with had hinted they would be glad to have him back); the open and clean wing of the Manor with a bedroom filled with resized clothes; and the lost *weeks*, not merely days or hours, of time. Something drastic had happened, that was certain. Draco half-wondered now if he had *Obliviated* himself to avoid the memory of a disastrous love affair, after discovering that he found it hard to sleep because he missed the warmth and weight of another body beside him.

But he could not imagine any combination of those circumstances, or any others, really, which would have led up to his freeing Batty.

"Why did I do that?" he demanded. Perry hesitated, and he added, "Pretend that I don't know anything."

Perry swallowed nervously. "M-Master Malfoy s-said that she should go for th-threatening Harry Potter."

Draco reeled backwards and barely caught himself on the wall. No memories had returned to

him, but he understood suddenly why he might have wanted a Memory Charm performed on himself. The *Daily Prophet* articles from the last year claimed that Potter had turned into an impossible bastard, an all-around git and pathological liar whom Draco might find fascinating to watch from a distance but would never wish to associate with.

And now to find out that he might have taken Potter as a *lover*, and then lost him instead of telling him to vanish…

It was too much. The signs of what he had wanted to *Obliviate* were clear enough: his own errors of judgment, his own *infatuation*—it could be nothing else—which would have him freeing Batty and valuing Harry Potter's life, and the final argument that must have resulted in tearful pleadings from him, because he knew that an obsession strong enough to make him send Batty away would not have been his own choice to end.

"Thank you, Perry," he said quietly, still stunned, and then turned and walked out of the kitchen. He didn't return to his breakfast. He needed to go to his own room and think about things in silence for a while.

"And here they are," Scrimgeour's voice said lightly. "Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger. And here he is." His tone altered to one of gentle concern. Harry, still sitting with his fingers touching the mark on the back of his neck, absently marveled at the way the bastard could act. He was a far more dangerous man than Harry had thought him—or would have been if he were less afraid of someone else stealing his power. He had already cast a light glamour that concealed the presence of the knife from Ron and Hermione. "I'm afraid St. Mungo's still hasn't agreed to accept him into their care again, even though we would of course arrange to put him in a locked ward. We have to keep him in this room because it's the only one strongly warded enough to be impervious to his magic. I'm sorry for—"
"It's all right, Minister," Hermione said, and her voice was full of tears. She sounded worse than she had the last time Harry had seen her, in front of the iron gates of the Manor.

A life that is over now, a life that is done.

"We know that you've done all you could, and this isn't your fault." She crouched down in front of Harry. Her face looked weary beyond Harry's ability to bear it. He turned his head away. Hermione made a little choking noise, and then Ron knelt next to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

I've lost all that, Harry thought, and made himself think it, acknowledge it, and accept it. He could never survive the onslaught of his own apathy if he didn't. The impulse to commit suicide might rise up in him at a later date. He needed to *conquer* this, not shove it down as he had done when living with Draco. *I will never have that again—not the comfort of a lover, not the comfort of these friends.*

"I'm sure that you want to converse with him alone," said Scrimgeour, in that same voice he'd used to apologize for the size and kind of room he was keeping Harry in, and then he stepped out

and shut the door behind him. Once again, Harry felt the compulsive hiss of the wards. He grimaced. Scrimgeour had almost certainly visited St. Mungo's to see the destruction that Harry had wrought to their suppressive wards with his wandless magic, and he would have strengthened the spells in response. Harry couldn't blast his way out of here.

Who said anything about blasting?

But Harry tucked the sudden kernel of a plan away, because Hermione was talking now, her words muffled, half-buried in Ron's shoulder, and this was his test. Besides, this might be the last time he ever saw her, and he wanted to hear what she said, even if it hurt him.

"I just—I don't understand this, Harry. What made you run? What made you go to *Malfoy Manor*, of all places? Were you just resentful that Malfoy couldn't cure you? Did you want to taunt him, since you escaped on his watch? I have no friendly feelings for him, but what you did to him was cruel, if only because it humiliated his professional pride."

You know nothing about cruelty, or about humiliation. But Harry bit his tongue and kept his words behind his teeth. He understood too much about how the Cassandra Curse worked now to find relief in speaking. And there was no Draco this time to remove the memory of any words he might speak for the easing of his heart.

There will never be any Draco again.

Harry breathed slowly, catching and absorbing that pain. It was right in the most important aspects, but wrong in one. The Draco Harry had known and loved would survive in his memories, even if he never saw the sunlight in any other place. For *his* sake, Harry was fighting to live. He had enjoined the company of the dead for thirteen months, when he couldn't get anyone else. There was no shame in the fact that he would need to rely on a memory now.

"I want to understand, too," Ron added, his voice full of confusion and frustration. "Don't you think you've played the superior act long enough? You're a good Auror. You're better than I am. You didn't even need a partner on most of the cases that you worked for the Ministry in the last year. If I *admit* that, will whatever pride made you decide to lie to us be appeased? Can you just—can you just *stop* being the prat that you turned into and start being our *friend* again?"

Alas, no, Harry thought, forcing himself to absorb those blows, too. *The curse doesn't work that way, and neither does our friendship. Even if I returned completely to normal, Ron,* we *wouldn't return completely to normal. There are too many memories, too many wounds.*

"Ginny has someone else, did you know that?" Ron said, evidently deciding coaxing wouldn't work and he should strike with pain. "She had to find someone she wanted to love and marry when you *abandoned* her in the way you did."

Harry just gazed back at him. The shallow cut on his palm tingled. The mark on the back of his neck was still sensitive when he touched his fingers to it, though he thought from his hunger that

at least a day had passed since Scrimgeour had thrown him into the room.

Abruptly, Ron launched a punch at him.

Harry ducked his head so that he took it on his shoulder, instead of his face. He couldn't afford to be blinded by blood, or have a broken nose, when he finally escaped. The pain in the middle of his back from Scrimgeour's curse would be bad enough.

"*Ron*!" Hermione exclaimed shrilly.

"He's just sitting there staring at us, Hermione." Ron's voice was flat and full of disgust. "I can't—how can you *stand* that?"

"If he thinks he's too good even to talk to us, then we ought to just leave," said Hermione, and turned around to call to Scrimgeour.

Harry watched them go. Hermione glanced back, trying to catch his eye. He caught her glance but gave her nothing, and acknowledged that it affected him when she dissolved into tears again.

The problem was that he could not let it *affect* him to the point of *stopping* him.

When they were gone, he lay back, and closed his eyes, and reached down to the place where his demons lurked.

Draco had given strict instructions to his house-elves. They were to leave him alone in his study for at least an entire day. No matter what they heard, what amount of screaming or profanity, they were not to intrude before then. If they smelled the scent of blood, then they might enter, do as much as was necessary to save his life or stanch a wound, and then leave again.
He had thought he could ignore the mystery of what had happened during these weeks he apparently spent with Harry Potter, because the truth would only humiliate him. But two letters had come today that made that impossible.

One was from St. Mungo's. Healer Mugwort, whom Draco had worked under in the past, wanted him to know he would be welcome, and no one held his failure to cure Harry Potter's madness against him. From the reports that had come in across the country as Potter randomly appeared, caused havoc, and vanished again, most of the hospital staff had concluded that this was not the kind of madness that was curable.

The second came from an Auror calling herself Lila Ambernight. She wanted to know what Draco intended to do about Potter and the Cassandra Curse. She had uncovered some information that distressed her, but which she believed was too sensitive to be trusted to letter, so she had requested an invitation to visit the Manor. Meeting in the room where he had convinced her of the truth, she said, would be fine.

Something more had happened than a few disastrous dates with Potter. And Draco was no longer

entirely certain that he had *Obliviated* himself. At the very least, he would have left notes so that he could be reminded of what date it was and that he had left St. Mungo's, to spare himself further shock and embarrassment.

He would have to Dive into himself, and do what he could to unlock the hold of the Memory Charm on his soul.

It was a risky procedure, and Draco had never cared enough in the past to work it on himself, except to recover the memory of the last night he had spent in Snape's company. Severus had Charmed him so that Draco could honestly deny certain details of his escape to the Dark Lord or the Ministry, should he need to. But Draco, who detested decisions being made for him, had Dived under the veil of the magic so that he could learn what Severus wanted to hide.

He had thought, given the time and pain that cost him, that nothing behind a Memory Charm would ever be worth knowing again.

He doubted that now.

He closed his eyes, regulated his breathing, and then cast the incantation on himself, the way he used to do when he was developing Psyche-Diving. The room wavered around him, then separated, and he plunged through the darkness of his mind to emerge floating above the familiar landscape of his soul.

No. Not familiar.

In one corner of the looming mountains, fading in strength and brilliance but still present enough to make an impact, was a lovely blue-green arch, a color that Draco had never before seen in himself. It was rare even among his patients, because madness tended to destroy loveliness like that. The hunger it raised in him was new—

And not new. Draco knew absolutely he had felt it before, the same way he had become used to a body in bed with him during the last few weeks.

He simply could not place the context.

Draco gritted his teeth and began to swim. Something severe would have been required to change his soul. And someone else had reached into his mind and *taken that experience away.*

Draco knew he would never have agreed willingly to that. He would have that experience, whatever it had been, *back.*

Down and down and down.
Harry presented himself with all the things that had happened to him in the last few days as a series of simple propositions. All the while, he kept one hand on Draco's mark and one hand on the knife Scrimgeour had left him.

Draco doesn't remember what happened.

He has no reason to, since to him you're only a despised enemy he hasn't crossed paths with in years. He could notice inconsistencies out of place, but what are the chances that he would care enough to pursue them? He'll probably write this off as an embarrassing experiment gone awry and beg anyone who knows something about it to never mention it again.

His grip tightened on the knife.

Ron and Hermione don't believe you, and don't believe in *you. Ron was willing to strike you. Neither one of them protested to Scrimgeour about these accommodations. The grip of the curse on them is stronger than ever. Even if it was gone, imagine all the work you'd have to do to rebuild that friendship from the ground up!*

Ginny has someone else. That anchor into your old life is gone.

The scars on his wrists seemed to tremble, calling out for the knife.

What happened, happened.

But that does not mean I *need to die.*

His breath quickened, straining against the bonds of his own desire for an ending. If he were dead, he wouldn't have to worry about anything else ever again. And Scrimgeour was right: in one stroke, he would end the danger he presented to anyone else. If Draco *did* remember, the Minister would turn on him in hatred again, and this time he might kill Draco and face the possibility that his disappearance would raise more questions than Harry's suicide.

He would cause Draco pain by dying, but not as much as he would by staying alive.

But if I were gone…

If I were vanished into the Muggle world, then Scrimgeour would immediately have fewer resources to hunt me with, and less reason to try, since I would have cut myself off from the means to climb to political power. Ron and Hermione are likely to give up on me, the way they would have last time. And Draco—

Would he still be in danger?

Harry sighed in exasperation. His fingers curled into the marks of Draco's teeth once again.

The problem is that that's a question I can't answer. Even if I killed myself the way Scrimgeour wanted me to, he might still be in danger; that's how paranoid Scrimgeour is. If I let myself be locked up in St. Mungo's, the same thing would happen. I can't protect him from the Muggle

world, but I can't protect him if I somehow get out of this and become a fugitive in the wizarding world, either. His standing, his skills, his wards, his house-elves—I'll have to trust to his own strength to guard him, the way he said he would trust to my strength to keep me alive in a hopeless situation until he could come for me.

But he won't come for me now, will he?

Once again, his fingers strayed out to play with the serrated edge of the knife. So simple. So quick. One cut, and he would place himself beyond considerations like this. So easy.

And then the impulse to laugh surged up in him.

Since when have I ever accepted the easy road?

And Harry felt himself turn the corner. For the first time, strength began to shine in him, a golden glowing kind of warmth that he knew he had never felt before his time with Draco, a warmth that Draco had given him. Harry began to breathe more steadily, and his head slowly lifted from the floor.

*Scrimgeour can't destroy what happened for me. The memory is gone now from the only other mind that ever shared it, but—*his fingers brushed over Draco's mark again*—I know it was there. Scrimgeour can kill it, but he can't change the past so that it never existed.*

And for me, this is still real. The Draco who marked me is still here. The promise I made to him, not to hurt myself in a hopeless situation, still holds. Scrimgeour can't make me kill my memory.

And there's a solution you still haven't considered. Escape, neutralize Scrimgeour so you know he can't hurt Draco, and then vanish into the Muggle world as needed. You still won't be happy, but you'll put distance between yourself and those who could be hurt, and you have the memory *of happiness, arriving later than you had any right to expect it would come.*

Harry opened his eyes slowly. Dim as the light in the room was, about the same amount of illumination as a *Lumos* charm, it seemed as bright as the sun to him.

He knew he would live.

He placed the knife beside him, so that he could fool Scrimgeour into thinking he was still considering suicide if he needed to, but it was no longer a temptation.

Now he had to put that part of his plan that constituted escape into motion, so that he could neutralize Scrimgeour and vanish.

And a thought he'd had when Ron and Hermione were visiting returned to him.

Who said anything about blasting?

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Chapter: 19

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nineteen—Wise Use of Magic

Draco watched as the colors around him darkened, the Slytherin green turning the shade of poison, the purple and black he was used to accepting as his flaws altering until they shone like a starling's feathers. He knew he was nearing the part of himself guarded by the veil of the Memory Charm, magic powerful enough to reach down and bind his consciousness along with his memories if he were not careful.

There was a reason that *Obliviate* was a spell widely used on one's enemies and on Muggles. Even if the person noticed the missing time, the chances were small that they would consider the memories important enough to search for when breaking the charm could drive them insane

Draco swam on.

He halted at last in front of the Memory Charm and the obscurity it had cast on his soul, and took several deep breaths. The beautiful blue-green arch he had noticed before reached overhead and then down into the darkness, like a rainbow losing itself in the advance of night. Draco peered ahead, but could see nothing within that darkness, not even the normal colors of his soul. It purely and simply refused his eyes.

The Memory Charm was linked to the event that had changed his soul, whatever it was.

To know what it was, he *had* to go into that darkness.

It was no good pretending otherwise, or that he *really* wanted to hesitate.

He called up memories of the time he had broken Severus's *Obliviate*. This ought to be easier, since then he had been only a terrified adolescent and now he was an experienced Psyche-Diver with years of maneuvering around mental obstacles behind him.

That did not lessen his terror, and since no one else was here, he could admit to the feeling.

He stretched his arms in front of him, an analogue for the determination he summoned up now. He could not stop once he began to tear the veil. To do so would be to drive himself mad with the glimpses of half-understood events and an uncertainty about what they meant. But the *Obliviate*

itself would drag at him like tar. It had never been meant to part or lessen once it was cast; Memory Charms did not wear away with the passage of time, either. He would have to keep going, no matter what he saw, no matter what shocked or frightened him, no matter how slowly he might have to travel at times and how close his speed would come to stopping.

