Storyid: 4626376
FanFiction.net
Name: The Next Best Thing
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Chapter 1 to 37

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Chapter: 1

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Harry kissed his way down Draco's throat reverently, taking the time to cover every inch of the pale flesh with his lips and tongue. Draco arched and moaned as Harry lightly scraped his teeth over his prominent collarbone, gently biting at the soft flesh beneath it before moving on to caress a small, pink nipple with his tongue.

Draco moaned and Harry sat back on his heels, scrutinizing the blond laid out before him. Watchful green eyes took in the sight of the dusky flush of arousal that covered Draco's nearly hairless chest. He ran his callused hands across the pebbled nipples, smirking at Draco's indrawn breath. Harry continued his slow perusal of his body, ghosting his hands down Draco's sides and over his hips to tangle in the fine blond curls at his groin.

Draco raised his head to watch Harry's progress down his body, his gaze somewhat remote. When Harry bent to take Draco's cock into his mouth, the other man flinched involuntarily before succumbing to the sensation and sinking back onto the pillows. The slight hesitation was not lost on Harry, whose green eyes hardened slightly even as he continued caressing his lover's cock with his tongue and mouth.

Harry released Draco's cock from his mouth, pulling away to rifle through the bedside drawer for a small pot of lubricant. Grey eyes locked onto green as Harry met and held Draco's gaze, dipping his long fingers into the pot and running them down his cock and balls, stopping at his own entrance. A look of distaste fluttered across Draco's face, and he looked away uncomfortably. Harry shut his eyes and opened his mouth to call the whole thing off when firm lips met his unexpectedly. His breath hitched as Draco's tongue eased its way into his mouth and the blond's hand came up to gently caress his balls and squeeze his now-wilting cock.

"Don't stop, Harry," he whispered, running a wet tongue around the shell of Harry's ear. "I want this. I want *you*."

The reassuring words and gentle caresses revived Harry's flagging erection. As Draco's hand pumped his cock, Harry slipped a finger inside himself, stretching and teasing the tight muscle at his entrance. Their breathing became ragged as Harry finger-fucked himself, and Draco lowered his head and settled his lips around Harry's erection.

"Fuck," Harry said roughly, keening as Draco's talented mouth engulfed him.

Draco's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing as he looked at Harry, contempt nearly rolling off him in waves.

"I believe that was the general idea, wasn't it?" he sneered.

The disdain in the other man's voice would have stopped Harry moments ago, but the dark-haired man was too far gone to care. Wordlessly he motioned for Draco to lie back on the bed. Harry scooped more lubricant out of the pot and coated Draco's erection with it. The blond's eyes closed tightly at the sensation of the cool liquid coating his arousal, his lips twisted into a grimace as though he were fighting some sort of internal battle. He remained stoically silent, not stopping Harry, but doing nothing to encourage him.

Harry straddled Draco and slowly guided his cock into his arse. He had complete control; Draco had gone stock-still underneath him. Harry eased himself down onto the blond's cock, moaning quietly at the sensation of being filled. Draco was panting at the effort of restraining himself, his hands fisting in the duvet underneath them to prevent him from grabbing Harry's hips to guide the other man's movements, eyes still tightly closed.

Harry swallowed the knot that had formed in his throat at the sight of his coldly unresponsive lover. He closed his eyes to hide the slight sheen of unfallen tears as he began to move, slowly at first and then harder as his need for release grew. Draco bit down on his lower lip to keep from crying out. Despite his efforts to remain still, his hips bucked slightly, meeting Harry's thrusts.

Harry cried out as Draco's cock brushed his prostate. He moved faster and harder, driving himself down onto Draco's erection in a merciless rhythm. He brought his hand up to fist his own cock, stroking himself in time with the thrusts.

"Shit!" Harry yelled as he came, his come spilling over his fist and shooting onto Draco's stomach. Draco's own orgasm followed almost immediately, causing the blond's eyes to shoot open in surprise. He came silently, arching up off the bed, his eyes wide as he stared in wonder at Harry.

Neither said anything for a long moment, their gazes locked. Harry broke the spell by rolling to the side, careful to make sure their bodies weren't touching when he settled against the bed.

Harry dropped his sweaty head onto his pillow heavily. He looked over at his thoroughly debauched blond bed partner, his eyes heavy with guilt and shame. Grey eyes flashed at him in defiance.

"This isn't going to work," Harry said gently, wincing at the disbelief that shone through Draco's eyes.

"This isn't going to work?" the deep voice spat angrily. "This isn't going to *work*? Fuck you, Harry. Oh, wait. I just fucking *did*."

Harry drew a hand through his thick hair. He had known it was a bad idea from the start. He should have said no; in fact, he had said no. He had said no repeatedly, coming up with dozens of reasons why this encounter was a horrible idea. Every reason had been countered with a different argument, days of fighting leading up to this moment.

His resolve had held until this morning, when he woke to find a pair of soft lips nibbling their way down his stomach. His sleep-muddled brain hadn't registered whose lips they were until they were wrapped around his hardened cock, and by then the jolt of seeing the gorgeous grey eyes above the talented mouth watching him with calm calculation had been too much. He hadn't been able to say no.

But now, as the sweat on their skin cooled and the late morning sunshine cast patterns across the quilt Molly Weasley had made for him and Ginny last Christmas, the impossibility of the situation – the *wrongness* of it – came crashing down around him.

"That's right, you did. You fucked me. You can't tell me you enjoyed it. That it made you happy. That it was something you *wanted* to do," Harry said harshly. "I know it wasn't."

Draco's head shook angrily, tears forming in the grey eyes.

"When has this ever been about what *I* wanted? This is what you wanted. What *I* had to give *you* to stop you from making a horrible mistake."

"No!" Harry said forcefully, causing the blond head to snap up to look at him. "No. *This* was the horrible mistake. This is insane. How could you possibly have thought this would change anything? What kind of life would this be?"

"You know I'm the only one who can make you happy, Harry," the cold voice snarled, bringing dozens of memories of school yard confrontations with the blond searing through Harry's mind. He hadn't heard that tone from Draco's voice in a very long time.

"Merlin, Ginny, I'm so sorry," he said quietly, throwing his feet over the edge of the bed and standing. He walked naked to the armoire, grabbing the first thing he could get his hands on – a green silk shirt he knew Draco loved and a pair of denims.

There wasn't any resolution to this situation that wouldn't hurt someone, Harry thought remorsefully. He honestly couldn't say how he'd landed himself in this situation, torn between his wife and his lover. One thing was for sure, though. It was ending today.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Harry rasped, his voice barely a whisper as he watched his wife's features begin to ripple into focus as the Polyjuice wore off. Softly mussed blond hair grew into a disheveled nest of red; perfectly pale skin became dotted with light freckles.

"You're going to him, aren't you?" she asked, her voice dripping with accusation.

Harry stilled, the denims he had been pulling on frozen on his hips, unbuttoned. He turned to face her. He owed her that much, after all. She was his wife of five years. The woman he was leaving for his lover, his soul mate, the man he had been cheating on her with for most of their marriage.