One glance at the blue-green arch was enough to sustain any faltering resolve.

Draco held his breath, silly thing to do though it was, and paddled in.

Harry sat back on his heels, still munching. Scrimgeour had, after all, brought him food, or rather assigned an Auror to bring him a cheese sandwich, a small salad, and a butterbeer. Harry had been surprised, but decided it was more of the Minister's paranoia. When Harry's body was found, he wanted no inconsistencies, and Ron and Hermione certainly would have thought it strange if he hadn't eaten for days.
Since the food gave him more strength, Harry wasn't inclined to object.

He had studied the wards carefully, moving his hand towards them now and again to watch them spark and flare when he wasn't sure of their purpose. He'd dredged up every bit of Auror training concerning wards he could remember, and while it hadn't been enough to let him recognize *every* line of magic, he could make secure estimates based on analogies and reason.

The Draco in the back of his head laughed. *A Potter functioning on reason, without a friend or a lover to help him along? If you wanted to kill me with humor, you just succeeded.*

Harry smiled fondly. He hoped that Draco would have a full life after this, eventually finding someone else he could love as much as he loved Harry. Perhaps he would arrange to keep as close an eye on him as a wizard living in the Muggle world could. He recalled, hazily, that there were ways to arrange the delivery of the *Daily Prophet* not using an owl; Hermione had helped her parents set up a subscription that way. That at least would allow Harry to know if anything newsworthy happened to Draco.

It will have to. Someone like Draco can't stay out of the spotlight forever.

Perhaps he would read someday that Draco had married, or settled down with a lover. Harry forced himself to shrug the pain away. So far, it was only imaginary. He had enough real hurt to confront that he didn't intend to give the false ones any power over him.

He once again moved his head slowly back and forth along the lines of the wards, and smiled. *Yes.* The colored spells all tied together in the center of the door, where they formed a tangled knot. His instructors during Auror training had drilled Harry in recognizing that most wards had a common purpose, and that that purpose could be found at the center. Someone who wanted to keep thieves out of her house, for example, would have alarms to alert her of unexpected intruders, wards sensitive to sound and certain charms, and separate individual protections on every entrance. The place where they came together in a common anchor would often appear as a lock or a sign saying *Keep Out* in ferocious runes.

As ferocious as runes can get, anyway.

These wards formed a knot, and the whole thing was pulsing in and out like a beating heart. That was because, if Harry had done his reading correctly, Scrimgeour was rather intent on not only keeping him prisoner but knowing when he died. Another plausible excuse, of course; no one would expect him to confine a man who had showed himself capable of suicide without *some* kind of alarm that measured and kept track of his health. The wards watched over motion and wand magic and defended the door, but they also kept track of his breathing and his heartbeat. If any one of them lowered too far or stopped, then a silent alarm would tremble through the knot and alert Scrimgeour.

Harry had been surprised that the wards were set up to measure slower breathing as well as a cessation of breath, but then he'd remembered whom he was dealing with. Scrimgeour probably planned to rush in and watch Harry's last moments if he had the chance, so that he could be sure his enemy was dead. It was an understandable weakness from a man whom Harry thought was probably ruled by his fear above all else.

And now it would cost him.

Harry knew already that he could not cut through the wards—the same magic that defended the door would lash out at him if he tried—and it would have been a difficult task to work around them even if he had his wand. But he didn't *need* to work around them. His wandless magic was powerful, newly energized by the food and the long rest he'd had, and it could be used for small and subtle things as well as large.

In his head, Draco laughed again.

Harry rolled his eyes. *Ever considered that I might have learned the art of subtlety* from *you?*

The Draco in his head allowed that this might make matters more plausible.

Harry lay carefully back on the floor, his head cushioned on a rug and the others arranged so that they cradled his elbows, his tailbone, and the curve of his spine. He wanted no distractions from what he was about to attempt by minor physical pains.

He closed his eyes and began to concentrate on his breathing.

Draco had not anticipated how hard the veil would drag at him. The darkness had turned complete almost immediately, not even the glimpse of the blue-green arch overhead lighting his way anymore, and the tar yanked at his elbows and his knees and clogged the normal pathways of his thoughts. He was panting already, and he knew that if he glanced over his shoulder, he would still see light.
Or maybe he*wouldn't* see light. Maybe the Memory Charm had already sucked him away from the rest of his conscious awareness, and he would spend the rest of his life, until one of his

house-elves gave up and mercifully killed his motionless body, drooling and staring at nothing…

Draco gritted his teeth. He had faced such perils before, when he was developing Psyche-Diving, and they had never been enough to stop him. He would not let them stop him now, when he could be uncovering the most important buried secret of his life. His patients' secrets were left at St. Mungo's when he came home. But he would heave to *live* with these.

Will surged up in him, and acted as a knife to cut the veil—for a few paces. Then he was crawling again, and the bulk of the task weighed on his mind once more. Draco made sure to keep swimming, but he couldn't keep from thinking about all he had to do, and whether dread would crush him flat.

It will not. I will not let it.

Determination and will were all very well, but there were other weapons that could be used to fight mental battles, and which Draco had used to keep his balance before in the midst of patients' minds that were trying to kill him in the way they tried desperately to kill their own delusions. He shrank his motions to the barest minimum now, and closed his eyes. Having them open or shut really didn't make any difference in the midst of the *Obliviate*, but the mental analogues of physical motions comforted him, and Draco was wise enough to use any advantage he could get in this situation.

Rising through him were his pride, his arrogance, and his unwillingness to admit defeat. Draco rode them like a whirlwind, and directed them straight at the slough in front of him, where the power of his enemy's magic was thickest and thus the going hardest.

He was *Draco Malfoy.* He had *invented Psyche-Diving.* A Memory Charm would not defeat him. He had lasted out stints in the minds of people that even their closest relatives had given up for lost. He had seen eyes widen in sudden awareness of his power, in awe and respect. He would not allow an enemy who, at this point, did not even have the dignity of a name and a face to hold a victory over his head.

Forwards! Forwards!

Around him, the veil began to boil. Draco concentrated on imagining the stuff of his mind as water, which his magic was heating. And a whirlpool was spreading out from him, tearing at the blackness, shearing great gobs of pitch from the curtain, sucking it down and drowning it.

The *Obliviate*trembled. It was hard to hold the imagining of his own power against the gloomy reality of it, but Draco had often been told that his arrogance was made of diamond. Every time he wanted to sag back in weariness, he pressed that diamond like a knife against the tip of his spine and dug it in. The pain—not physical, but rather the shame of thinking that he'd let this single Memory Charm rule over him—drove him into new efforts.

A large patch tore in the veil. Draco laughed as light glittered down across the blue-green arch. It

still continued. Its root was still somewhere ahead. But he could make out the general outlines now. He reached a hand up, out of the spluttering might of his whirlpool, and touched it.

That was nearly the end of all his efforts. The shock was so great that the magic around him dropped. Draco shook his head and called up the power again, turning the shock to wonder and thus to more fuel for the water.

The blue-green arch contained love—an overwhelming emotion, thick with blended passion and impatience, as though Draco had once understood the need for slowness but had wanted more from his partner all the same.

And that love was for Harry Potter.

Draco was not stupid. If he had fallen in love with Harry Potter, it was for a *damn* good reason. And the Memory Charm was still burying that reason, along with exactly how this had happened.

Draco roared, and raised his arms. The ocean around him whirled up into a waterspout. Draco reared it higher and higher, into a wave, and brought it crashing down on the remnants of the *Obliviate* with the immeasurable force of a ton of angry water.

Harry had always been pants at the parts of Occlumency which involved clearing the mind. On the other hand, this wasn't exactly the same. And he had never tried to use his wandless magic to help with Occlumency. He knew how to use it on his body. Letting it into his mind was asking for trouble.
This, though, was a physical response. The main trouble he would have was with the finesse involved.

Help if you can, he thought to the Draco living in the back of his mind, and began to wrap his magic around his breath.

He had thought of actually using his magic to lower the rate of his breathing and his heartbeat, to go into a state of torpor, but then he might not react fast enough when Scrimgeour came through the door. It was far better to create a glamour over himself that would fool the wards. He only had to concentrate on it.

And hope that I have enough wandless magic to create this in the first place.

He envisioned his magic surrounding him in a light, shimmering cocoon, telling the wards that his breathing was slowing down. His heart didn't beat so hard, either. He was dropping past the states of relaxed and asleep, both of which the wards would recognize and not consider dangerous, and into something beyond that. His chest barely heaved. They couldn't detect his heartbeat. Each contraction forced more blood from his body. His veins swelled sluggishly. His breathing continued to drop. His mind was drifting away. In a few more minutes, an hour at most, life would leave his body. He was dying. He was dying.

The glamour grew deeper. Harry could feel it tingling around him like a beam of sunlight. He gritted his teeth on a wistful whimper, as he wondered if he would ever see the sunlight again. Escaping from this room was only the first step. He *must* find a way to neutralize Scrimgeour before he fled, or Draco wouldn't be safe.

His heartbeat surged with fear and adrenaline, and Harry realized he was disrupting the glamour; a hole was growing over his chest. He reached out again and coaxed the magic to lie still and respond. Slowly, it settled back into place. That was the way of things, his body dutifully and deceitfully reported to the wards. He had, for a moment, changed his mind and wanted to live, but that only shortened his life and made his heart labor all the more now, since it had briefly bounded.

Deeper and deeper into the deception he went, coaxing more wandless magic out of his body and into the cocoon. But he never quite lost track of two things: how ready he really was under the glamour, and the solid hilt of the knife that Scrimgeour had given him, lying beneath his right elbow.

The veil broke loose into slimy pieces that clung to Draco's face and shoulders. He spat them out, disgusted, knowing that they weren't really touching his body but sliding along the surface of his thoughts. One thing he had taught himself to remember when he was Psyche-Diving was that the mind would translate what it felt and saw into physical terms because it didn't have the language or the concepts for what was really happening.
That didn't make it any less disgusting, though.

The blue-green arch appeared and vanished again, fracturing into pieces behind the flying tar. Draco called up still more pride when he thought of drowning under a failed Memory Charm so close to his goal. He only needed to last a little longer, and bring down a little more water—

And then the last of the veil broke with a roaring, churning sound, and fell on top of him.

Draco couldn't breathe. He reminded himself brutally that he didn't need to, not here, and that the most important thing was not to cease his motions. He turned in circles, since that was the only thing he could do, now using his will like a knife. Saw and slice and cut, the slowest and most exhausting way of getting through any obstacle, but the thought that he had been in love with Harry Potter drove him now as effectively as his pride ever had.

Scratch and batter and tear and paddle, for what felt like hour after tiresome hour. Draco didn't know when the tar would end. He had to chew at one point, as the sensation of thick gore filling his mouth became too much for him. It was only an analogue, but a damn convincing one.

Blood dripped down his throat. Liquid sealed his eyelids shut. Strands of webbing yanked at his limbs like tentacles. Draco chewed and swallowed when he had no choice, spat it out when he could, and continued to move his hands and his legs.

And then he was through.

Draco shook his head, staring at the light, and turning to look beneath him, where the strands of the *Obliviate* were falling away, disintegrating like mist in the sun. Then he turned and reached for the panes of glittering stained glass in front of him, which represented the memories the charm had buried.

Light swarmed him.

Harry knew the moment when his deception had worked. A sharp tingling that did not come from his glamour ran over his body. He could feel the small hairs on his arms stand upright. Gooseflesh followed a moment later.
He nearly lost control of the glamour in his excitement, but he managed to tame the wandless magic instead. He had to lie there, looking like a corpse, at least until the moment that Scrimgeour bent over him to examine him for a cause of death.

It still took some moments; perhaps Scrimgeour was busy and had to make excuses to the people he was standing with. Harry was never under much doubt that he'd come, though. After all the effort he had gone to to make sure that his hands were not actually stained with Harry's blood, he would want to see the fulfillment of his plans.

Distantly, his hearing muted by the glamour, Harry heard the door open. Keeping himself still, and not letting his fingers clench into fists or his muscles tighten or any other betrayal run through his body, was the hardest thing he had ever done.

Scrimgeour came nearer slowly. Since he was so distrustful, Harry wasn't surprised that he would think of deception. Of course, he would also know that Harry fooling the wards wasn't likely.

Hell, your thinking of a clever plan, when he believes you to be unbalanced and suicidal, isn't likely, Draco announced in the back of his head.

Harry permitted himself to give an inner grin. He was doing this as much for Draco's sake as his own.

Breath raked through the glamour. Scrimgeour was bending over him, studying Harry's face intently.

Harry doubted he would get a better chance.

He *moved.*

Draco opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling of his study for a moment, his breath racing so that his vision wavered, his head moving slowly on the cushion he had chosen to cradle it. The memories had returned to him so fast that he needed to spend some time fastening them in place and remembering what had happened in what order.
And then he was consumed from the inside by incandescent *rage.*

He rose from the couch and Summoned a vase that stood on a table on the other side of the room, shattering it with his next spell. Bits of alabaster flew everywhere. Draco didn't care. He turned and Summoned one of the porcelain elephants his mother had spent a year collecting next, this time disintegrating it.

He whirled about the study, harming everything except his books. Chairs cracked down the middle. Table legs came spontaneously unattached from their tops. Shelves trembled and warped, bending into useless curlicues of wood. His walls bulged and rippled suspiciously; Draco managed to turn his attention away from them, but only because any damage to them might actually hurt the structural integrity of the Manor.

He had nearly—

He had nearly spent the rest of his life without the memory of Harry. Even if Scrimgeour had been stupid to erase the memories of him while leaving so many people about who could tell Draco the truth, Draco might still have decided the effort of breaking the Memory Charm was too dangerous. He *could* have ignored his own humiliation, and chosen to live with what he had. He might have returned to work at St. Mungo's. He might have been unaware of Harry's fate, unaware of the Cassandra Curse, unaware of the missing shard of his soul. Perhaps the inconsistencies would have bothered him occasionally, but he would have conjured justifications for them. The longer a Memory Charm endured, the stronger it grew—at least if it received reinforcement from its victim's mind, which Draco knew it would have in this case. He would have wanted too much not to think about Harry Potter leaving him.

So close.

But he remembered Harry now, and his fury made it painful to stop moving and stand with his eyes closed, trying to think up a plan that would hurt Scrimgeour.

That did not take long, in fact. So intense was his anger that only a few things would satisfy it, and several of them were beyond Draco's reach. There were a few potions he might have asked Severus for, but none of them was likely to be on hand, and Draco could not afford the time the brewing would take.

Harry could not afford the time the brewing would take.

So. He would choose a revenge that lay within his capabilities, and, more than that, within his expertise. He only need spend a bit of time looking up the specifics in his books, and then he would create a plan to enter the Ministry. He did not know where Scrimgeour had put Harry, but it was early afternoon on a Wednesday.*He* would certainly be at the Ministry.

And—

Draco felt his lips curl slightly. It might be that he could solve two of his problems at once, if he

planned this right.

Remain where you are, Harry. Remember your promise. I'm coming.

Scrimgeour was a trained Auror, and no fool. The moment Harry broke the glamour, jabbed his elbow down, and flipped the knife into his hand, he began moving himself, struggling to bring his wand to bear on Harry's face.
But Harry was younger than Scrimgeour, insanely determined, and did not have a bad leg. He grabbed Scrimgeour's right hand, which held the wand, and bent two of his fingers backwards to snapping point, even as he braced the knife against his wrist and began to cut in. The pain was too much. Scrimgeour cried out and dropped the wand. Harry half-whirled, his body looping like a dancer's, snatching the wand from the floor at the same moment as his knife continued to cut further.

Scrimgeour scrambled away from him like a crab. And then Harry was on his feet and holding the wand out, as well as the dripping knife. It was the knife that Scrimgeour looked at first, and Harry snorted as he figured out why. There were several illegal but highly effective spells that could be performed with an enemy's blood.

It's typical that he thinks I'd do that.

Harry cast a Silencing Charm on Scrimgeour, so he couldn't call for help, and then shut and locked the door with a small wand motion. He doubted Scrimgeour would have told any of his companions the truth about where he was going, so there should be at least a few minutes' grace period.

"Now," he said, as he Body-Bound his enemy and stood above him, powerful for the first time in fourteen months, "you and I are going to have a little talk."

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Chapter: 20

Thank you again for all the reviews!

I intend to update this story until I finish it, at Chapter 24, which should be on Halloween.

Chapter Twenty—Having Words

Draco drew the book slowly from its place at the back of the shelf. Then he cast a small cutting spell on his finger, and squeezed a drop of blood out, careful to drip it precisely on the lock of the book. Certain—things—would happen if the blood landed anywhere else.

But on the lock, the spells that guarded the thing could tell he was a Malfoy, rightful heir of the wizards who had first locked it. There was a small groan, and the lock uncurled into a dark head that vaguely resembled a dragon's. For a moment, piercing green eyes burned in that head, staring into Draco's so sternly that they reminded him of Harry's, though a Harry with more strength than he had ever seen.

The eyes closed, the head bowed, and the smoke faded away, leaving Draco alone with a book that might have seemed ordinary to someone who had just entered the room.

Draco sat down with the book, and flipped slowly through the pages. Lucius had taught him to read his great-grandfather Septimus's handwriting while he was still a child. Even then, of course, his father had warned Draco solemnly of the dangers inherent in a book like this, but he had deemed it necessary knowledge for his son.

The pages felt slightly oily as he flicked past them. He was glad he had never had the habit of licking his fingers to turn pages when reading. It would be a bad habit to have with any Dark Arts books, not simply this one.

Great-grandfather Septimus Malfoy had been perhaps the most brilliant wizard of the line, and one of the strongest; Lucius had said once that he had come close to rivaling the Dark Lord himself. He had also had a keen interest in Muggles. To him, they were still an inferior life form, but some of their philosophers and scientists had come up with theories that might become useful spells with a little adaptation. He was aware, Lucius had told Draco, that Muggles used logic more often than wizards, not having the wild creativity magic needed, and he looked on it as one of the few services they could provide directly to their betters (Muggle-hunting and the taking of Muggle slaves having been outlawed by Septimus's time).

Draco finally lighted on the page he was looking for, and leaned back against the couch with a slow smile.

Sepitmus's handwriting explained that his research had uncovered the existence of a Muggle philosopher named Descartes. Among other, less interesting ideas, he had proposed the idea that the mind was the seat of all consciousness, the surest way of knowing that one existed. Septimus had created a spell that drew on the idea.

Draco's fingers ghosted over the name, in larger letters, beneath the introductory note. *A Spell to Sever the Mind from the Body.*

"I know that you don't believe me," Harry said flatly. "Still. That's not of much concern to me when I can force you to tell me the truth."

His hand clenched on the stolen wand, and for a moment he was horribly tempted to simply curse Scrimgeour, in hopes that that might force him to take back the Cassandra Curse. But he

shook his head and restrained himself. The wards on the door might react in alarm to that sort of magic, and with Harry's luck, that would alert the Aurors.

Besides, he didn't think he could be frightening enough to force Scrimgeour to take back the curse. The books he had read on it had emphasized how, most of the time, the caster simply could not be persuaded. Every good reason out of the mouth of the victim would sound like a lie, after all.

Harry negated the Silencing Spell on Scrimgeour with a wave of his wand and crouched down to look him in the eye. The stare he received in return was very nearly mad. Locked in a room with the man he hated and feared more than any other…yes, Harry thought he could see why Scrimgeour was teetering on the brink of insanity.

"Why did you do it?" he asked quietly. "Why that form of magic and no other? And why did you use Dark Arts?"

Scrimgeour's body stiffened. Harry could only imagine what nefarious purpose he thought was behind the questions. But after a moment, perhaps reminded by Harry's lazy twirling of the wand that he was at his foe's mercy and had no way to move right now, his jaw relaxed and he answered.

"It was the only way I could protect the wizarding world from you," he said. "You should have seen the adoring glances you received. Anyone would have followed you anywhere. You could have become Minister without effort. And I wouldn't *have* it. You would have made a worse than evil Minister. You would have made an *incompetent*one. But if you were always lying, you could never make the speeches that you would need to get ahead in wizarding politics, and you would be too busy fighting your own battles to worry about taking over my position."

Harry closed his eyes. The idea that his life had been sacrificed for nothing more than one man's paranoid delusions was—

The truth, he thought. *You knew it all along. You just wanted him to say it, so that any disbelief could die.*

The fury that rushed through him had no equivalent in his experience. By the time he put Voldemort down, it was akin to putting down a mad dog. Voldemort had every reason to hate him, every reason to act like the incarnation of evil.

Scrimgeour had nowhere near the justification.

But Harry restrained himself sharply when he thought of cursing Scrimgeour. That was not him. His time under the Cassandra Curse could not make him act so desperately; nothing could.

Draco undoubtedly would have tried for some Dark Arts spell that would cripple Scrimgeour with pain for life. But as matters had fallen out, Draco no longer had the right to punish the

Minister. Harry did. And he would do it in his own way.

He aimed his wand directly at Scrimgeour again, who blinked warily at him.

"You will lean out this door," Harry said quietly. "You will not shout for help, because if you do I will destroy your spine." The pallor of Scrimgeour's face said he thought Harry would do something even worse than that. "You will summon Lila Ambernight, and we will wait here for her."

"What do you mean to do?" Scrimgeour whispered.

Harry smiled. "You're going to swear an Unbreakable Vow, Minister," he chirped. "Doesn't that sound like fun?"

Draco leaned back against the couch and read carefully through the description of Septimus's spell. Though he had remained impressed with its cruelty and cleverness for years, he had not read the description in more than a decade, and he wanted to be sure that it really was the ideal tool for his revenge.

This spell leaves the body alive and able to follow simple commands, but severs the mind from it. The victim will obey whatever orders are given to him by the spellcaster in the first few minutes after the incantation is spoken. His mind is trapped in unfeeling flesh and utterly unable to communicate with anyone, even by means of Pensieves or Legilimency.

The spell is progressive, unless the spellcaster remains by the victim's side and arrests its progress. It slowly takes away the area of the brain that belongs to the victim still, confining him in a smaller and smaller space. In the end, he will be left in a cell of his own memories and impulses, while alien thoughts—provided and suggested by the spellcaster himself, or by the repetitive actions that the spellcaster sets him to—stream through his brain. Madness is certain, but death cannot come about unless the spellcaster suggests it do so.

The victim will have time to learn every one of his own thoughts and whether Descartes was right to call the mind the seat of existence, as the spell gradually removes all physical senses but sight and pain. The victim can still experience any hurt inflicted on him, and observe what happens about him, but feel no sexual pleasures, nor taste any food, nor make out voices.

It is important to note that the spell can be arrested once cast, but not reversed.

Draco nodded slowly. Yes. This was the spell he wanted. It mimicked the confinement that Scrimgeour had tried to force on Harry, while removing the consolation of suicide that would have been Scrimgeour's preferred method for ending Harry's life. And it gave Draco absolute control over the Minister's future movements. *He* was the one who would say how long he had to live trapped like that, and how soon his mind would cease to be his own but for one small corner.

It was elegant, Draco thought, the perfect payback not only for the Cassandra Curse but for the fact that the Minister had tried to take Draco's memories of Harry away.

Draco's fingers tightened on the edge of the book, and he winced and held the bleeding one away just in time. He could not let his rage make him careless.

He glanced at the page. He would take ten minutes or so to make sure that his pronunciation of the incantation was perfect.

Then he would stand on the edge of the property and call to Batty.

Batty had been a perfectly devoted house-elf, having adopted the Malfoy pride as her own pride, and the family as her children. It was the reason Draco had not hesitated to exile her. She loved him too much to attempt any retaliation.

She would welcome the chance to come back to his service. And Draco would accept her, at the price of several carefully worded orders—

And her Apparating him into the Ministry.

Scrimgeour spoke carefully out the door. Harry held the wand to his back all the while, and whispered what to say into his ear. He was grateful for the thickness of the wards now; their colors, still active as the door was barely cracked, prevented anyone from seeing how the Minister was bound or that Harry stood behind him.

"Yes. Lila Ambernight. Summon her at once. I need to consult with her on a matter regarding the prisoner."

The Auror who had answered Scrimgeour's call, the same one who had brought Harry his meal earlier, sounded bewildered. He was a young man with brown hair and honey-colored eyes and a terribly earnest expression that reminded Harry of Percy Weasley. Briefly, Harry felt sorry for him. "But—sir, really? I thought that only a few of us had permission to approach the prisoner until he returned to St. Mungo's—"

Harry nudged Scrimgeour.

"That's an *order,* Hollis!" Scrimgeour's voice skirled up the scale a few notes. Harry could hardly blame him. Visions of what Harry would do next, based more on his own predilections than Harry's, had to be cascading through his head. "You know that Ambernight was working the Potter case when he vanished from St. Mungo's. I want to see her *right now!*"

"Yes, sir," said Hollis hastily, and retreated down the corridor. Harry didn't relax. He nudged at Scrimgeour until he stepped away from the door and sat down in the middle of the floor. Then Harry Body-Bound him again and stood warily watching.

Lila was currently the only person in the Ministry who knew the truth about him—or who knew the truth and would help him, Harry amended, remembering that Eugenie knew but almost certainly didn't care. She would serve as the Bonder for their Unbreakable Vow. And then Harry had hopes that she could fetch him his wand and escort him out of the Ministry.

I'll ask her to tell them that she's taking me to St. Mungo's, Harry thought, pacing back and forth as his brain whirled furiously. If this was the way that Draco felt all the time, Harry wondered how he lived with it. *I don't think anyone but Scrimgeour knows the state of negotiations with them. And a private owl could always have come in the meantime, agreeing that they'd let me back in.*

Quick footsteps sounded just beyond the door. Harry cracked it again, and caught Lila's eye. She stopped Hollis, who was following her closely, with one hand on his arm, and murmured something. Hollis looked disappointed, but Harry knew full well how commanding Lila could be when she wanted to. In the end, the other Auror turned around and trailed back up the corridor in a dispirited manner, while Lila came on alone.

Harry pushed open the door and stepped back to let her in. Lila brushed past him—and then paused, staring at the Minister sitting in the middle of the floor.

Harry could see her eyes flash and narrow as she slammed the pieces of the puzzle together. Her jaw tightened, and then she knelt down before Scrimgeour in one graceful movement.

"Never," she said, voice raw with passion, "did I think you would descend to this."

Harry grinned and stepped back, folding his arms. It was almost worth knowing that he couldn't punish Scrimgeour worse than this, to watch the expression of stunned disbelief cover the Minister's face.

"You cast the Cassandra Curse on Potter," said Lila. Her fingers hooked around the edges of her knees. "You used Dark Arts, just like the wizards who took my sister from me." She shook her head, and her eyes glowed with the kind of ferocity that Harry was accustomed to seeing in the eyes of a hawk before it dived. "How could you think that I would remain loyal to you if I found out?"

Scrimgeour made a little sighing sound in his throat. It was the most he was capable of, since Harry had Body-Bound him. Nor did he see the need to unbind him, at least not until they were ready to take the Unbreakable Vow. Scrimgeour had had his chances at justification and excusing himself. Harry would take no chances with him, up until the moment when he escaped from Scrimgeour's control forever.

"Lila," he said, and drew her attention. "I don't think I can call up enough of a threat to make him reverse the spell, not with what I can threaten—"

"Then let me do it," Lila said softly, and slipped her wand free from her sleeve. Harry took a moment to make sure he had locked the door and, with it, the wards. It wouldn't do for anyone to intrude at the moment and see one of the Aurors holding her wand on a helpless superior. Luckily, the door was indeed shut. "I do not mind using stern spells on those who practice the Dark Arts."

Harry reached out and gently took her wrist. "I wouldn't let you corrupt your soul that way," he said, when she met his eyes. "And I'm sure that your sister wouldn't want you to pay that price, either, simply in pursuit of vengeance."

Lila nodded. "Then I promise to dedicate myself to telling people the truth," she said in a resonant voice, "and working on it until the Minister admits that he wronged you."

"You'll have an enemy if you do that," Harry said. "Eugenie Figg-Warwick, the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, also knows the truth, but she sold us to Scrimgeour." He jerked his head at the Minister. "And he *Obliviated* Draco. I know nothing about reversing Memory Charms."

"It cannot be done, from what I know." Lila's eyes flashed. "At least that explains why he answered none of my letters." She glanced at Scrimgeour. "And what will you do to prevent him from chasing after you?"

"An Unbreakable Vow," said Harry.

Lila smiled, a pitiless expression. "That suits me."

"You will be careful?" Harry asked her, even as he stepped in front of Scrimgeour and freed his right hand and his jaw from the Body-Bind. Harry knelt then and took Scrimgeour's right hand in his. The man glared. Harry ignored him. He had no choice now. It was the only taste Harry could ever give him of what he had experienced under the Cassandra Curse. "About Eugenie pursuing you?"

"What makes you think that I have ever been afraid of danger?"

Harry had to admit that was the thing most resembling a promise he was likely to get from her. He shook his head, but asked formally, "Will you be our Bonder?"

Lila gripped her wand in answer and marched over to stand beside them.

Harry met Scrimgeour's eyes. They shone with trapped fury now. Harry shrugged. He had once thought he would always be moved by the sight of someone else's suffering, but the past year had taught him to put up with it in his friends. Perhaps it had changed him more than he had realized in other ways, too.

"Rufus Scrimgeour," he said, "swear not to hurt Draco Malfoy in any way, direct or indirect, or

encourage others to hurt him in any way, direct or indirect."