"Yes," he said simply.

"I'll never forgive you for this, Harry. If you leave now you won't be welcomed back after you change your mind again," she said bitterly. "I won't let you come back to me if you leave now, Harry, not like last time."

Harry was silent for so long Ginny thought he meant to leave without another word. But as he neared the doorway he paused and gazed at her, his eyes full of sorrow and regret.

"I know, Gin. Neither will he," he said softly.

His last conversation with Draco had been clear. Harry had to choose between the two. Choose between his wife – the sister of his best friend, the daughter of his surrogate parents – and the love of his life, the only person who truly understood him. The man who could make him so angry he lost control of his magic; the man who could make him so aroused he lost control of his mind. He'd left Ginny for him once before, but returned because she had thought she was pregnant. Draco had issued his ultimatum a month later, when Ginny had confessed she wasn't pregnant after all. Two more months of constant fighting with his wife – and the heartbreaking absence of his lover – had come to a head today. He wouldn't be back if he left Ginny; there was no way in hell Draco would let him.

Ginny's eyes took on a slightly mad light. She scrambled up from the bed, clutching the duvet around her slim body.

"Harry. Don't give up on us. Don't give up on *this*," she said, pleading. "I'll keep taking the potion for as long as you want. Please, Harry. You can keep our life together and still have him that way. It's the next best thing."

Harry shook his head slightly. Ginny, he knew, would never speak to him again. The rest of the

Weasleys would eventually forgive him, or they wouldn't. He couldn't deny this part of himself any longer. It wasn't fair to him, nor was it fair to her.

"Oh, Gin," he said sadly. "You deserve to be more than the next best thing."

Harry watched as his beautiful wife slumped back onto the bed, her defeated acceptance of the situation clear as the fight left her eyes. Harry slipped out of the room, sure in his decision. He took a deep breath as he stepped into the hallway to Apparate toward his future. Draco.

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Chapter: 2

View disclaimer and warnings in Chapter 1.

Draco sat in front of a roaring fire in the library, a glass of Firewhisky forgotten in his hands.

Two months, he thought angrily, his lips drawing together tightly. It had been two fucking months since he last saw Harry.

Draco closed his eyes, willing away tears he knew would come if he let them. He knew Harry wanted a family so badly he could fucking taste it, which is why he hadn't stopped him from going back to his wife. But the stupid shrew hadn't been pregnant.

He was certain she'd fabricated the whole thing, but Harry, his darling, trusting Harry, hadn't wanted to believe that of Ginny. So he stayed with her, comforting her over the loss of a child that had likely never existed, miserable but unwilling to put himself first.

Typical Potter behavior, Draco thought dryly. So he'd played his hand like the Slytherin he was, demanding that Harry leave his wife once and for all and commit to a relationship with him. All or nothing.

And look what it's gotten you, you idiot, Draco berated himself. *Nothing. That's what.*

It had been horrible to share Harry with his wife, to spend countless hours consoling the man when he broke down over the duplicity of their affair, knowing he'd be going back to Ginny's bed

a few hours later. But Draco was finding out that it was worse to not have him at all.

Draco moved his leg restlessly, a sure sign he was distressed. He was so lost in thought he didn't see his mother enter the room. Narcissa's eyes narrowed as she watched her son.

"A Malfoy never fidgets. It is unbecoming," she said from her position in the doorway.

Draco started, raising his head. He quickly masked his surprise at her unexpected appearance, wondering for a moment if he'd managed to wallow away an entire day unknowingly.

"Mother," he said, rising politely. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to greet you. I didn't expect you until tomorrow. Is father here as well?"

Narcissa inclined her head, accepting her son's apology. She struggled to keep her face neutral as she swept into the room and took a seat on the sofa near the fire.

"He remained behind in Greece. He had an urgent matter arise unexpectedly, but he will be joining us for dinner. I believe he will be bringing a guest with him."

She saw Draco stiffen slightly. Allowing herself a small smile, she reassured her son.

"I've already spoken to the house-elves; preparations have been made," she said, bringing a slim hand up to pat a stray hair back into place. "Your father should be here shortly. You should change for dinner. Your grey dress robes would be appropriate, I think."

Draco bit back a retort, choosing instead to nod to his mother and head to his rooms.

Waltzing in here unannounced, with a guest, no less, and demanding I change into formal robes, he thought caustically. *Am I or am I not the master of Malfoy Manor? I feel like a bloody 12 year old.*

His mood darkened even more when he reached his bedchamber, noting that the robes his mother had suggested were already laying out on the bed. He kicked his shoes off with a sigh, heading into the bathroom for a quick shower. He shook his head fondly, smiling despite himself. His mother was definitely something else.

A house-elf popped in to tell Draco his father and guest had arrived, and drinks were being served in the drawing room. Draco fortified himself with a sigh, fastening his silver cufflinks. He indulged in a moment of self-pity, stroking the cufflink in his hand and its ornately engraved D and H, a gift from Harry two Christmases ago. He slipped his aloof Malfoy mask into place and Apparated downstairs, appearing just outside the French doors that led to the drawing room. He was surprised to hear his mother's tinkling laugh and an answering baritone chuckle from his father; the guest must be a friend of the family, since such intimacies were rarely shared with the outside world. While far from perfect, the Malfoys were not the heartless bastards most of the Wizarding world assumed them to be. As Draco opened the doors, the polite smile he had fixed

to his face gave way to unmasked shock.

"Draco, that is no way to greet a guest," Narcissa chided, her lovely mouth drawn into a teasing smile. She stepped backward into her husband's embrace, both of them watching Draco steadily. The open display of affection in the presence of a guest would normally have surprised Draco, but his mind was still whirling with the shock of seeing Harry Potter laughing with his parents in his drawing room.

"Harry came to visit me this afternoon, Draco," his father said, no trace of mocking in his tone. "We had a rather enlightening conversation."

Draco's eyes shifted from Harry to his father warily. His parents did not know of his relationship with Harry. No one knew.

"I believe the house-elves are ready to serve, Draco," his mother said, her eyes dancing. "Your father and I will go on through. Join us soon, won't you?"

Harry waited until Narcissa and Lucius had left the room before taking a tentative step toward Draco.

"I've spoken with your father," Harry said softly, his eyes locked on Draco's.

"So I heard," Draco said, his voice thick. Harry's sudden appearance could mean only one thing; he had made his decision. Draco studied the dark-haired man's face, desperate for any clue as to what the decision had been.

"I told him my intentions," Harry continued, closing the distance between them. He stopped mere inches from Draco, and Draco had to still his hand before it could reach over to caress Harry's jaw.

"Intentions?" Draco asked, blinking slowly. The moment was surreal; he couldn't make his brain keep up. The joy and fear of seeing Harry after two months was too much, and he felt as though he was seeing the world through a hazy curtain.

Harry laughed, delighted that his presence had so befuddled the blond. He took Draco's hand.

"I needed his approval so he would give me this," Harry said, a hopeful smile lighting his face.

Harry reached into his pocket, pulling out an onyx ring. The Malfoy family crest glinted in the firelight as Harry held it out to Draco.

"That's the Malfoy signet ring," Draco said dumbly, his brow furrowed. "Why would he have given you this? It passes to the family heir upon his engagement –"

Draco broke off, his mind finally catching up. His breath hitched as he swallowed back the

threatening tears. Still reeling from Harry's sudden appearance, he struggled to compose himself.

"You mean – you've done it?"

Harry took a deep breath, struggling to hold back tears of his own. His voice was heavy with emotion as he answered.

"The divorce filing was signed today. I went to your father as soon as the ink had dried. I want to marry you, Draco," Harry said. He looked down almost shyly, studying their joined hands.

"Harry, are you sure? You've only just left your wife. It's enough that you're here. I don't need marriage."

Harry looked up, emerald eyes blazing. Draco's heart skipped a beat; to have all that intensity turned on him was exhilarating.

"But I do," Harry said earnestly, his expression telling Draco everything he needed to know.

Draco dipped his head to capture Harry's mouth in a brutal kiss. They would need to talk about the details of Harry's divorce from Ginny later, and the problems that would likely emerge when they went public with their relationship and their intentions to marry. Draco knew nothing had really been settled, not until they sat down to have a real discussion about their future. At the moment, though, he could think of nothing but the beautiful man in front of him. He'd be damned if he would let Harry slip through his fingers again.

The two jumped apart guiltily when they heard Lucius clear his throat.

"If everything has been settled between the two of you, I'll ask you to join us in the dining room," he said, his smirk adding unexpected warmth to his grey eyes. "Your mother and I are returning to Greece this evening, so we'd best get the evening started."

Draco drew in a shaky breath, trying desperately to steady himself. He knew what he must look like: tear-stained, flushed and wrinkled. Hardly the image the Malfoy heir should project.

"Of course, Father. Harry and I apologize for delaying," he said, grabbing Harry's hand to lead him from the room.

"No apologies are necessary, son. May I be the first to congratulate you and Harry on your engagement?" his gaze swept over both men, looking for a sign that things had gone the way Harry had hoped.

"Thank you, sir," Harry said with a bright smile. "Draco hasn't officially accepted my proposal, but I am confident that he will."

Draco barely suppressed an eye roll, stopping abruptly. He turned, in full view of his father, and

took Harry's face between his hands. He pulled Harry closer, kissing him gently before releasing him.

"Of course I'll marry you, you dolt," Draco said, exasperated.

Harry just beamed, sliding the Malfoy signet ring onto Draco's finger. It tingled as it magically constricted around his finger; he could feel the metal warm as the full responsibilities of being the head of the Malfoy household settled onto him.

"Father," Draco gasped, surprised at the sensation. He knew the ring would pass to him upon his marriage, but he didn't realize his father would truly cede all control over the family and its wards and assets.

Lucius inclined his head briefly, walking through to the adjoining dining room. Draco and Harry followed, taking their places when Lucius moved to stand behind Narcissa's chair. He rested his hands on her shoulders, her own coming up to grip his.

"You and your family are the future of the Malfoy line, Draco. All rights and responsibilities have passed to you. Consider it my blessing on your union," Lucius said, giving Narcissa's shoulders a squeeze before gracefully taking the seat next to hers.

Draco was speechless. His parents – who, to his knowledge, hadn't even known he was gay, let alone in a relationship with Harry Potter – had just stepped down as the head of the family to make way for him and his husband-to-be. Who was, not inconsequentially, a man his father had been tasked to kill several times. Draco couldn't wrap his head around it.

"Thank you, Narcissa, Lucius," Harry said, toasting them with his wineglass. "I know your blessing means the world to Draco."

The rest of the dinner passed in a blur for Draco, who was still in a daze over the fact that Harry had not only chosen him over Ginny, he had gotten a divorce and planned to marry him. He barely noticed when his parents embraced both of them warmly before Flooing back to the Malfoy villa in Greece, where they had been living nearly full-time since Draco came of age and took over the Manor.

"You look like you've been hit with a Confundus," Harry chuckled, clasping hands with Draco and leading him back into the drawing room.

"I feel as though I have been," Draco said. He gave Harry's hand a squeeze before pulling away and crossing his arms in a defensive stance. "I haven't had a word from you for two months, Harry."

Harry sobered, his eyes clouding with guilt and regret.

"I was trying to make it work with Gin, since I thought she was carrying my child," Harry started

slowly, moving to the sideboard to pour himself a drink. He didn't want one, but in truth, he needed the extra time to carefully choose his words.

"She told me a few days after I went back to her that she'd never been pregnant," Harry continued softly, the sadness in his voice evident. "I was shattered. I love you, Draco, I do. I know it now, and I knew it then. Hell, I knew it when I said my vows in front of 300 guests and half a dozen reporters."

Harry poured a Firewhisky for Draco, who accepted the finely cut crystal glass of amber liquid warily, as though he was afraid of it. Harry's jaw clenched; he knew this was going to be a horrible discussion, but he knew it had to happen. He didn't want a relationship built on deceptions and half-truths like the one he'd had with Ginny.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and pressed on, staring past Draco. The blond's face was full of conflicting emotions; relief at having Harry back, anger that he'd left in the first place, worry that he'd leave again.

"But to have a family –" Harry broke off, his voice wavering. Draco felt his own heart break along with Harry's. He knew how much that meant to Harry, both to the man standing before him and the unloved orphan he'd been years ago. Harry steadied himself. "To have a family is just about the only thing I've ever wanted. I'd trade everything I have – the fame, the Galleons, hell, even my magic – just to have that."

Draco's chest tightened, and he found it hard to breathe. He had always understood why Harry married Ginny, why he pushed aside his feelings for Draco to be with her. But he'd never fully appreciated the intensity behind the actions; how much they must have cost Harry. Before, he'd only thought of how much they cost *him.*

"I've been battling with myself over it for weeks now. And then suddenly, three days ago, it just became clear," Harry said, hesitating. He'd been unsure about whether or not to tell Draco about the Polyjuice incident, but it just didn't feel right. There was no reason to subject him to the gory details. The story hurt enough as it was. "It was obvious that Gin would do anything she could to manipulate me into staying with her. It all crashed down on me. What we feel for each other, it's different. *You'd* never manipulate me into doing something just to hold it over me as a bargaining chip."

Harry shook his head, gripping the glass in his hand. "If I did have children with Ginny, my whole life would revolve around her. I'd been thinking of her as an innocent victim in all this – but she has a part in it, too. She'd have used that child to control me for the rest of my life."

Harry looked up, his eyes searching Draco's for a sign of how this revelation had affected him.

"And I knew you'd never do that. And just like that, years of internal battles were just over." Harry swallowed, steeling himself for Draco's reaction. "I'm so sorry it took me so long, love. I hope you'll still have me, because the only one I want is you. You are my family."

Draco swallowed and nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Yes, we are a family," Draco said carefully, sliding his hands up Harry's arms to rest on his shoulders. "But that doesn't mean we can't have children. We *will* have children, Harry."

Draco raised his eyes to meet Harry's, smiling softly at the dark-haired man's bewildered expression.