Scrimgeour's jaw worked for a moment. Harry watched his eyes darting, and knew he was figuring options. With no wand, however, and the rest of his body frozen, he had no chance, and he seemed to know it. He was a clever political thinker, but it took him time to come up with brilliant plans. Harry only had to think on the nine years it had taken him to find the Cassandra Curse, and how many holes were in place with his leaving the knife with Harry, to know that.

"I so swear," he grumbled at last. A tendril of fire shot out of Lila's wand to encircle both their hands.

Harry nodded. "You will swear not to hurt anyone with the name of Weasley, or Hermione Granger, or anyone married into or associated with the family, directly or indirectly, or encourage anyone else to hurt them, directly or indirectly, and swear the same for Lila Ambernight."

Scrimgeour audibly ground his teeth this time. Harry felt a moment's surge of contempt for the man. Hating and fearing Harry was one thing, but had he *really* wanted to hurt the Weasleys simply because they were Harry's friends? Even though they were as much victims of the Cassandra Curse as anyone else?

Harry decided that he would think Scrimgeour had wanted them as potential hostages for his good behavior, and let it go at that.

"I so swear," the Minister said at last. A second tendril of fire joined the first.

Harry nodded one more time. "And you will swear not to pursue me, directly or indirectly, or encourage anyone else to pursue me, directly or indirectly, or to interfere in my life again by *any* means."

Scrimgeour squeezed his eyes shut. "If it happens and I do not know it—"

"Then you will die," Harry said, and heard Lila laugh low in her throat. "So you had better make sure ahead of time that nothing you do will hurt me."

Scrimgeour bowed his head like a stag striving to protect his throat from wolves, and spat, "I do so swear."

The third strand of fire, and Harry felt the magic of the vow settle into place around them like a coat of armor. He stood and nodded to Lila. "I'll need your escort out of the Ministry," he said, "to find my wand and to get me beyond the wards. We can pretend that St. Mungo's asked for me back, and that Scrimgeour summoned you to serve as Bonder for *my* Unbreakable Vow that I wouldn't try to commit suicide anymore."

"And what about me?" Scrimgeour demanded nastily.

Harry smiled at him. "Why, Minister, you'll escort us, of course. And let us depart with your blessings."

"Batty will do anything for Master Draco. Batty loves Master Draco. Batty will never hurt Master Harry Potter again, not when Batty knows now that Master Draco needs him."

Draco waited, impatiently. He knew that interrupting Batty's declarations of eternal devotion would only cause her to apologize for misinterpreting his wishes and start them all over again. He clenched his hands together behind his back and waited for the moment when she stopped banging her head against the ground outside the Manor and stared up at him expectantly, awaiting his orders.

"You will have a final test," he said. "You're still on probation, Batty. I don't trust you completely. Do this task flawlessly, and then I will, and accept you into my binding again, and take back the gift of the cloak. Do you understand?"

Batty nodded frantically, ears flopping around her. "Batty understands. Batty loves Master Draco. Master Draco is such a *kind* master—"

Her voice was less frantic than before, so Draco had no qualms about interrupting her. He bent down in front of her and took her hands. "I know that house-elves can Apparate to many places that normal wizards can't," he said. "You can pass through wards, can't you? Even wards on the most guarded places?"

Batty nodded proudly, her ears bouncing and her eyes rolling wildly.

"Then you will Apparate me to the Ministry, for your test," said Draco. "And you will take me directly to Harry Potter's side. Through any protections in the way, through any spells. You will make sure that it is the *real* Harry Potter, and not an impostor under an illusion or someone using Polyjuice Potion. Do you understand? That is my task for you, Batty, a task most difficult."

Batty gave a quiet little whimper, but said nothing about the impossibility of the task, though Draco knew it would be hard even for a house-elf as old and experienced as she was. Her hands reached out and clasped his firmly, the fingers tightening like rings. Draco closed his eyes, because he wasn't sure that he wanted to see the way the world around them would change during house-elf Apparition. Normal wizarding technique was bad enough.

The world *warped*.

His mother had told him once that house-elves made use of out-of-the-way places, rubbish, discarded bits of rooms and stairwells and corridors that ordinary wizards never saw. Draco had not realized that that included even their magic. It felt as if they were skipping wildly, like stones bouncing off water, through all the places that Apparition normally never touched. A sound struck his ears, a baby crying, and then the sound was ripped away to be replaced with that of

water falling, and then that was gone and there was the quiet, motionless hush Draco was familiar with from hospital corridors crowded with dying patients.

And then a tugging sensation blossomed in his chest, and purring filled his ears. Draco opened his eyes, recognizing the pull of the soul-bond.

Harry, Lila Ambernight, and the Minister stood in front of him, all crowded into the back of a lift to make room for his unexpected arrival. They were also all staring in shock.

Draco smiled.

"You did well," he told Batty, and stroked her head with one hand, a touch that would mean more to her than extended praise. He Body-Bound Scrimgeour, just in case. His hatred and fury roared up at the sight of the man, but right now there was someone, and something, much more important.

"Love," he said to Harry, and held out his arms.

Harry was trembling, his left hand spasming open, his right barely maintaining a grip on a wand that didn't look like his own. Then, perhaps reassured that this *was* the real Draco by the contentment of the soul-bond, he let out a shrieking cry, half-triumphant and half-painful, and flung himself into Draco's arms.

Draco embraced him hard enough that Harry winced; he seemed to have something wrong with his lower back. Draco bowed his head and inhaled the scent of Harry's hair. The memories had prepared him for it, he thought, but there was nothing like this, nothing like holding the real thing.

"Stop the lift, Batty," he murmured to his devoted house-elf.

"Yes, Master Draco!"

They jerked to a halt a moment later. Draco held Harry tighter to him, and ran one finger along the nape of his neck, locating the bite mark.

"I told you that I would come for you," he murmured. "Didn't I?"

"I kept my promise," Harry said back, in a voice so small Draco almost lost it behind the Minister's panicked breathing.

"So you did." Draco's mouth watered with the urge to mark Harry again, but he settled for kissing him on the forehead and then turning him so that he stood safely in the crook of his arm. He didn't intend to let go of Harry until they were back in the Manor, and then only for as long as it took to get him into bed.

He drew his wand, and smiled slightly when he watched the panicked widening of Scrimgeour's eyes.

"*You*," he said. It was all that he really needed to say.

Almost as powerful as the scent of his Harry was the scent of his enemy's fear.

Draco opened his mouth to speak the incantation that would sever the Minister's mind from his body.

And then Lila Ambernight was between him and Scrimgeour, her wand out, her eyes utterly fearless. "I will not let you use Dark Arts," she said.

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Chapter: 21

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-One—Doing and Undoing Damage

Harry's whole body was twitching.

He could feel his heart thumping irregularly, his breath speeding up, his muscles trembling with the effort of holding himself back instead of simply exploding in joy. And his soul was dancing to the beat, as well; he thought he could feel the domes of bright blue-green Draco had told him about pulsing like moths' wings.

He had never had anyone whom he loved like this. He had never had anyone make him a promise and then keep it under such desperate circumstances. He had never had this kind of *belief* in another person flood him with gold, the sensation of opening his eyes after a long nightmare and seeing the sunrise through the bedroom window.

That was what gave him the strength to reach up, take Draco's wrist, and shake his head gently when Draco looked at him.

"I don't know what you were about to do," he said quietly. "But I saw the expression on your face. You would have cursed him with something that would darken your soul. I don't want that to happen. You have a beautiful soul, Draco. I don't want you to ruin it."

Draco snarled and said, "You don't understand. You're mine."

Harry cocked his head. "I'm not sure what that has to do with it." Because he had been forced to attune himself to the other two people in the lift, he could feel their shifting moods: Lila nodding in stern approval, Scrimgeour looking from face to face and daring to hope that he might get out of this unscathed after all.

That won't happen, Harry thought. *On the other hand, I won't let Draco destroy himself to destroy Scrimgeour.*

Then Draco's hand lifted to cup his cheek, and Harry forgot everything else for a moment. He tilted his head back to see Draco's eyes shining like rain running down Muggle windows, terribly beautiful and terribly bright.

"No one else has ever been mine like you have," Draco murmured to him. "I've never loved anyone else like I've loved you. I *have* to take vengeance for you, and it has to be the most horrible vengeance I can conceive. I must—" And he shook his head and fell silent, either unable to say the words in front of other people or unwilling to say them aloud at all.

Luckily for him, Harry could fill in the words. *I must do this because this is the way I show love.*

"There are other ways," Harry said softly, and kissed Draco. He felt a shiver run through the other man in the moment before his mouth opened and his tongue brushed against Harry's. Harry smoothed a hand down his spine, delighting in the play of muscles, in the flex of a whole and unharmed spine. That Draco was *healthy* made him happy to an excess of giddiness. "For example, threaten him enough to get him to remove the Cassandra Curse—that's something I can't do, since he cast it out of fear of me, and he won't reverse it just because of more fear—and then we can talk about a different form of vengeance."

Draco was all but vibrating under his hands. Harry laughed softly into his frustrated lover's mouth. "Draco," he said, and his voice was soft and dreamy. *Let him see, if he can, that I don't have any objection to being his, just to some of the ways he expresses it.* "For my sake, do something else."

Draco's rage had not calmed. If anything, it increased as Harry held him and spoke to him, utterly open, utterly relaxed. *This* was what Scrimgeour would have made him forget, would have taken away from him. That deserved *punishment*. The punishment should be permanent and neverending. Harry's little ethical objections, and whatever Lila might say, were so many straws in a whirlwind.

But then Harry asked for that.

Draco licked his lips. He knew that he couldn't get away with this, not without hurting Harry. If he tried to use the curse on Scrimgeour, Lila would attack him, and he would have to hex or *Obliviate* her. And that would hurt Harry, who never wanted anyone to suffer.

It was just that Scrimgeour needed to suffer *so much.*

Maybe he could reason his way out of this.

"The spell I wanted to use is not precisely Dark Arts," he murmured to Harry, and let their tongues brush again. Harry's eyes widened, the depths in them brimming with excitement. *Good. He's not exactly rational when he's this full of lust.* "My great-grandfather invented it. That counts for something, doesn't it? The Ministry has to recognize and label a spell for it to become Dark Arts—"

"It does not," Lila interrupted, her voice deep and filled with steel. "The Dark Arts are those spells intended *primarily* to cause pain and harm to other human beings."

Draco hissed and glared at her. *Why did the woman who sees the world in black and white have to choose this moment to develop a complicated morality?*

"I will not let you use it, whatever it was," said Lila, and her hand tightened on her wand until Draco could see her knuckles straining against the skin.

"You don't even know what the spell is meant to do," said Draco, and gave her his most charming smile. It physically hurt, because he thought that expression really should have been reserved for Harry. "I haven't described it to you."

"No," Lila said, and for a moment she smiled back. It was, Draco thought, the kind of smile a guardian Crup would probably give. "But I, too, saw the expression on your face when you thought you would be unopposed."

Draco shook his head and started to argue, but Harry touched his hand again, and Draco turned away again, stooping solicitously over the man he was in love with. He tried to convey to Lila with the expression on his face *this* time, and the motion of his body, that she would never get anything like this from him. From the looks of it, Lila was profoundly unimpressed.

"His greatest fear was that I was going to take his political power away from him," Harry murmured. "So let's make that happen."

Draco blinked. "You want to become a politician? I'm sorry to tell you this, love, but you'd be terrible at it. Of course, with me behind you—"

"Draco, don't start plotting now," Harry said, though his voice was flavored with laughter the way cider was flavored with apples. "I meant that you should make him reverse the Cassandra Curse, and then cast a spell that ensures everyone knows what he did and why he did it. Showing everyone the truth should be quite enough."

"Ah," Lila said, sounding pleased. "You are adopting my plan after all."

Draco licked his lips and took a slow, deep breath. "I might be able to live with that," he said. "But even *that* wouldn't necessarily prevent him from coming after you again."

Harry chuckled. "I *have* made him take an Unbreakable Vow not to hurt you or any of my friends or interfere in my life again by any means. Give me credit for *some* clever and original thought, if you would."

Draco clenched his teeth and looked quickly back and forth between them. It seemed that this was the best he would get. Arguing too much longer would only firm Harry's stance and perhaps lose him his chance at vengeance altogether.

"Very well," he said. "But may I choose the truth-telling spell?"

Harry gave him a cautious look. But Lila nodded with her eyes squinted shut. "There is no truth-telling spell that is Dark Arts," she said, as if that should be the one circumstance that Draco should consider in choosing it.

Draco smiled and stepped forwards, spinning his wand between his fingers, fixing his attention on the Minister's face. "And in the meantime," he said, "I *do* get to frighten him into reversing the Cassandra Curse."

Harry shook his head, amused and wondering just how Draco had managed to turn his disappointment at not being allowed to use his Dark Arts curse into what sounded like keen anticipation of the reduced punishment.

Draco lowered his head to Scrimgeour's, and began to whisper. Harry strained his ears, but couldn't overhear what he said no matter how hard he listened. From Lila's frown, she was having the same problem.

Scrimgeour's face grew steadily paler as Draco talked on. Harry folded his arms and smiled. He couldn't pretend to any love for the Minister. If Draco *could* have managed intense vengeance without damaging his soul, then Harry would have agreed to it.

It was a wonderful feeling, knowing just what he did and didn't care about.

Draco finally stepped away from Scrimgeour, and the Minister nodded and said, with spittle flying from his lips at the force of the words, "I'll do it. Give me back my wand, Potter. I—I'll remove the Cassandra Curse."

"What did you say to him?" Harry asked, even as he reluctantly passed Scrimgeour's wand back over. They still hadn't retrieved his holly wand, which Scrimgeour had said was in a private office on the fifth floor.

"Only described the curse that I *would* have used, if our good friend here hadn't prevented me,"

said Draco, and bowed his head in Lila's direction. "It made him—quite cooperative."

"I didn't know it was *that* bad," Harry murmured, trying not to tense up as Scrimgeour pointed the wand at him. But he couldn't interfere in his life by any means, or he would die. He could only *remove* his interference in Harry's life. Harry was fairly sure that Scrimgeour wanted to remain alive to pursue his political career more than he wanted the satisfaction of seeing Harry suffer under the Cassandra Curse. "It's a good thing that I stopped you from using it."
Draco tossed his head. "If I had been allowed to," he said, "you would have seen how much you matter to me. I love you, Harry."

Hearing the unabashed tone of affection in his voice made Harry reach up and clutch his arm. "You've already done more for me than I have any right to ask for," he said.

Draco's face, oddly, reflected alarm at that. "No," he said. "You should ask for *more*. I want to do everything that I possibly can to make your life better and better, Harry. If you don't ask for things, how will I know I'm doing that?"

Harry bit his lips in an effort to hold in the snort, he really did, but it made itself known anyway. Draco stepped back and gave him an offended look.

"Sorry," Harry muttered. "But just being here next to me works, Draco. And—"

He felt a tingling flow of magic wash over him just then, and the hum of a spell that had endured so long he didn't notice it anymore stopped. He blinked, then said, because it was the most immediate test he could think of, "My name is Severus Snape."

And the lie emerged from his mouth untwisted, unforced into truth by the magic of the Cassandra Curse.

Lila nodded in satisfaction.

"Oh, Harry," Draco said, his voice breathy. "If Severus could hear you taking his name in vain, he would *not* be pleased."

And then he crushed Harry to the wall of the lift and crushed the breath out of him with one enormous, hungry kiss. Harry returned it, feeling his heat rise in a way that it never had when he kissed Ginny.

I suppose I'm not straight anymore.

I can't wait to tell him.

Draco kissed Harry until the temptation to simply drop him on the floor and fuck the life out of him was almost too strong to resist. Then he broke loose with a gasp and turned to Scrimgeour.

The man was clutching his wand as though he thought he would get to use it on one of them after all, but it would never happen. Batty was keeping an eye on him, as Draco had known she would, and muttering soft threats about what would happen should the Minister hurt "her master's Harry."

"Now," Draco said. "I have chosen the truth-telling spell that I want to use." He raised his own wand, and felt the hunger for vengeance thrumming through his body like flame. "Not widely used because it's not usually terribly effective, and more embarrassing than hurtful. But now? Now, it will be all those things."

Lila's eyes widened, and she chuckled. The Minister simply frowned. Draco sneered. *Of course, he would not have paid much attention to spells that enabled others to hear his voice speaking truth. He is interested only in the absolute perversions of free will, as exemplified by the Cassandra Curse.*

"What spell do you want to use?" Harry asked, bright curiosity in his voice.

Draco caught Harry close to him and kissed the top of his head. He could forgive Harry for not knowing, because Aurors were in general not supposed to be as educated as the Minister of Magic, and in any case Harry was just reeling from the unexpected lifting of the Cassandra Curse. "A spell that causes a misty image of the victim to appear to everyone he has ever had contact with," he said. "He confesses the truth about whatever crime the spellcaster chooses. In most cases, as I said, it's more embarrassing than effective. Few wizards have large circles of close friends, and of their acquaintances, few will care that a relative stranger is telling them he cheated on his wife or stole a few Galleons. But with the Minister of Magic having contact with so many people, and with the crime being something like the casting of the Cassandra Curse on the living icon of the war with the Dark Lord…"

Harry chuckled into his shoulder, but did say, "Could you not call me the living icon of the war with the Dark Lord? I *hate* that kind of thing."

Draco had deliberately chosen a title so ridiculous he thought no one would ever have used it, but he didn't comment. Harry would have to get used to being called worse pet names than that by the time Draco was through with him and had reduced him to a pile of shivering jelly.

"Do not do this," Scrimgeour said, and though Draco knew he was frightened, his voice was still powerful and resonant. "I can give you many other things that you want. I have already made my promises never to hurt anyone Potter cares about again. Why would you want to take more from me?"

Draco stared at the man. Scrimgeour stared back, the practiced politician's look, confident, with the fear mostly hidden. He seemed to think that he could still bargain or trick his way out of this after all.

Draco, for a moment, let go of the fury that he'd been tamping carefully down inside since the

moment when he recovered his memories. Scrimgeour looked into the eyes of the man who had destroyed several of his own possessions and could not care less, though possessions were wealth and property to a Malfoy.

That broke the mask, at least. Scrimgeour flinched and looked away.

"*That* is why," Draco said, and his words emerged only a little lower than the cry of some ravenous beast. "Because you kidnapped my lover, murdered my memories of my time with him, cost him his friendships, and made him nearly commit suicide. This is *too good* for you, but for the sake of others—not you—I will allow it. If we were alone, you know that you would become my slave in a worse way than any Imperius Curse would allow for."

The Minister said nothing.

Draco lifted his wand and cast the Truth Reflected spell.

He felt the energy of the magic speeding away from him, multiplying itself many times over as it realized how many reflections there would have to be. Thousands of people in the British wizarding world would have had contact with the Minister of Magic at one time or another, if only briefly at Ministry functions or official celebrations and speeches. Further and further away the cone spread, growing in size as it traveled.

The first reflections appeared in front of them, three Scrimgeours explaining in calm, simple terms that they had cast the Cassandra Curse, a spell which forced the victim to speak truth but have everyone else hear what he said as a lie, on Harry Potter. They explained, also, that they had done it to further their political ambitions and prevent Potter from becoming a threat to their positions. The sheerest and baldest explanations were always the best; Draco had heard of poor results when someone tried to force the Truth Reflected spell to carry the nuances of a delicate situation.

Simple—and utterly devastating. Once an hour was past, Scrimgeour's political ambitions would be effectively dead. Draco knew the Wizengamot had the power to try someone, even a person as highly placed as the Minister, who used a Dark Arts spell of this kind. And Harry's enormous and obsessive group of followers would demand no less as reparations for their hero.

Draco took almost as much pleasure in the thought that, right now, Harry's friends would be hearing the truth from the Minister's own mouth. He imagined Weasley collapsed back into his chair, face slack with astonishment. He imagined Granger weeping.

A surge of vicious satisfaction went through him. He curled himself close to Harry and stroked a hand through his hair. Harry's friends had been curse victims, yes, but Draco couldn't help but think they should still have served Harry better. The friendship that couldn't survive something like the Cassandra Curse was no friendship at all.

"Gentlemen."

Draco blinked and looked at Lila, startled. If nothing else, he had never expected that she would address him that way.

Lila smiled. "I am perfectly happy to remain with the Minister and explain the truth to anyone who shows up," she said. "I believe I know the room where the Minister has locked your wand, Mr. Potter. If you would prefer to retrieve it and leave the Ministry for now, I can deal with the publicity."

Draco raised an eyebrow. She must have seen his twitching hands and the possessive spark in his eyes.

Maybe she does have some modicum of sensitivity after all.

Harry wouldn't have believed that coming to Malfoy Manor could have felt like coming home.

But what other home did he have, now? Even with the curse gone and Scrimgeour's crime confessed to Ron and Hermione and Ginny, his place with them would never be the same again. He couldn't simply return to his flat, not when the last thing anyone knew he'd tried to commit suicide and then run around the country like a madman—

Harry gave his head a firm shake. No. He was not going to think about how much he had lost because of the curse, not right now. This was a day of victory, in more ways than one and despite Draco wanting to use whatever curse it was that had made Scrimgeour pale. He intended to share that victory with Draco.

He started to say that, but Draco said in a strangled voice, "I'm sorry, Harry, I just—have to—" And then he turned Harry around to face the wall next to the hearth they'd come out of after Flooing from the fifth floor of the Ministry, and closed his teeth on the nape of his neck.

Harry gasped, his head falling back, and then forwards as Draco nudged impatiently at him to get his hair out of the way. His entire body writhed, and his erection was so immediate it almost hurt. Feeling Draco renew the mark that had sustained him in the cell was—intensely intimate, but also intensely erotic. Harry had enjoyed the gesture before, but it hadn't been anything special to him. Now it was. He could feel his body's craving for more.

Draco closed his teeth down a little harder, then drew back again. Harry knew he hadn't pierced the skin; Draco had explained that he preferred the dark coloring of a bruise to actual blood. But feeling him lick and nip and kiss, accenting the bruise further, made Harry nearly faint with desire. He let his head collapse onto his trembling arms, and surrendered to almost pure enjoyment.

At last Draco pulled him away from the wall and helped him onto a sofa. His hands never left Harry's body for long, whether they were pulling Harry around to face him or touching and

tangling with his fingers. Then he sat down in front of him and stared at him with eyes so full of passion that Harry blinked and looked away.

Draco's hand cupped his chin and turned his face back at once. "Oh, no, you don't," Draco whispered. "When you're everything to me, you don't get to pretend that you don't deserve this."

"I didn't think that," Harry whispered, though to himself he couldn't deny that that might have been a part of his averting his eyes. Recovered strength or not, one's self-esteem, flattened by a year under a curse, didn't recover because of a month of attention. "It's just too—intense. Like staring into the sun." With some difficulty, he met Draco's eyes again.

Draco looked pleased. And then that expression slid off his face, and he said, "I can't begin to imagine what you endured in your captivity, Harry. I'm sorry—"

"Not your fault." Harry reached up and cradled Draco's face, a section of his soul twisting even as the bond between them began to hum. It hurt to hear Draco saying things like that.

"This time, it was," Draco whispered. "I should have been warier of Eugenie, instead of just assuming that she would keep her side of the bargain. But I'm making a promise to you, Harry. From this moment on, I will never take chances with your safety again."

Harry opened his mouth, then shut it. He thought Draco had been about to say that he would never get hurt again, which wasn't a promise he could keep. But this one he probably could, and more than that, he had needed to say it, to feel that he had made up in some way for endangering Harry.

Even though his coming into the lift like that had been all the compensation Harry could have asked for.

"It's all right, Draco," he whispered. "I forgive you."

Draco closed his eyes in sheer relief.

"As for the cell," Harry said, "it was hard, yes, especially knowing at the time that I'd never see you again." Draco's fingers tightened convulsively on his. "But I decided to live fairly quickly. The love we had shared still existed in our mind, and I remembered, even if no one else did, that I had promised you not to hurt myself. And I was ready to live off that memory for the rest of my life, if I had to."

Draco's eyes slowly fluttered open. "Live," he said, as if the words were foreign to him. "Off—a memory."

"Yes," Harry said, wondering about the tone in Draco's voice. "I know that I probably should have held more faith you would break the Memory Charm, but I didn't know what kind of information you would receive after the fact, and—"

Draco moved. Abruptly, Harry found himself lying on his back on the couch, with Draco on top of him. He felt his legs open of their own accord, cradling Draco's hips. Draco seemed too concentrated on his face to notice.

"You have no idea what that means to me," Draco whispered.

"Perhaps not," said Harry. "But I think I could." The desire and the trust had brewed together inside to fill him like some perfect potion. "Why don't you show me?"

Draco licked his lips. "You mean—"

"Fuck me," Harry said. "Make love to me." He arched his back, trying to press his chest closer to Draco's, wondering how to explain his desperation. "It—I already trust you so much. But I want it to go further. I want to know what it's like having you inside me, because that's one expression of trust we haven't gone through yet."

His face burned as he spoke the words, so unlike what he could have imagined himself saying three days ago.

But from the expression of pure hunger that overtook Draco's face a moment later, he doubted his lover minded the blush.

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Chapter: 22

Thanks for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Two—All the Love

Draco did not think he'd ever been so excited in his life. He had to hold himself still and carefully so he wouldn't shoot in his pants and ruin things too soon.

He understood what this meant to Harry, and that Harry could summon that kind of trust for him, and so soon after such an ordeal, only made it mean more. He ran his hand over Harry's cheek and up into his hair, scratching and digging in the way that he knew Harry liked. And, for the first time, the other man let his head fall and his body go limp with delight without a hesitation first. He was no longer worried about looking weak in Draco's eyes.

Draco licked his lips to rid himself of drool and bent his head down to whisper into Harry's ear. "Let's go to the bedroom."

Harry opened his eyes, and they were beautiful with hunger, cloudy with desire. "Let's," he said, and entwined the fingers of his right hand with Draco's.

Harry paused on the threshold of the bedroom, because this time Draco had decided to pin him to the door while he bit the back of his neck.

Harry moaned, unable to believe the sensations that simple gesture called up from within him. His body was lightly tingling, which reminded him of being under the glamour of wandless magic that he had used to fool the wards on his cell.

With the oh-so-minor difference that reacting to this tingling won't get you killed.

And then Draco's teeth drove a little deeper, and Harry cried out. His hips moved, trying desperately to scrape his cock against the door, but Draco was holding him at just the wrong angle to give him that kind of pressure.

"Draco," he whispered.

"I know," Draco said, licking the back of Harry's neck in between words. "Soon." And then he drew Harry away from the door and towards the bed.

A flash of pain briefly made him jerk, but Draco already seemed to have anticipated that he might still be feeling whatever Scrimgeour's Blasting Curse had done to him. The blankets Harry sank into were even softer than he remembered, brushing against his skin like clouds. By the time he finally came to rest, his back was sending him nothing but signals of comfort and happiness. Harry wriggled to get more comfortable.

Draco lay down on top of him.

He'd done that on the couch, too, of course, but this time it was different. Harry reached up and entwined his fingers with Draco's, forcing himself to gather in every nuance of a heavy body on top of his. Ginny had been no featherweight, but she'd been different; she'd held herself diffidently, always ready to shift in a moment if Harry wanted to move. Draco settled into place as if he were perfectly assured that he had a right to be there.

Knowing Draco, he probably does think that.

Draco was gazing at him with shining eyes. He lowered his head and brushed his face against Harry's, and even the prickle of beard stubble was exciting in a way it hadn't been before. Harry's hips moved upwards in an involuntary thrust.

And then he felt Draco's cock.

There had still been some hesitancy when he touched Draco before. He couldn't *quite* forget what someone else would say if they saw him, a heterosexual man who'd never had any reason to question his sexual orientation before, touching another man's skin in apparent worship or sucking him off. They were always laughing in the back of his head, those Aurors who made jokes about friends being gay or bent if they exchanged a look that went a little too long or spent the night at each other's flats.

That was gone now. Harry humped again, eager for *that* to be inside him. He knew it wouldn't be painless or easy, but that was part of the point. He wanted what Draco would do to him to prepare him quite as much as he wanted to be thrust into.

Not because it was a man. But because it was Draco.

"Come on," he whispered, and focused as much of a frown as he could on his lover's face. "Why are you *taking* so long?"

"I want to look at you," said Draco, in a voice as rough as if he were pissed, which made Harry fall silent and blink up at him.

Draco was willing to try all sorts of things in bed with Harry, even things that he'd refused to lovers in the past. This was different, because he trusted Harry not to take advantage of or hurt him—or run off in the morning to sell stories of a Malfoy's deviant tastes to the *Daily Prophet*, as some of his more Slytherin ex-lovers might have.

But he thought his favorite position would always be lying on top of Harry like this, aware that he was sheltering Harry from any damage that might come to him from another person entering the room.

And sheltering him from another person's line of sight, for that matter.

Draco flexed his neck, then bent it so that his face was lying alongside Harry's. From this angle he could see the pulse jumping wildly in Harry's throat, and hear the sharp, short breaths he was pulling and releasing through his mouth. Drops of sweat glittered among the fine dark hairs scattered around the curve of his jaw.

No one else could see them now. Not ever again. Draco could not think about Ginny Weasley for any length of time, because his jealousy and his contempt at the thought that she'd given *Harry* up for any reason were both too wild to be handled.

Focus on your lust again.

Oh, yes. *That*, he could do.

He lifted his head again and rolled his hips gently, brushing their erections together just to test

Harry's reaction.

Harry gave a desperate sob, and his lips moved in what might have been a prayer or a curse. Then he murmured hoarsely, "I'm sorry, but if you keep moving like that, I'm going to flip you over and pin you to the bed, and then I will *not* be responsible for my actions."