"We can adopt, or we can have our own children through a surrogate. Wizards can't have children, but that doesn't mean we have no options," Draco said, his throat tightening at the sight of the hope that flared in Harry's green eyes. "You never had to choose between children and me, love. It was always possible to have both."

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Chapter: 3

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. I don't own them, I just enjoy their company from time to time.

Harry leaned forward, raising his hand to caress Draco's smooth chin. He let his fingers wander over the blond's face, tracing the features he knew by heart, both by sight and touch. Draco shivered as the gentle fingers ghosted over the shell of his ear before fanning out into his hair to pull him into a soft kiss.

Draco's eyes drifted closed as he shifted, bringing his body flush against Harry's. He deepened the kiss by running his tongue against Harry's lips, urging them open so he could delve inside. Harry groaned, tightening his arms around Draco as though he was trying to push out anything that could come between them – the painful confessions of the evening, the memories of his life with Ginny, even the air itself – Harry blocked everything out except for the beautiful man in front of him.

Harry pulled back, his lips swollen and red. He rested his forehead against Draco's, allowing both of them to catch their breath.

"You'd better take us to your room, unless you'd like to christen the drawing room," he said, his voice husky.

Draco laughed, his eyes flicking to the smattering of portraits around the room. Most looked back with steely glares, though some lucky enough to have a second portrait had deserted the

room.

"I doubt the Malfoy ancestors would appreciate that, love," he said, his tone full of warmth.

Draco wrapped his arms around Harry tightly, giving him a squeeze before Apparating them to his suite. He could still barely believe that Harry was here, at the Manor. They were about to make love with absolutely nothing hanging over their heads: None of Harry's guilt about cheating on Ginny, none of Draco's resentment about taking a backseat to Harry's marriage, no quiet regret about the brevity of their time together, no need to hold back on declarations of love and possession. Draco's heart soared. Harry wouldn't be jumping up to shower the moment after they made love in an attempt to wash the scent of Draco off his skin before heading back to his wife. He wouldn't be steering Draco's sharp teeth away from marking his body for fear of leaving evidence for Ginny to find. He wouldn't be sneaking out in the dead of night, distracted by the excuses he was weaving to explain his absence to his wife long before actually leaving Draco's side.

"Mine," Draco growled, shifting Harry to the bed the second they appeared in the room.

Harry, still disoriented from the Apparation, allowed his usually passive partner to take the lead. Draco's slender fingers tore at Harry's dress robes, popping buttons and ripping fabric. His lover's eagerness filled Harry with tingling warmth; he had sorely missed Draco's enthusiasm and passion in the two months they'd been apart. His encounter with Ginny a few days before had been a hollow one, lacking the crazed urgency that he and Draco usually displayed in bed. Harry absently wondered if the desperation they felt while making love would fade now that they had unhindered access to each other. *Merlin, I hope not*, Harry thought, groaning as Draco's warm mouth engulfed his throbbing cock.

"Yours," Harry agreed, arching up and moaning as Draco's talented tongue flicked over the head of his cock, sending shudders of pleasure down his spine, before licking a path down to Harry's entrance.

Harry shuddered, his hands clutching the duvet underneath him so hard his knuckles turned white. This wasn't how their lovemaking usually went; Harry felt an indescribably thrill at Draco taking charge.

"Holy fuck, Draco!" Harry panted as Draco's velvety tongue circled his puckered hole, his hot breath giving Harry shivers.

He keened, unable to stop the needy sound as Draco's tongue pushed into him. Draco moaned in response, and the vibrations were nearly too much for Harry. Harry ground against Draco's mouth, his gasps almost sobs as the blond brought a hand up to fist his weeping cock.

"Shit, Draco! I can't – I'm going to –" Harry gave up trying to speak, giving himself over to the hard climax that rocked through him, his arse clenching around Draco's tongue while he shot ropes of pearly white come over Draco's hand.

Without giving Harry a chance to come down from his orgasm, Draco shifted and rubbed the tip of his erection against Harry's loosened entrance. Grey eyes sought assurance, silently asking Harry's permission to continue. Both men considered themselves bisexual, but Draco was much more comfortable with the role of bottom than Harry. Though Harry did bottom often, it was never something Draco would take for granted.

"Please," Harry gasped, pushing up and forcing the head of Draco's cock to slip past the ring of muscle. He met Draco's gaze, his own green eyes burning with love and desire. "Draco. *Please*."

The need in Harry's voice was Draco's undoing. He thrust into his lover, losing himself in the sensation of Harry's tight, welcoming heat. His eyes burned, and Draco closed them to hold back the threatening tears. It felt like coming home.

"Harry," he whispered, quickening his thrusts. "My Harry."

Harry's eyes pricked at the raw emotion in Draco's voice. He smiled, drawing Draco down for a kiss, his tongue twining with the blond's and mimicking his frenzied thrusts. Draco sat back, pulling Harry up with him so he was cradled in his lap. He ran his hands over every inch of Harry he could reach, relishing the feel of the hot skin beneath his fingers. Harry braced himself against strong shoulders, using them for leverage as he rode Draco's cock. He felt Draco tense and shudder, pulling away to bury his head in Harry's neck as he came.

"I love you. Oh Merlin, Harry, I love you!" he screamed, his hands gripping Harry's slender hips hard enough to bruise.

The two stayed locked in their sweaty embrace for several minutes, moving only when Harry grimaced at the feeling of Draco's spent cock slipping out of him. He gathered the still-panting blond in his arms as he scooted further back on the bed, pulling Draco's head onto his chest so he could stroke his silky hair. Harry pressed a kiss behind Draco's ear, telling him softly how much he loved him over and over again.

"Mother of Merlin," Harry said when the other man's breathing had evened. "Where the hell did that come from, Dray?"

Draco smiled, his softening cock pressing against Harry's hip. Harry usually dominated their lovemaking sessions, but tonight he'd needed to stake his claim over the dark-haired man.

"Mmm," he said, capturing Harry's mouth in another deep kiss. "Missed you."

Draco lowered his copy of *The Daily Prophet* to look over at Harry, who was completely focused on buttering the toast in his hand. Even after nearly three weeks, he was still somewhat surprised to see Harry across the breakfast table each morning. The blond was still having a hard time believing the domestic scene was real.

"What?" Harry asked without looking up, reaching for the marmalade.

"Hmm?" Draco asked, shifting his gaze guiltily back to his paper.

"I can feel you looking at me, Draco," Harry huffed impatiently. Draco had been watching him like a hawk for days. "I'm not going anywhere this time."

Draco set the paper down, all pretenses lost.

"I'm not going to apologize for staring at my fiance, Harry," he said pointedly.

"I'm not asking you to, Dray. I'm asking you to trust that I've chosen to spend the rest of my life with you, and that I'm not going to change my mind." Harry shook his head, summoning patience. He knew Draco was vulnerable and insecure about bringing their relationship out into the open, and he knew those unfamiliar feelings were hard for the Slytherin to swallow.

"Listen," Harry said, rising to grab Draco's hands. "I love you. I will be free to marry you in –" Harry broke off, looking down at his watch – "approximately 72 minutes. So stop worrying."

Draco grinned, the butterflies in his stomach quieting.

"Woe unto you if you expect Narcissa Malfoy to plan a wedding in just over an hour," he joked, squeezing Harry's hands before releasing them.

Harry gave an exaggerated shudder, throwing his hands up in surrender.

"That woman is out of control. At last count, the list was up to over 600 guests. Do you even *know* 600 people, Draco?"

"Of course not. But do 600 people know *us*? Easily," Draco said, picking the paper back up to scan the front page.

"I still don't see why that means they all have to be invited to the wedding," Harry whined. He looked up, noticing that Draco's expression had hardened. "What?"

Draco slid the paper across the table, his mouth pursed in disgust. Harry saw Ginny's tearful face staring out from the pages, her mother and father at her side. He barked out a harsh laugh as he read the headline – "Ginny's Story: Wife of the Boy-Who-Lived-A-Double-Life". A story speculating on the outcome of today's divorce hearing accompanied the photo, and a grainy shot of a two men locked in a kiss – one dark haired, one blond – played in a loop underneath. The blond had the other man pinned against a grimy wall in the lavatory of a notorious gay nightclub in Diagon Alley.

"I understand why you're upset, but don't worry," Harry said gravely, his voice betrayed by green eyes dancing with laughter. "Anyone who knows you in the least would see through that hoax of

a picture. As if you'd ever step foot in that club, let alone snog me in its disgusting lav? And that bloke must be a good three inches shorter than I am – really, who does Skeeter think she's kidding?"

Draco's tension melted away at Harry's reaction. He'd been braced for this kind of bad press, but he expected Harry to take it much harder than this. Part of him had been convinced that Harry would leave him as soon as the first sordid article appeared. He'd expected anger, shame and ranting, not laughing and jokes.

A bedraggled house-elf burst into the room, trailing a beautiful tawny owl, which landed near Harry's plate and held out a leg tied with parchment. The house-elf stopped near the table, wringing its hands, its spindly fingers clenched.

"Master Draco, Tizzy is sorry! Tizzy is telling the owl to be waiting, but the bad owl would not stop," she said, her thin voice full of dread.

"It's alright, Tizzy," Harry said, glancing up at the distraught house-elf with a smile. He stroked the owl's soft feathers before untying the letter, which was sealed with his lawyer's crest.

Draco suppressed an eye-roll at Harry's light treatment of the house-elf, but softened when Harry challenged him with a raised brow. Things were changing around Malfoy Manor, and Draco wasn't sure all of the changes were for the best. He waved the house-elf away with a dismissive gesture.

"You may go, Tizzy," he said, earning a sigh from Harry. With an inward groan, he added, "No need to, er, punish yourself. Just return to, uh, whatever it is you do."

The house-elf's large eyes filled with tears, and it launched itself at a startled Draco.

"Tizzy thanks you, Master Draco! You is a kind master! Tizzy isn't deserving a master like you, Master Draco!"

"Tizzy," Harry said with a laugh, placing a hand on his fiance's rigid arm. "There is no need for such a display. Please return to the kitchens."

The house-elf curtsied deeply before Disapparating with a soft pop. Draco shot Harry a censorious look, brushing at his clothes where the house-elf's grip had wrinkled them. He'd just finished smoothing out the creases when was startled by a lap full of Harry Potter.

"You're so sexy when you're kind to house-elves, Dray," Harry purred, bringing his mouth down on Draco's.

Draco leaned into the kiss, his hands roaming up Harry's robe-clad back, massaging the smooth skin and hard muscles underneath. Harry groaned, pressing his obvious arousal into Draco's own and grinding against him before reluctantly pulling away. Harry hopped up, pulling his own chair

closer to Draco's and settling into it with a sigh.

"The letter was from Abramson," Harry said, motioning for Draco to read the parchment. "This morning's hearing has been postponed. Ginny's asking for an extension to delay the divorce proceedings. Apparently she has some 'new information' that will supposedly change things, and her lawyer needs time to update their demands."

Draco's annoyance at Harry's departure from his lap faded as he read the contents of the missive. Abramson was a lawyer in the firm the Malfoy family had on permanent retainer, but he'd never worked with the man before. Harry had contacted Abramson on his own to start the divorce proceedings the day he left Ginny.

"You don't think she'll claim she's pregnant again, do you?" Draco asked, narrowing his eyes as he scanned the brief letter once again.

"She can't," Harry said with a shrug. He hesitated, unsure how much to disclose. He still hadn't told Draco about the Polyjuice incident. "I haven't had sex with her since before I left her the first time."

Draco's head shot up at the news, shock evident on his face. When Harry had gone back to Ginny after hearing she was pregnant, Draco had assumed he'd lost Harry forever. He'd asked no questions about their relationship when Harry showed up in his drawing room two months later; truthfully, he hadn't wanted to know any details.

"I only went back because of the baby," Harry said, his eyes shuttering at the mention of the pregnancy. "And I only stayed because, regardless of everything else, she's family to me. I couldn't walk out right after she'd lost the baby. It wasn't until a few weeks later that I started to really question whether or not there had been a baby at all."

Draco nodded, his heart aching for Harry's loss. Whether or not Ginny had actually been pregnant was immaterial; in Harry's mind, he'd lost a child either way.

"Abramson doesn't need to see you until this afternoon. Fancy a seeker's game?" Draco asked, his mouth lifted in a hopeful smile. He couldn't change Harry's past, but he could change his future.

"Last one to the pitch has to deal with Hermione's next S.P.E.W. inspection?"

Draco grimaced, bolting from his chair. There was no way he wanted to deal with Granger's house-elf idiocy.

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Chapter: 4

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They aren't mine, and what a pity that is. I'd *definitely* have more fun with them than Ms. Rowling does.

"Can she do that?" Draco's voice was steely, his grey eyes flashing with anger.

Harry's attorney shuffled through the parchment on his desk. Finding the one he sought, he consulted it, and then pushed it across the large cherry desk to Draco.

"She can ask for whatever she wants to, Mr. Malfoy," Abramson said, nodding at Harry as he spoke. "The divorce code puts no restrictions on what a claimant can demand. That doesn't mean she'll receive everything she asks for, of course."

Harry took a deep breath, flexing his fingers as much as Draco's vise-like grip would allow. He didn't let go; he knew squeezing the hell out of his hand was helping Draco keep control of both his magic and his sharp tongue.

"Thank you, Abramson. I'm just not sure how Ginny could possibly ask for everything in the Potter and Black vaults. Surely that's unusual?"

Draco twitched beside him, and Abramson shot him a wary glance before answering.

"It is unusual, yes. I can only assume Mrs. Potter thought that starting out asking for everything would give her greater leverage later on. When the judge demands she cuts her request, she'll still be able to ask for a sizeable sum."

"The money hardly matters, though I'd spend double just to make sure that shrew never sees a Knut of Harry's money," Draco said through gritted teeth. "What concerns me is the allusion to 'shocking evidence' about their relationship and the 'extenuating circumstances' she claims complicates the proceedings."