Draco let his weight settle more heavily. "You'd try," he said softly. "Don't you think I can keep you in place if I want you there?"

Harry smiled at him, an expression more powerful than anything in Draco's recovered memories. "Yes, you could," he said. "And you don't have to use your physical strength."

Draco had rarely wished with more intensity that it was possible to simply rip off a male lover's clothes and *take* him.

But he reminded himself that slowness was its own reward. He wanted Harry mindless beneath him by the time he was done—because Harry had so rarely had someone he could trust enough to fall that deeply with, because Harry deserved it, and because it would be a new experience for Draco, too, to enter that mindless state alongside his lover instead of holding himself coolly back.

Draco began to tongue Harry's neck, slowly. Harry stretched his head back with a slight gasp, baring his throat. Draco let himself smile, just enough to permit Harry to feel it, and then slowly unbuttoned his robes.

Harry didn't move from the nearly spread-eagled position that Draco had put him in, but lay still, hands and feet pointing towards the corners of the bed, his chest heaving with quick breaths, his eyes shut. Draco smiled, and wondered what Harry would think if he could see it. Draco knew it probably had more of a dark edge than normal, but seeing willing compliance like this…

To reward Harry for it, he used his tongue on every inch of skin he exposed. He kissed Harry's shoulders, then worked his way towards the edge of his collarbone and felt the taut press of the bones against the flesh. He rested his fingers above the fluttering pulse and timed the pattern of its beat, and tapped his tongue on Harry's throat in answer. He sucked strongly at the upper portions of his torso, leaving bruises almost as dark as the one decorating the back of Harry's neck.

He wasn't entirely satisfied with that as a decoration, to tell the truth. It was out of the way, so much so that other people would barely see it—and if anyone else *did* look closely, Draco wanted to know about it—but he had the feeling that Harry wouldn't agree to carry an obtrusive bruise on his face each and every day.

He became aware he'd stopped when Harry made a noise of protest. Draco peeled his shirt and robes further down his flanks, giving him a new cushion to rest on, and then lowered himself further and fastened his lips on Harry's right nipple with no warning.

Harry had reacted to this only mildly when Draco tried it in the past. Now he threw his head back, and his jaw worked in what looked like a silent scream. Draco smiled, and sucked, and Harry gasped out incoherent, mumbled pleas for more, and then for Draco to move to the left nipple. Draco did, nipping this time. Harry only reacted more strongly to the use of teeth.

He does that when I bite his neck, too. Draco licked around the outline of Harry's muscles contentedly. *I bet he never knew that about himself, or at least he would have denied that he liked pain if anyone asked him.*

At last he reached Harry's waist—though only after he had licked the line of hair leading down from Harry's navel into sticky submission—and rested a hand on Harry's groin. He lifted his head to meet a pair of green eyes so far gone they were probably seeing the dark side of the moon at the moment.

"You still want this?" he asked, taunting, with a false solicitous note in his voice. "Because if you don't want it, I can stop—"

"Damn it, Draco," Harry said, impressing Draco with the amount of breath he had left, "what part of *inside me* did you not understand?"

Draco laughed, and then attacked the remaining cloth in the way with an impatience that he thought could have been understood by anyone in his place.

Except that no one will ever be in my place, ever again.

More than one of Draco's lovers in the past had told him that his extreme possessiveness was a sign of a dysfunctional relationship. Draco had ignored them all. While they were his, he required that they be exclusively his. When they left, as they always did, then he could look back and laugh at his own emotions.

Not this time, though. Since he never intended to leave Harry or be left, Draco thought his feelings only normal and appropriate.

And he had meant what he had said in hospital all those months ago. A straight man could go bent for Harry. What could be expected of a curved man but that he would wrap himself around Harry, cradling him safely in the middle of all his intense energy?

Harry had ascended up pleasure, through ecstasy, and to a height from which he thought he could see joy.

True joy had been so rare in his life. Adventures carried more danger than happiness. When he had defeated Voldemort, his major feeling had been relief. He had enjoyed lovemaking with Ginny and her companionship, but again, it had been enjoyment. He had always thought that joy

was something separate from all that, only to be experienced in brief moments and suddenly. He could certainly never hang onto it.

But now it was here.

And the moment, impossibly, stretched and did not depart.

Harry looked down. Draco had opened his pants at last and was staring at his cock with an overwhelmed expression on his face, which Harry did not think was all for the body part. After all, Draco had seen him naked before, and erect before. Draco had probably not thought they would ever come this far.

For all his confidence, for all his pride, he needed the evidence of it happening in front of him as much as anyone else did.

Harry felt the joy turn purple inside him. He bent down, catching Draco's cheek and his attention in the same instant, and kissed Draco's mouth, slowly, carefully, sweetly. His lover's mouth opened under his, eagerly sharing the reassurance he might not even realize Harry was offering.

Then he gave Harry a little nudge in the stomach with his elbow, and muttered, "Who's supposed to be doing the lovemaking, anyway?"

Harry stifled a laugh, and blinked at him instead. "I thought we were sharing it equally."

"We are," said Draco. "But we're doing that by your letting me do what I need—" He froze a moment, as though he were startled to hear his own words, or ashamed to say it aloud. Then he shook his head a little and finished, "And what I want to do."

"Says the person who can't be arsed to get himself naked yet," Harry said, and then lounged back on the bed to watch. He wondered for a moment if Draco's undressing this time would be different because of what was going to happen.

And then he*knew* it would be, because Draco's eyes opened wider than they had before and he lifted himself off the bed in one fluid motion.

Harry had been aware that Draco was graceful, in the way that he was aware Draco was blond. It was one of those facts about him that mattered at certain moments and had less than zero relevance at others. After all, Draco's grace hadn't won him victories on the Quidditch Pitch or given Harry the trust to let Draco make love to him completely before this.

But now, as he began to undress with a series of sinuous movements that simply would *not* stop flowing into one another, which had no end, Harry was glad for the bed beneath him. He might have weakened and collapsed otherwise.

Harry himself tended to undress with a precise economy of motion, at least if he had the choice.

Draco made it look like a dance, like a work of art performed and enjoyed for its own sake. Harry swallowed, and then realized that had done no good, because his mouth was *still* as dry as if he had eaten dust for lunch.

"Draco," he whispered.

Draco, in the middle of a bend that whipped the shirt off his shoulders and loosened the rest of his robe buttons so that that garment joined the shirt on the floor, gave him a faint smile. The scars from Harry's *Sectumsempra* spell gleamed across the middle of his chest. Harry might have taken a moment to feel guilty about them, but he didn't *have* a moment. Draco's eyes held his and wouldn't let them go.

For the rest of his undressing, Harry was only aware of those eyes, though he shivered now and then when a particularly graceful bend caught his peripheral vision. His limbs were weightless, and his mind buzzed, and he felt rather as he did in the moments right before he went to sleep. Anything could startle him out of this mood and bring him back to wakefulness, but he didn't think anything would.

He's so beautiful.

That realization was not hard. The second one was, and dawned slowly, washing over him like the edge of a gentle wave.

He's looking at me like I'm beautiful, too.

Draco grinned slightly in triumph. It seemed that Harry was finally realizing that they should have done this a long time ago.

Maybe in sixth year. That would have solved a lot of our problems right there. I would certainly never have let him take a lowly Auror's job in the Ministry, and then he would never have had the chance to fall under the Cassandra Curse.

Still, there was no sense regretting lost chances, not with the rich and endless possibilities opening up in front of them.

Draco knew the exact moment when Harry's attention finally shifted away from his eyes and to his cock. Suddenly, Harry's face flushed, not exactly a blush so much as a red tracing of excitement, and his breath stuttered.

Draco leaned against the bed, stroking himself. *God*, that felt good, but the thought of the bliss to come, and the fact that his passion had retreated from the edge a bit, fed him patience. He separated his fingers, allowing the head to peek through them, and then flicked his thumb, drawing Harry's attention to the clear liquid that coated it.

"That's what will go inside you in a moment," he said, and then cocked his head. "Having second thoughts?"

"Never again," Harry said, and then blinked and seemed to feel the need to clarify that. "Never with you."

Draco nodded, and climbed onto the bed. For a moment more, he gazed at Harry, wondering if he would like asking Harry the question or having Harry sense what he wanted more.

Harry sensed what he wanted, as it turned out. He lay back against the pillows and smiled at Draco for a moment. Then his legs parted.

It was all the sexier because it was obvious that Harry had no experience in seduction. He just wanted to do it, so that was what happened. Draco hissed under his breath and reached out a hand to cup Harry's arse.

Harry's eyelids dropped half-shut. "Yes," he said, as Draco let his fingers tickle the sensitive skin around his entrance. He squirmed, and Draco guessed he was on that edge of sensation where the tickling became a sensual brush.

"So beautiful," Draco said.

Harry popped open one eye as if he would deny that, but Draco had already bent aside for the lubricant he had taken to keeping in a table next to the bed, ever since he and Harry had started sharing it on a regular basis. Draco came back rubbing it across his fingers, and circled Harry's entrance again. Harry went back to moans and coos of approval.

When he thought it was time, Draco slid one finger gently inside, keeping up the soothing petting with his other hand.

As it turned out, he needn't have worried.

Harry arched his back as the finger slid in. It felt too solid in him, too real, too present, and he almost wanted to cry out for it to be taken away again—

But then he would lose the reality and the experience it promised. And Harry *wanted* to get used to them, the same way that he wanted to get used to having joy in his life on a regular basis.

He braced himself on the pillows, and, when Draco glanced up at him in concern, shoved himself firmly down on the finger.

That made him hiss. But it also cut away any layers of gauzy uncertainty that were still keeping him separated from Draco. Harry had never been this *awake* before, because he had never had so much to cope with.

He panted, exhilarated, remembering for a moment the eleven-year-old he had been, and the wonder of the moment when the broom had jumped into his hand. This wasn't as easy as flying had been, but it was just as new.

"Another," he whispered.

Draco ignored him and began to move his finger. Harry hissed again, but nodded his acceptance. This was another sensation altogether, and he could see that he needed time to get used to it before Draco introduced a second finger.

It—

It wasn't too bad.

Or, no, it was *new* all over again, and Harry had to close his eyes and open them several times before he realized that nothing in his past experience had really prepared him for this.

He didn't feel like a girl, the way he had assumed he would. Women didn't need to have this done to them. And he didn't know, having never asked Ginny and being horrified at the mere thought of asking Hermione, if women felt the need to part their legs more the deeper something traveled inside their bodies.

Draco added a second finger. Harry thrust himself backwards again, and wondered if that should be embarrassing, and then decided that *he* was the one doing it and he should damn well have the right to not act embarrassed if he wanted to.

"Good," Draco said, his voice unsteady. "Very good, Harry." His fingers moved deeper inside and curled, and Harry was introduced to the sensation of knuckles brushing against him along with fingertips. He whimpered and pushed back with interest.

A third finger.

And then—

"Yes," he said, and rocked, grateful now for the pillows that Draco had insisted on putting behind him. He could hear Draco muttering a soft spell and then feel added support under his hips where another pillow had probably floated. He didn't care. They meant nothing next to whatever protrusion in his body Draco had brushed before and was now regularly hitting. "*Yes.*"

"That's your prostate," Draco said. "It's your fault that we never got far enough before for you to feel this."

Harry cracked an eye open. "No, it's *your* f-fault for not describing it w-well enough—*yes!*"

Pleasure and joy built together in him now, and Harry wondered if he would have an orgasm before Draco ever got inside. But evidently they had taken the right amount of preparation time by the Malfoy watch or else Draco had lost his own patience, because he was gently removing his fingers now and taking Harry's hips to urge him into place.

Harry spread his legs wider and lifted himself as much as possible, wondering if his curiosity or his desire was greater.

And then Draco was easing into him, and he found out.

Desire. It was eating him from his groin up as Draco shoved, gently but insistently, deeper and deeper. Harry didn't feel pierced or impaled or any other silly word that Ginny had sometimes gasped out when they were in the depths of lovemaking. He just felt as if there were someone inside him.

At once the strangest sensation he had ever felt and the most compelling, he thought, and attempted to wriggle closer.

"This angle is awkward," Draco whispered to him, voice husky. He didn't stammer the words, but he did have to pause and take awfully deep breaths before each one. "Put your legs over my shoulders."

Harry promptly did. The thought of what he would look like to someone who entered the room tried to surface in his head, but was drowned out by the remembrance of the wards and the house-elves.

Draco stopped, panting and leaning over him, sweat plopping from his forehead onto Harry's chest. Then he began to thrust.

And Harry knew in an instant that he liked this better than any other thing he'd ever done, because Draco trusted him enough to thrust roughly, urgently, knowing that Harry would object if he were at all uncomfortable.

Harry wasn't uncomfortable. There would be pain and soreness later, but only in the way that there was always pain and soreness after he used his muscles for exercise. He squeezed back and rocked his hips as much as he could without letting his legs tumble off Draco's shoulders.

He wondered for a moment what it would be like to do this to Draco, and then the joy swept in, and he concentrated solely on what was being done to him.

Draco had thought at least part of his greed would be cured once he was inside Harry. Instead, he felt it growing. Indeed, he was already dissatisfied that there wasn't a way they could somehow both fuck each other at once. The look of dazed bliss on Harry's face made him long to experience the same wonderful things.

He thrust, to make up for it.

And almost immediately he was caught up in the wild motion that usually didn't affect him until later in a session with a lover, no matter how intense, unable to stop, his hips snapping forwards and then retreating just as swiftly, his breath scraping in a frenzied manner past his own ears, his hands gripping Harry's ribs in a way that would leave more marks still. Harry was breathing like a long-distance runner, his eyes opening and closing without pattern.

Draco leaned nearer, feeling the pressure of those squeezing muscles, and imagined what it would be like to do this again, and again, and again, and never have Harry falter in matching him stroke for stroke and pace for pace—

And his orgasm was already overwhelming him; his body would reach the tipping point where he couldn't hold it back in a moment. Startled, he cried out and reached for Harry's cock. He had totally forgotten to touch it for some time now.

Harry cried out in answer, the ringing shout of a racer as he crossed the finish line, and began to come.

Draco watched for long moments, more than seemed possible, as white liquid sprang copiously across Harry's chest and stomach, rising and falling in rich streams. Harry was still crying out, though more softly and at shorter intervals now, with pleasure. His eyes were shut tight, and his body closed again and again and again on Draco.

Draco felt a moment's smugness that he had made Harry come without even touching his cock.

The smugness spun him higher than his orgasm, though that, which smashed him like a wave of his own power deployed against the *Obliviate* and carried him beyond simple extremes of happiness, was quite pleasant, too.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He wasn't sure how long he'd been lying there with Draco collapsed half on his chest and half across his arse. He found he wasn't that eager to move. Even limp, he liked the sensation of Draco's cock inside him.