Abramson nodded thoughtfully, unfolding his hands from his lap to gesture. He'd given quite a bit of thought to those claims as well, and he agreed they were concerning, if only because they had no idea what her attorney was planning.

"Unfortunately, there's no way to force their hand in this. Because this is a just a preliminary hearing and not a formal trial, Mrs. Potter's attorney doesn't have to give us notice of the evidence he'll be entering," Abramson said, frowning slightly. "I'm afraid we'll just have to prepare for every eventuality we can."

Harry nodded, rising. Draco resisted, obviously wanting to stay and discuss the case further.

Harry tugged at their joined hands, pulling the blond out of the chair.

"We've requested copies of her medical records in the event Mrs. Potter tries to use her pregnancy -" Draco made a low noise, and Abramson swallowed quickly "—or non-pregnancy, as it may be, against Mr. Potter in the proceedings. There's really nothing else we can do at the moment."

Draco's stance softened slightly at the pleading look in Harry's eyes, and he allowed himself to be led to the door.

"The hearing is slated to start next week. Be on the lookout for any communication from Mrs. Potter. It's not unlikely she'll approach you to try to come to an agreement out of court," Abramson warned. "It's quite common in high-profile divorces, especially ones where one party brought nothing into the marriage."

Draco gave Abramson a curt nod, reflexively bringing an arm around Harry when he felt the man tense against him. Harry still wanted to believe the best of Ginny, even after all this.

"—just come out for a drink, mate?"

Draco poked his head around the corner at the sound of Ron Weasley's voice. Harry was crouched on the carpet in front of the fire, talking to his oldest friend.

"I'd love to see you, Ron, and Hermione, too. But it's just not a good idea for me to go out before the trial. Skeeter's been staking out Diagon Alley, just waiting for me appear so they can fling questions at me."

"It's been ages since we've had a chance to talk, Harry," Ron whined. "Just a few drinks. You can Floo directly to the pub, so no one will know."

Draco stepped into the room, coming up behind Harry and running a hand up his back to rest on his shoulders. Even through the distortion of the fire, he could see Ron tense.

"Why don't you and Granger come here, then? You three can catch up all you like, well away from the prying eyes of the media," he said, the welcoming tone of his voice not matched by the hardness of his eyes.

"That's a great idea, love!" Harry said, leaning back into Draco's touch. "It's settled, then. You and Hermione can come here, and we can spend as much time as you like talking. I'll open up the Floo to admit you."

Hermione's head came into view, pushing an annoyed-looking Ron out of the way.

"Thanks for the offer, Malfoy, but we really just wanted to talk to Harry," she said, her expression unsure.

Harry's brow furrowed. He sank back on his heels as Draco's arms came around him, cradling him protectively.

"I know this situation is difficult for you," Draco said graciously. "But I'm a part of Harry's life. I've *been* a part of his life for years. I don't want to horn in on the friendship you three have shared. Your support is important to Harry, and Harry is important to me."

The look in Hermione's eyes softened, but Harry could hear Ron snort in the background. He rolled his eyes, sighing heavily.

"Draco is offering to open his home to you, and I'd be thrilled to see you," Harry said calmly, holding his hand up to stop Ron's interruption before the red-head could get a word in. "That's my only offer. I can't meet you in public, and I won't Floo over to see you out of respect for Ginny. The Floo's open. Come over if you'd like to see me."

With that, Harry ended the Floo call, standing stiffly. His legs and back ached from being hunched over talking to Ron and Hermione. They'd been arguing about when and where to meet for nearly 20 minutes. He absolutely refused to visit them, since they were living at the Burrow while their home was being renovated. Harry didn't think it would be fair to Ginny to show up on her home turf; he wanted to avoid the scene that would occur if she walked in and found him there. Plus, he worried about the reaction he'd get from the other Weasleys. Arthur and Molly had been with Ginny in the photo that ran in the *Daily Prophet*, so Harry wasn't sure if they were openly siding against him or staying neutral, like he hoped Ron and Hermione were. Harry hadn't really spoken more than a few words with either of them since this ordeal began, but he had received several encouraging owls from Hermione.

Draco sidled up behind Harry, strong hands massaging his tense shoulders. He pressed a soft kiss to the nape of Harry's neck, smiling as he nuzzled in to the fine black hairs.

"It will all work out, love," he said quietly, imparting as much comfort and support into the embrace as he could.

"I know it will, Draco. It always does. I just wish for once they'd see things my way instead of fighting me tooth and nail every step of the way," Harry said with a sigh.

He grabbed the parchments he had been reading before Ron's Floo call and threw himself into an undignified heap on the nearest flat surface. Draco, to his credit, only grimaced slightly at the sight of Harry's legs hanging over the side of the antique Victorian Rosewood sofa.

Before he could say anything, the Floo roared to life, and Ron and Hermione stepped out. Ron met Draco's gaze with a fierce glare, but Hermione had the grace to smile and nod slightly at her host. Draco greeted the guests with a little bow before pressing a kiss to Harry's temple and leaving the room.

"I suppose not going out was *his* idea?" Ron spat, his eyes flashing.

"Actually, it was my lawyer's idea. He thought it would be best for the case if I stayed out of the public eye for awhile."

Ron began a retort, but he was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a small house-elf. She curtsied before setting down the tray of tea and snacks she carried on a nearby table. Before she could leave, Hermione stepped forward to catch her attention.

"Did Mr. Malfoy ask you to bring those?" she asked, motioning to the tray.

"Yes, Miss," the elf replied, obviously worried she had done something wrong.

"Thank you, Posie," Harry said gently, shooting Hermione a dirty look. "You may go."

The house-elf started to leave once again, a look of relief passing over her features, when Hermione stopped her.

"Just a moment," she said, digging in her bag to find a scrap of parchment and a self-inking quill. "I don't believe we've met. I am Hermione Granger-Weasley, with the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare. I've conducted several interviews here, but I don't believe you've been on my list."

Posie's eyes grew almost comically large as she looked from Hermione to Harry, clearly unsure what the witch was talking about. Hermione had been conducting inspections and interviews about the treatment of the Malfoy house-elves for the past few weeks, ever since Harry moved into the Manor.

"She wouldn't have appeared on your registry, Hermione," Harry said, motioning for Posie to leave. The house-elf Disapparated, leaving a disgruntled Hermione glaring expectantly into empty space. "Posie has not reached her age of majority yet, which means she is not actually employed by the Malfoy family."

Hermione made an impatient sound, but Harry cut her off.

"Unlike many families, the Malfoys insist their house-elves be educated. They actually fund a small house-elf academy here on the grounds, and they accept elves from Wizarding families across Britain, schooling them for free," Harry said, arching an eyebrow at Hermione.

"Posie is almost finished with her education, which is when she'll get the chance to decide whether or not to enter into a contract with the Malfoy family. All of the family elves serve by choice, not because they have to," he said, his stern gaze making the usually staid Hermione squirm. "She knows how to read and write, and she has received instruction about how best to focus her magic to avoid exhaustion or accidents. She has had extensive tutoring in the history of magic, both from the Wizard and magical creature perspective. When she makes her choice in a

few months, it will be a very well informed one."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Harry shook his head, continuing with his lecture.

"As you can see, the preconceived notions you have of Draco and his family aren't all on-target. I'd like you to keep that in mind. I'd like you to get to know the real Draco."

This time, it was Ron who interrupted. His usually calm eyes were blazing, and a flush that had nothing to do with the heat of the fire crept up his neck and face.

"You think a little house-elf school is enough to redeem what that arsehole and his family did in the name of their so-called *master*? That it makes up for stealing my sister's husband? For convincing the hero of the bloody Wizarding world that he's a poof?"

Harry flinched as though Ron's words had been a physical slap. Hermione reached out to grab Ron's arm, but he shook her off, advancing on Harry.

"You screwed around on my baby sister with that ponce, and you left her for him after everything she has done for you. After everything my entire *family* has done for you! All it takes is Malfoy's cock up your ass for you to turn your back on the people who have loved you and claimed you as one of their own for more than a decade!" The veins in Ron's neck were bulging, his hands clenched at his sides. "The Weasleys took you in when your own flesh-and-blood family wouldn't have you, and this is how you repay us?"

"Ron!" Hermione gasped, her face full of shock and sadness.

"No, Mione. Ginny has been at the Burrow every night since Harry left, crying in Mum's arms because of that bastard," he said, pointing at Harry. "He doesn't even have the decency to wait more than a month after she miscarries to leave her for his lover, a man he'd been sleeping with on the side for Merlin only knows how long. How do you think Ginny feels, Harry, knowing that the cock that was inside her had also been up Malfoy's arse?"

Hot tears spilled down Harry's cheeks as he listened to the man he considered a brother cut him down. He hadn't expected Ron to take his side, exactly, but he also hadn't expected this.

"And after all that, after losing her baby and her husband in a matter of months, Harry refuses to give her what she deserves! He's making her go through the courts to get any money at all! Don't you think she deserves every Sickle in your vaults for what you've put her through?" Ron's voice had risen steadily throughout the diatribe, and Harry cringed each time the volume increased.

"That's enough, Ron," Hermione shouted, slapping her husband across the face. He turned slowly to look her in the eyes, his own blinking in confusion. "It's enough. *Enough*."

Ron grabbed Hermione by the upper arms, shaking her hard several times before pulling her closer to his body, looking down on her with an angry glare. The three stood stock still in the

middle of the drawing room, jumping when the heavy silence was broken by the sharp sound of applause. Hermione stumbled as Ron shoved her toward Harry, who stepped forward to steady her. Draco strode into the room, clapping his hands together.

"Bravo, Weasley. A commendable performance. Either that was the greatest piece of acting I've ever seen, or you've succeeding in staging the longest performance art piece in history with your what – 15 year? – friendship with Harry," Draco drawled, stopping near Harry but not touching him. "The man who fought alongside him against Voldemort, who helped him through the senseless deaths of so many friends and loved ones – there's no way you could be both that man and the vindictive bastard here tonight. So which is it?"

Ron lunged at Draco, but a hastily cast spell stopped him in his tracks. He cast a wild glance around the room to see who had cast the Sticking charm that bound him to the floor, utterly bowled over to see it had been Hermione. Her wand was still leveled at him, shaking, but at the ready.

"Hermione?" he asked, his voice menacingly low.

"No," she said, her voice so quiet he had to strain to hear her, even in the otherwise silent room. "No. You had no right to say those things to Harry. You know Ginny's at fault here, too. They've had problems since before they even married. You know about Dean, and about the decision she made then. You were there when your Mum had to force a Calming Draught down her throat to get her to walk down the aisle."

Harry's pale face turned even whiter at Hermione's words, and Draco's back stiffened. He still didn't close the gap between them, instead shifting closer to Hermione.

"So no, I won't let you blame all of this mess on Harry. And I won't let you make him feel like dirt just because things aren't going your way. I thought you wanted to come here to hear Harry's side of things before it was too late, before you and Ginny did something unforgivable," she continued, her eyes narrowing as she glared at Ron. "Did you think I wouldn't find out what you intended to do? Did you think I'd let you get away with fleecing Harry out of so much money?"

Hermione laughed, a cold sound that Harry had never heard before.

"I thought I knew you, *Ronald*. I thought I knew the man I'd married. It turns out I didn't know you any better than Harry knew Ginny. I'm sure our divorce will be smoother than theirs; after all, I don't have any money."

She closed the gap between her and Harry, holding her arms out in a gesture of apology and remorse.

"I'm sorry, Harry."

He pulled her close, inhaling the sweet scent of her shampoo as he buried his tear-stained face in

her hair. Draco moved quickly, banishing Ron from the room with a flick of his wand.

"Wards," he said shortly, noticing that Harry and Hermione were staring at him. "The head of the family can banish intruders. He'll be fine, just a bit disoriented. The wards will deposit him just outside the Manor's gates."

Hermione led a still-crying Harry over to the couch, pulling him down so he was sitting next to her. Draco paced near the windows, his brow furrowed.

"What do we need to know?" he asked Hermione, worried about some of the things she'd said to Ron.

"He and Ginny planned to present evidence that Harry forced her to terminate a pregnancy two years ago. It was before he took the administrative job, so they planned to say that he forbid her to continue the pregnancy because it would have been detrimental to his career."

Harry's blank gaze worried Draco, but he brushed it aside.

"Two years ago?"

"Yes. Ginny had been sleeping with Dean Thomas, and she got pregnant. She wasn't sure if it was Harry's or Dean's, so she chose to end the pregnancy. Harry never knew," she said, her gaze shifting to Harry's bowed head. "I'm so sorry, Harry."

Draco closed his eyes, stopping near the sofa.

"So she had an affair, and she terminated a pregnancy? That can't be all. You said something about Ron and Ginny getting ready to do something unforgivable."

Hermione swallowed, trying to clear the painful lump that had formed in her throat. She blinked back tears, upset at the thought of her husband's betrayal. Ron's behavior had become increasingly erratic and abusive in the last two years, and she had reached her breaking point. Ron spouting filth at her was nothing new, but she wouldn't let him turn it on Harry.

"Ginny promised him a cut of the money if he testified that Harry beat Ginny," she said, her voice a hoarse whisper. "They planned to present evidence that she lost the baby a few months ago because Harry attacked her."

"*What*?" Harry's head shot up, his expression one of pain and disbelief.

"How would they prove that?" Draco asked, his deceptively calm voice hiding the banking fury underneath.

"Medical records," Hermione said, her voice barely audible. "They have medical records."

"Where did they get faked records?" Draco asked, moving closer to Hermione. The look of absolute anguish on her face told him things he didn't want to believe.

She shook her head, eyes glassy with unshed tears.

"They aren't fake," she said flatly, hugging herself with her arms. "They're mine."

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Chapter: 5

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They don't belong to me, no matter how much I wish they did.

"*They aren't fake," she said flatly, hugging herself with her arms. "They're mine."*

Draco practically vaulted over the back of the sofa to get to Hermione, who had drawn her legs up and hugged them, the dam finally breaking. Harry sat still, staring at Draco wrapping his arms around her, his chest muffling the heart-wrenching sobs that tore from her throat.