He only stirred because Draco had said, "I reckon you'll agree that you aren't straight now."

Harry smiled at him, and ran a hand through that flopping, mussed blond hair. Draco looked so pleased with himself Harry *had* to say something to remind him earth existed. "I'm not," he said.

Draco nodded. "Curved or bent, then?" he asked, as if he had been laying bets with himself on the answer.

"Neither," said Harry, and waited a moment as the perfect brow crimped, then added, "Slanted."

"What?" Draco huffed. Harry thought he might have tried to cross his arms if the position he was in hadn't been ridiculous for it. "That doesn't make *sense.*"

"It does," Harry said firmly.

"But it doesn't *mean* anything."

"Since I'm the slanted one," Harry said, "and not you, *I* get to decide what it means."

Then he gave in and moved carefully backwards and up so that he could kiss the outraged look on Draco's face. Draco *did* look close to cute when he had to remember that he didn't know everything in the world.

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Chapter: 23

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Three—Day of Wonders

"Where do you think you're going, Draco?"

Draco couldn't quite keep his fingers from clenching down hard on the sleeve of the formal robe he'd just pulled on. *Caught.*

He craned his head back to see Harry standing with his arms folded on the spiral staircase that led to the first floor, his head cocked to the side, a small smile on his lips. The smile was not amused. Draco thought of pointing out that Harry only wore a pair of trousers, therefore he couldn't accompany Draco even if Draco *was* going somewhere, which he wasn't, but decided that was rather counterproductive given the growing stormclouds in Harry's eyes.

"I was dressing for the meeting with Weasley and Granger." Draco still had reserves of cool dignity to call upon, even when he was embarrassed. He called upon them now, raising his chin and fixing Harry with a haughty stare. Harry came down a few more steps, staring at him in return all the while. "God knows they won't be impressed with your choice of lover. I thought I would at least impress them with my clothes."

Harry's lips drew back slightly, and the smile vanished altogether. "Oh? You mean the meeting that isn't until this afternoon? The meeting that we agreed *I* would attend, alone?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "So I might have sent them an owl asking them to breakfast this morning in Diagon Alley," he said. "So I might have intended to give them a short speech about what would happen should they hurt you again. What would have been the harm in that?"

"*Draco.*"

When Harry used that tone, as Draco had had ample opportunity to observe during their arguments of the last three days, he was past joking. So Draco dropped his own amusement and stepped closer, narrowing his eyes. "They *hurt* you," he whispered. "There needs to be vengeance for that, more than you would ever take."

"Draco," Harry repeated, and stepped closer to him, resting one hand on his shoulder. Draco shivered. Even through the silk of his shirt, the heat of Harry's palm felt delicious. They'd spent most of their time since Harry's rescue in bed, but Draco's body didn't care; it wanted to return there immediately. "I don't need you to take vengeance for me. I *know* you love me already. I also know that you'd defend me against my every enemy. I agree that I can't just accept Hermione and Ron back into my life as if nothing had happened. But I don't want you hurting them, either. Otherwise, they'll probably never stop distrusting you and trying to persuade me to leave you."

"But you wouldn't," Draco said, glad he could keep his voice steady.

"*We* know I won't," said Harry, and Draco bathed in the reassurance of that, in the fact that he and Harry were part of a "we" that didn't include Weasley and Granger. "*They* don't. And I'd rather not be a victim in the tug-of-war between you, *if* you don't mind. I've had enough of unnecessary pain."

Draco's arms rose and enfolded Harry of their own free will. Harry embraced him back, gently rubbing up and down the middle of his spine. Draco couldn't help a little thrust of his hips. Harry laughed, but didn't return it.

"You shagged me until I'll have trouble sitting down this morning," he muttered, and broke away from Draco. "Let me throw on a shirt. I don't think I'll need formal robes for this."

Draco blinked. "I thought you'd send an owl telling Weasley and Granger that you want to meet them this afternoon instead."

"They've probably already left," Harry said calmly, turning to face the stairs again. Draco felt a surge of private glee at the visible mark on the back of his neck; Harry had listened to him, with some persuasion, and cut his hair short enough that it showed easily. "I'd rather not alienate them on our first meeting—that they remember—in some time. We'll go to breakfast, and it can take the place of the afternoon meeting." He paused and shot a glare at Draco over his shoulder. "But you'll leave me alone with them when I tell you to."

Draco nodded slowly, his eyes fastened on his lover's. Harry had shown a greater range of

emotions in the past few days than in the month before that; he was finally aware, it seemed, that Draco wouldn't leave him for being angry or upset or frightened. Draco would not have discouraged the half-fury on his face now for the world. "I promise."

Harry gave him an unabashedly sweet smile, and rushed up the stairs to dress. Draco leaned on the wall and consoled himself. At least he would be there for part of the meeting.

And Harry had forbidden threats, but not threatening glares. Draco could make his point—that he would tear Weasley and Granger apart if they hurt Harry—almost as well silently as he could aloud.

Harry came into the Eyrie slowly, his shoulder against Draco's, his arm entwined with his, his eyes darting ahead as he searched out Ron and Hermione. They ought to stand out because of their hair if nothing else, but the Eyrie was so quiet and dim inside that it still took Harry several moments to spot them.

Then he saw them, and a little thrum of tension ran through his body. Harry reminded himself whom he was there with and whom he was there to see, and told the tension to be quiet.

Ron was shredding a napkin through his fingers, but he looked up at Hermione's gesture, and then scrambled awkwardly to his feet. Hermione was standing already, eyes ablaze with tears, her arms reaching out. Harry supposed she had expected a sudden dash forwards and a hug.

Part of Harry longed to give that to her. It would be easier than the slow approach he had promised himself he would use—easier for her, at least.

But he would not pretend that everything could simply fall back into place the moment they saw each other again. If he started lying about what *he* felt now, to spare their feelings, he'd probably explode with the resentment at a later point in time and they'd have no idea why.

Besides, Draco was there, squeezing his elbow sternly, as if to say that Harry had better show the mixed emotions Draco knew he felt.

So Harry gave his friends a small smile and walked steadily forwards. By the time he reached the table, Hermione's arms had dropped, and she was gazing searchingly into his eyes, as if she wanted to find the barrier there that had kept him away.

Harry nodded slightly, the way he would to friendly acquaintances, and then said, "Ron. Hermione."

"Harry," Hermione whispered, "we missed you."

That part was completely true no matter what the circumstances of the curse had been like. Harry gave her a wider smile in acknowledgment of that. "And I missed you," he said. "Thanks for coming." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a server approaching them, and he reached for his

chair.

Draco pulled it out for him, and then hovered—though doubtless he would object if Harry used the word—until Harry sat down. Amused, Harry let him push it in. Draco immediately took the seat beside him and stretched his arm over Harry's shoulders.

Ron was staring from one to the other of them in total, shocked silence. Harry let him do it, then nodded to the server and murmured his assent to Draco's preferred meal of kippers and porridge. It was far from the fancy fare the Eyrie would serve at lunch and dinner, as Draco had told him before they Apparated, but Harry knew they could get even better food at the Manor.

"Harry," Ron said at last when the man had gone, and Harry felt a surge of gratitude for Ron's courage to step into the middle of complicated situations where anyone else would have trod cautiously. "What is *this*?" He nodded to the arm Draco had over Harry's shoulders.

"Draco is my lover," Harry said steadily. "And the man I love, and my best friend. He discovered the truth about the Cassandra Curse before anyone else." He shot a quick glance at Draco, just to make sure that he hadn't changed his mind about what they'd agreed on before they came here. Draco flicked an eyelid, so Harry knew he could continue. "And he gave me a piece of his soul to tear through the curse. We're connected in every way possible." He paused to drink from the glass of water the server had already sat down. Draco's hand landed on his a moment later, his fingers intertwining tightly with Harry's.

Hermione blinked several times, opened her mouth, but in the end said nothing. Ron was the one who turned red—with several complex emotions, Harry imagined—and blurted, "What about Ginny?"

"Ginny has someone else, Ron," Harry said. "I don't blame her for that. As you told me a few days ago, she had to find someone else if she wanted to get married, and she thought I'd turned on her." Ron's eyes dropped away from his. "Draco is the one who fought for me, helped me, supported me—"

"So it's just gratitude?" Hermione cut in, with a glance at Draco.

Draco's hand clenched down on Harry's, but Harry was perfectly capable of showing his own anger. He had realized his friends wouldn't understand him falling in love with an old enemy. On the other hand, he didn't require their approval.

"No, Hermione, it's *not* just gratitude," he snapped. "Not unless you think that people regularly give each other *pieces of their souls* out of thanks."

"Harry, I didn't mean—"

"I meant every word I said for the past year," Harry said. "I mean them now. I know it wasn't easy for you when you realized what the Cassandra Curse was and what Scrimgeour had done to

me, but remember that it was even less easy for *me.* I'm not going to defend my actions to you. I'm not going to let you criticize Draco and not respond. He's *mine*, and I'm *his,* and we're a part of each other's lives from now on. That's all there is to it."

Draco had not voiced it, but he had been somewhat afraid for Harry—one reason he had wanted to go early and confront Weasley and Granger alone. Harry was not weak or fragile any longer, but he had not met his friends since the ending of the curse, either. He might be overcome by their apologies, or feel he had to listen to them too much because of the echoes of their long friendship .Draco knew he wouldn't be swayed by anything like that, and so he could defend Harry from himself.

Now he saw that those fears were groundless.

Harry spoke with quiet power in his voice, his eyes flashing as strongly as they did when Draco pinned him to the bed and bit his nipples. He looked both Weasley and Granger in the eye, and his face hardened when they said something stupid.

He was fully committed to the defense of himself. He knew he hadn't done anything wrong. He was standing more solidly on his own two feet than Draco knew he would have managed, were he the victim of the Cassandra Curse.

Harry would be fine.

Granger had gone silent after her ill-advised interruption, her eyes lowered and suspiciously red around the edges. Harry waited calmly, patiently, for the assault, one arm tucked around his chest and one stretched out so that his fingers could continue holding Draco's.

So, of course, the next comment had to come from Weasley.

"I just—" He waved a weak hand. "Harry, we're sorry for what we did .But you know we were victims of the curse, right? You know that we couldn't help it?" His face was tight and anxious, his eyes searching Harry's.

"I know," said Harry, and smiled a little. Draco sighed inaudibly and wished the food would get here. No, he didn't have to worry about Harry, but he could have wished that Harry shared just a little more of his taste for rubbing people's mistakes in their faces.

"Then—" Weasley licked his lips. "I don't understand why things can't go back to the way they were before…?"

Harry's lips tightened. Then he glanced at Draco and said, "Love, do you mind stepping outside for a moment? I promise that I won't let your food get cold."

Draco held his eyes, telling Harry wordlessly that he had *better* call Draco back inside if Weasley attacked him with magic or tried to guilt him into something he didn't want to agree to, and then

shoved back his chair without a word. He stepped outside the Eyrie into the bustle of Diagon Alley and tilted back his head so that he could study the wispy clouds still clinging around the sun.

Harry had quite obviously changed his mind about how much of the conversation Draco would be allowed to be present at, but he still had a finely tuned sense of how much his lover could tolerate. Draco would probably have snapped at Weasley in a moment.

It was better to stand out here, and watch the passerby who would never know anything of the great love he and Harry shared with some pity, and be ready to rush inside in an instant if wands came out.

Harry faced Ron. He made sure to keep his expression even and his voice smooth and calm, especially since the server had returned a moment after Draco left and put their food down on the table.

"Because we've all changed," he said. "I haven't really been part of your lives for the past year, and you haven't been part of mine. And—" He took a deep breath, his anger running like illness through his veins for a moment, and spoke when he thought he could sound rational. "The last time we met, you *punched* me. Look me in the eye and tell me that things will be exactly the same after that."

"We were under a curse," Hermione whispered, more as if she didn't want him to forget than as if she were protesting his conclusions. That was the only thing that kept Harry from snapping at her.

"I know that," said Harry. "And so was I, for that matter. But this was no ordinary curse, and it won't have ordinary consequences. Scrimgeour's probably going to be tried and kicked out of office." The *Daily Prophet's* writers were turning themselves inside out with joy over that, he thought with some amusement, and his handing the story to them ensured plenty of praises of Harry Potter. For some mad reason, Draco was keeping all the clippings of the story he could find and every photograph of Harry that appeared. "I've learned that I can fall in love with a man—"

"That's another thing," Ron interrupted bluntly. "Are you gay?"

"I don't know," Harry said calmly. He wouldn't explain about curved and slanted yet, and maybe not ever. That was a private and special thing for him and Draco. "I didn't fall in love with several men, just with Draco. I probably would have fallen in love with a female Psyche-Diver who took the trouble to find out about the curse and gave me a piece of her soul, too."

"That's it, Harry," Hermione said earnestly, leaning forwards and putting her hand on his. It felt peculiar, but Harry suspected that was simply because he'd gone without touch for so long and then received only Draco's. "We just want you to be happy and safe, and I don't know if you can be with Malfoy. I mean, patients falling in love with Healers happens all the time, but not in a

healthy way."

Harry turned his head slightly, to give her the full benefit of his long, slow, incredulous glare. Hermione blushed and lowered her eyes again.

"My relationship with Draco is not open to question," Harry told them. "He *gave me a piece of his soul,* Hermione. He didn't just heal me. He didn't just wash his hands of me when the going against the curse proved to be difficult. He's the most important person in the world to me, and always will be. I understand the source of your questions, but if you really trust and love me you'll accept my word that I'm safe and happy now. At last."

He paused, ate a few of his kippers, and then added, "I'll be happier if we can be friends again, of course."

"That's why we're here, mate," Ron muttered, and briefly reached across the table to squeeze his arm.

Harry nodded. "But we'll have to *work* at this friendship. It can't be just the same. It won't be effortless. Memories of old times aren't enough. I'll be cautious around you at first; I won't be able to help that. It took a lot just to come here today." Of course, part of that had been his helpless delight in the fact that the Cassandra Curse was gone and random strangers wouldn't spit after him in the street, but his wariness towards Ron and Hermione was greater. "I want to know if you're willing to work at it. If you're not, then let's just part ways here and now. I'd rather live my life without you than constantly do all the labor."

Hermione blinked, the tears gathering on the edges of her lashes. "Oh, Harry," she whispered. "I—*we* love you. We missed you so much. Yes, I'm willing to work at it." She glanced sideways at Ron.

Ron coughed. Harry thought he might be chasing away tears of his own. "Of course, mate."

"And Draco?" Harry raised his eyebrows. "I have to tell you, if you can't treat him civilly, there won't be many meals like this and no visits to the Burrow. I won't go where he's not welcome."

"We can try," Hermione said firmly. "If he makes the effort, too."

"Mum and my brothers will take some time to understand," Ron acknowledged. "But they'll learn to do it. They love you, too, Harry."

Harry gave them a cautious smile, and then reached over the table. Their hands closed firmly around his.

It wasn't flawless, he thought. But it was a beginning.

Draco turned at a flash of red hair down the street. His first thought was that one of the Weasley

brothers had found his "invitation" to Harry's friends and had come to make sure Draco intended no treachery.

But then he made out the slender, feminine body beneath the hair, and he stood straighter, growling quietly to himself.

Ginny Weasley was smaller than he remembered her—not that he had ever paid that much attention to her at school. She had mostly been important to him as taunting material for Blaise, who had been ashamed of liking a blood traitor. Draco reckoned she had grown up well enough for people who liked that sort of thing, who could look past the hideous hair and the clean but unfashionable robes she was wearing. She walked directly towards him, eyes fixed on his face, and Draco had no doubt that she meant to accost him.

"Weasley," he said deliberately when she came close enough to hear him. *She* might be uncivilized, but she could not make *him* shout. Draco knew his tone was cold enough to carve icebergs, and he saw her flinch a little at it.

But she nodded to him instead of running away, which Draco had to admit was a bit disappointing. "Malfoy." She glanced at the Eyrie. "Harry's in there, I think?"

"Yes," said Draco. "And if you've come to grovel before him, or shriek at him like the Hogwarts Express and demand he come back to you, then you should know I'm his lover."

He sounded too defensive, too possessive. He knew it. But Ginny Weasley was a threat in a way none of Harry's friends ever could be. Harry had only ever had her as a lover, he'd confessed a few nights ago, before he came to Draco, and there were seven years of memories between them. Draco knew that he wouldn't lose what he had with Harry easily, but he also knew that Harry was too much of a believer in abstract, idealized notions like truth and justice, or else why would he have disdained vengeance on Scrimgeour and his friends? If the baby Weasel begged and cried enough, then she might convince Harry to feel sorry for her and spend time with her. And Harry might still be the kind of person who could be snared out of pity.

Weasley just gazed at him evenly. Then she said, "I'll have you know Harry Potter was the great love of my life."

Draco said nothing. To say he felt the same would not only be crass—he could express it in *much* better words than she'd chosen—but to share an intimacy with her that she didn't deserve.

"And I know that we've both moved on, and I know why." Weasley took a deep breath. "And I understand that it can't ever go back to the way it was before. The minute the Minister appeared in front of me and confessed his crime, I knew. I—think I felt it more keenly than Ron and Hermione, because I'd lived with him longer and closer than they had.

"I'm sorry that things fell out the way they did. I wish I could have acted better. And if I had married Harry, I would have been happy, I think." Her eyes glistened for a moment. "But that's

the way I wish things had happened, not the way things are. I just came to tell Harry I'll always be his friend, and that I wish him well." She glanced sideways at Draco. "In *whatever* he does, and with *whoever* he chooses to spend his life with."

Draco just stared at her in disbelief. She looked back as if she had not said something incredible, and then turned to the side.

Harry had come out of the Eyrie, and was looking warily back and forth between them.

"Ginny?" he whispered.

"Harry." She nodded, took his hand, and leaned forwards to kiss his cheek. Draco growled under his breath, but the gesture really did seem to be one of farewell, the one his mother had given him the last time he saw her, not a caress from a lover. "I was just telling Malfoy that I wanted to wish you well. And that I hope we can be friends now?" She bit her lip and seemed uncertain for the first time as she met his eyes.

Harry's smile broadened and softened into one he'd never given Draco. Draco shifted uneasily from foot to foot. *I'm glad he has his friends,* he reassured himself. *I'm glad that they give him something I can't.*

That didn't prevent his pride from stinging a little, though.

"Of course, Ginny," Harry said quietly. "It'll take some work—"

"I *knew* that," she cut in.

"And maybe it'll take me some time to forgive you completely, but—" Harry shrugged. "I'd like that."

Weasley smiled one more time, flicked a quick glance and a briefer nod at Draco, and then turned and walked down the street. Draco put an arm around Harry's waist, only to realize that Harry had already reached for him. Together, they watched her go.

"This is a day of wonders," Draco complained under his breath. "That I'm forced to respect a *Weasley*, of all people, and the one who would have married you to boot."

"I think it's perfectly natural," Harry said. "Ginny always did have one quality her brothers didn't: the minute she makes up her mind, she acts on it. Ron will dither around and avoid doing anything for as long as he possibly can—it took him years to realize he loved Hermione and then to do something about it—and the twins plan things out, and Percy would rather that someone *else* do the acting. But Ginny…" He shook his head.

There was too much admiration in his voice for Draco's liking. He caught Harry close and kissed him. Harry went with it willingly, not seeming to care about the people in Diagon Alley who

paused to stare.

"Just remember you're mine," Draco murmured, pulling back.

"Not easy to forget," said Harry, and motioned towards the back of his neck. "But, you know, it's hard for anyone to *notice* this. I want some more visible sign."

Draco had to close his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, he had convinced himself his voice was normal. "How should we do that?"

Harry smiled, and his hand on Draco's cheek was gentle. "I had an idea."

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Chapter: 24

Thank you again for all the reviews!

This is the end of *A Determined Frame of Mind*, and, with it, the Frames of Mind series. (I may write a prequel detailing Harry's time under the Cassandra Curse or Draco's invention of Psyche-Diving, but those would be gen, and probably wouldn't be written for some time anyway). I do intend to keep posting other stories after I finish my current WiP, *I Give You a Wondrous Mirror.* Thanks for reading!

Epilogue

"And it is the verdict of the Wizengamot—"

"I could give him a rotting disease. Just enough to take the fingers of his right hand. That wouldn't be vengeance for what he did to you, but it would be a start." Draco's voice was low and urgent in Harry's right ear.

"Will you *hush*?" Harry snapped back at him, making sure to keep his voice low enough that no one would glance at them disapprovingly. Draco might not care about looks like that, but for Harry, the entrance into public life was still too recent for him to be happy about making a fuss. Disapproval of his relationship with Draco didn't matter. Disapproval of him as a person reminded him too much of what it had been like under the curse. "This isn't convincing me to give you back your wand, you know."

Draco made a horrid face. Harry turned away from him, wondering for a moment if the interruption had been enough to make him miss Scrimgeour's fate. But the Wizengamot member reading from an elaborate scroll had paused, as they always did, to restate Scrimgeour's crimes,

just in case there was someone in the crowd who had managed to miss them.

They were sitting in the courtroom that Harry remembered with such intense unfondness from his trial for using underage magic before his fifth year began. Scrimgeour sat in the chair this time, with the Wizengamot staring down at him from their high places. Harry had to appreciate the symbolism. Until recently, the Minister would have had the right to stare at criminals like that. Now he was less than an insect to most of those involved.

The trial had gone speedily. Harry was wise enough to know that that wasn't because of Scrimgeour's particular crimes, but because of his own name. He felt uneasy about it. On the other hand, no amount of speeches trying to convince the Wizengamot to ignore who he was would be effective.

He touched the silver ring on his finger, which bore the Malfoy crest on its simply-cut green stone. Already that had become the calming gesture that touching his bandaged wrists had once been.

Draco's hands came into view, settling on the balcony railing beside him, and then picking up and rubbing his fingers. Harry smiled. It had taken some digging for him to recover the Potter crest that had appeared on his father's schoolbooks and his late grandparents' home, but he had finally found it, and Draco bore that crest on a red stone. His ring was of gold.

Draco had not even protested the colors, which showed how much he approved of Harry's public declaration of their relationship.

"Almost done," Draco whispered near his ear. "They won't *dare* not sentence him." He paused, and then added, "Of course, if you would let me have my wand back, then I could make sure his life is even more interesting after this."

"Not a chance," Harry retorted. He had taken Draco's wand away from him the moment he first pointed it at Scrimgeour, or tried to point it at him, under the cover of the crowd. "Now *hush*. They're about to give the sentence."

"—the Wizengamot has decided," the witch concluded, with a stoic dignity in her voice that she no doubt thought appropriate to the occasion, "that the former Minister Rufus Scrimgeour will be sentenced to Azkaban for life."

Harry huffed out a breath, and blinked hard. There were no Dementors in Azkaban anymore; the final battles against Voldemort and the hunts afterwards, armed with new spells that the Order of the Phoenix had invented during the war, had dissipated or scattered them completely. But still, spending the rest of his life on a storm-lashed rock was a humbling fall for the man who had once hoped to control the British wizarding world.

And though Scrimgeour was in his seventies, that didn't mean nearly as much for a wizard as for a Muggle. He might live fifty years or even a century yet if he was unlucky, bound there.

For a moment, Harry was tempted to call out and protest the sentence. But then he turned his head and saw that Scrimgeour wasn't staring at the witch who had read the sentence, or even at the rest of the Wizengamot, as if to ask how they could have betrayed him like this. He was looking at Harry instead.

The hatred in his eyes was *insane.*

Harry made himself stare back, but it was hard. Even now, he knew, this man would have liked nothing so much as to see him dead and bleeding, preferably by his own hand. If he was free in any manner, he would continue to make Harry's life a misery. He seemed to have decided that his one mistake was in allowing the curse to be discovered. There was certainly no sign in his face that he regretted his actions.

Harry felt Draco's hand on his shoulder. He leaned close to him for strength, not caring if Scrimgeour saw. The Minister's great weakness, after all, had been that he saw others solely as tools to further or threats to challenge his position. He had no conception of cooperation or the rewards that might come out of it.

Scrimgeour had the opportunity to make a speech at the end. He said nothing. He was simply taken away in chains, and Harry began to breathe a little more easily the moment he was past the courtroom door.

He groaned when he realized that several of the Wizengamot members and a good portion of the crowd were heading towards him. Since the announcement of the Cassandra Curse and Scrimgeour's fall from grace, the country seemed to be competing to see who could shower him with the most solicitous attention and send him the most extravagant gifts. Draco thought the gifts were hilarious and insisted that Harry keep all of them, if only to resell later, but he was the one who dealt better with the public attention. Harry gratefully let him take over for the moment, while he closed his eyes and fixed Scrimgeour's stare in his memory.

That was what hatred looked like.

Harry was never going to forget again. He doubted that Scrimgeour would be the last person to hate him like that, as he had not been first; that dubious honor belonged to Voldemort.

If he felt the sentence was too severe, that was a tribute to his own fine sense of justice, Harry reckoned. But he would not ask for it to be reduced, or protest it. Scrimgeour had passed beyond any sense of moderation. He would not just target Harry if he had the chance to attack again. He had to be locked away for the good of others.

Even if he was the instrument of our coming together, Harry thought, as he leaned his head against Draco's shoulder and felt the soul-bond start up like a contented kitten. *I wonder if he ever realized that?*

Draco knew he was better at smiling than Harry. He was also better at looking into the eyes of many people at once, and at making ambiguous comments that would sound like assents and compliments at the time and only give the people asking the questions some doubts or misgivings later.

"Does Mr. Potter intend to return to the Ministry?" asked one of the older members of the Wizengamot now, a witch with immaculately groomed gray hair and sleek green robes Draco had to admire.

"The site of his curse?" Draco raised his eyebrows. "Mr. Potter has not shared, as of yet, his plans with others."

And Harry hadn't. Draco saw no reason to hurry him about it. He doubted that Harry would want to be an Auror again, but Harry was always surprising him—he had surprised Draco when he asked for a ring, and again when he asked for it in Slytherin colors—so he might. Since Draco had already found a few wealthy patients to Psyche-Dive for, he could keep them both in comfort without stint until Harry was ready to make his decision.

Meanwhile, it was quite refreshing to always have someone in the house ready and willing to shag, or be shagged, or have a row, or have a row while shagging.

"Does Mr. Potter intend to seek vengeance against anyone who might not have treated him well while he was under the curse?" asked a voice from the side.

Draco turned his head, and found himself looking full into Eugenie's face. Understandably, she was a bit pale.

Draco smiled. "Of course not," he said. "*He* understands that they were subject to the malicious nature of the curse and not entirely themselves."

Eugenie closed her eyes and nodded. Draco looked carefully, and smiled more widely when he made out the faint dark scab on the side of her left hand.

Harry had been quick to take Draco's wand away from him, but not quick enough. Draco had seen Eugenie among the crowd that morning as they made their way to their seats. A swift curse, and she was infected with a rotting disease which would slowly make her uglier than one of the magical creatures she worked with. It was indistinguishable from a number of unfortunate illnesses which sometimes showed up on their own. Eugenie might suspect the truth at last and try to tell it to someone, of course, but Draco doubted that she would have a tongue left by the time she tried.

The disease would not kill her. But it would force her to retire, and it would certainly lessen what influence she had managed to gain through her cleverness and appearance. Draco thought the price just high enough.

If Harry finds out and protests, I can always point out that using that spell on Eugenie sapped my anger, and now I don't have any reason to visit Azkaban and try to do something else to Scrimgeour, he thought happily, and turned to answer the next question.

Harry sighed as they made their way back into sunshine again. "I can't wait until that dies down," he murmured.

Draco laughed and put an arm around his shoulders. "Forget it, Harry. You were their hero once. Now you're their martyr, the beautiful and tragic figure who was nearly condemned to eternal loneliness—"

"Tell me you're quoting the *Daily Prophet,* please." Harry buried his head in his hands.

He felt Draco kiss the top of his hair. "Of course I am. You should read the articles sometimes, they really are quite educational."

"Why are you keeping them?" Harry dropped his hands and looked quizzically up at his lover.

Draco's face went unexpectedly serious, and he cupped a hand beneath Harry's chin. Harry stared steadily back. He no longer felt unequal to arguing with Draco. Draco was quite good at it, but they were too different for his reasoning to make sense to Harry most of the time.

"Because I *never* want to forget," Draco whispered. "Not what we fought for, or what we almost lost." He bent closer and laved his tongue along the corner of Harry's jaw, then touched his golden ring to Harry's silver one. A spark of magic leaped between them. The jeweler who made them had been somewhat puzzled why they wanted such elaborate tracking and defensive spells built in, but she had done a marvelous job. "I am rather sensitive when it comes to my memories of you, you know."

Harry closed his eyes to make sure he wouldn't do something ridiculous, and then stretched up to kiss Draco briefly. He wasn't blind to the small winces Draco made as he walked.

"Too hard a shagging last night?" he asked innocently.

"I can take anything you hand me, Potter." Draco was using his superior Psyche-Diver tone now, and the snotty expression on his face said all too clearly that he could read people's souls and Harry could not.

"I wasn't questioning that."

Draco's eyelids lowered in the pleased look Harry was coming to know and adore.

And I'll have years more to learn everything I can about him.

The slightly soiled feeling that had come from gazing into Scrimgeour's eyes was already fading. Harry took a deep breath, shook his shoulders, and walked smartly beside Draco towards the Apparition point.

I don't ever want to forget, either. I don't think I can, but it's good to be reminded.

He was thinking of both the struggle and the success, of the year under the curse and the warm pressure of Draco's hand in his, as they went home.

Finite.