The blond met Harry's tormented gaze, both grey and green eyes filled with tears. No one spoke; the sound of Hermione's harsh weeping rang through the room. When Hermione burrowed further into Draco's body, he lifted her gently, settling her on his lap and cradling her like a child. The movement broke through Harry's stupor, and he slid off the sofa, kneeling in front of them and hugging Hermione around the waist, laying his head in her lap. Draco lifted his hand, running his fingers through Harry's thick hair, rubbing comforting circles against his scalp.

Tizzy found the three of them intertwined hours later, long after Harry and Hermione had cried themselves into exhaustion. Draco was afraid to move them, reluctant to disrupt the calm they'd found in sleep. With Tizzy and Posie's help, Draco managed to move Harry and Hermione to the master suite without waking them. He left them curled around each other, faces drawn and pale even in sleep, and made his way to his study.

"Posie," he called, settling himself behind his imposing teak desk.

The house-elf popped into the study carrying a tray with a sandwich and a pot of tea laced with a mild muscle relaxant to relieve the knots in Draco's arms and back, caused by sitting in the same position for hours.

"Sit with Master Harry and Miss Hermione, won't you? Let me know at once if they wake," he said, giving the elf a small smile when she nodded and disappeared.

Draco poured himself a cup of tea – a wry laugh escaping when the faint scent of Elderberries tipped him off to the potion in it – before using his wand to cut through a complex Locking charm on a hidden drawer in the desk. The drawer was warded to Malfoy blood, and further spelled to respond only to his wand. He retrieved a small mirror from the space, placing it gingerly on the desk in front of him.

"*Citatio* Lucius," he said, tapping his wand to the silvery glass. He took a sip of the tea, the tension in his muscles melting away nearly as soon as he'd swallowed the first mouthful.

Moments later, Draco's reflection wavered as Lucius' face swam into focus.

"Son?"

"Father," Draco breathed, instantly feeling as though a weight had lifted from his chest. His father never failed to offer counsel, to help him hash out problems. "I need to see you as soon as possible."

Lucius' grey eyes darkened in concern, fine lines appearing around his mouth as his lips drew together in a frown.

"No one is in danger, but some revelations about Harry's divorce proceedings have surfaced, and I need someone to talk them out with."

Lucius nodded, looking away from the mirror. Draco could hear the faint sound of his mother speaking, answered by the comforting rumble of his father's voice. Just hearing the familiar sounds relaxed Draco more than the potion.

"We're coming home, Draco," Lucius said, his eyes searching Draco's for clues about what had upset his fiercely independent son enough to force him to ask for help. "Get some sleep. Your Mother and I will see you at breakfast."

Draco nodded, releasing a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

"Come prepared to stay for awhile," he said with a grim smile. "This is going to take a long time to explain, and even longer to fix."

Dusky rose-hued streaks shot through the dark sky, heralding the arrival of dawn. Hermione watched the day approach without the slightest flicker of emotion, her lips pressed together tightly. Harry thrashed restlessly on her right side, his cherry red lips drawn down in a frown. She ran a hand absently over his jaw, her touch dispelling whatever nightmare had caused his discomfort. On her other side, Draco lay on his stomach, his arm heavy around her torso. His hand gripped Harry's, their fingers twined.

So this is what real love looks like, she thought distantly. She moved slightly, shifting closer into

Draco's embrace. Part of her feared his nearness and warmth were the only things holding her together. After years of Ron's escalating abuse, she marveled at the simple act of being touched by a man without any undercurrent of fear. She kept herself still, her thoughts running wildly, enjoying the sensation of being cared for. She certainly hadn't felt anything like this in her five year marriage, not even before the abuse started. Her brown eyes flashed at the ludicrous thought that she found more comfort in the arms of a man she'd never even called by his given name than she'd ever found in Ron's.

She turned her impassive gaze on the tawny owl that glided into the bedroom, accompanied by Tizzy. Hermione frowned as the bird landed in front of her, proffering the official-looking scroll on its leg. Her frown deepened as she realized her name was on emblazoned on the creamy parchment. She pulled her arm free from Harry as gently as she could, shifting Draco over so she could sit up. Her careful movements awakened Draco, who promptly pulled his arm back and sat up as well.

Hermione broke the wax seal, not even glancing up as the owl hopped backward and took off, its mission accomplished. Draco nodded to Tizzy, who Disapparated, presumably to the kitchens to prepare breakfast.

"This is a copy of a divorce filing," Hermione said, her voice scratchy. She leafed through the accompanying parchment, her eyes widening as she saw her name. "*My* divorce filing."

Draco ran a soothing hand down her robe-clad back, his fingers rubbing at the tension he found there.

"I hope it wasn't too presumptuous, but I took the liberty of Owling my attorney last night to get the process started," he said, his tone not remorseful at all. "The sooner that bastard is out of all of our lives, the better."

Hermione's eyes pricked with tears, her chest tightening at the thought of being free of Ron and his manipulative family. She leaned over, crushing Draco to her in a one-armed hug.

"Thank you," she whispered, her lips curving in the first genuine smile she'd had in ages.

"Harry is still asleep, and Hermione is eating in my suite," Draco said, bowing to his father and holding the chair out for his mother.

Draco took his own seat, reaching out automatically to wrap his hands around a cup of tea to keep himself from fidgeting. His parents didn't miss the gesture from their usually calm and aloof son.

"We had an unpleasant visit from Ron Weasley yesterday," Draco began, launching into the tale with no preamble. He didn't stop until he came to the end, telling them about the start of Hermione's divorce proceedings.

"I'm using the Malfoy family firm," he said, scanning his parents' faces for any sign of disapproval. He found none.

Narcissa wept openly at the news of Ginny's abortion and Hermione's miscarriage, and Lucius' normally impassive face darkened at the details. The irony of the conversation and his parents' reactions was not lost on Draco, and he knew few would believe him if he were to tell them of the anguish and sorrow his Pure-blood parents felt over crimes and atrocities committed against a Half-blood and a Muggleborn. While he knew his parents' political opinions hadn't exactly mirrored those of the Dark Lord, they were certainly close. His parents' reaction to the news was largely because of who these particular people were; Draco's fiancé, and a woman who was quickly becoming very important in his life.

"I'm sure it's not necessary, but I will send a letter to Martins about Mrs. Granger-Weasley's case to show him your Mother and I support your actions, Draco," Lucius said, wrapping an arm around Narcissa when she shuddered.

"I want that family punished," she said, her voice heated. "I want that entire family punished."

Lucius smirked, inclining his head at Harry, who had just wandered into the breakfast room. He'd had a shower, and there was no trace of the broken man who'd fallen asleep with his head in Hermione's lap the night before.

"I'm on board with that," he said lightly, snagging an apple off the table and bowing politely to Lucius and Narcissa. "I just Flooed Abramson. He wants us to report what we found out last night to the Ministry. He said he'd meet us at the Auror office so we can give him a Pensieve deposition. Hermione, too."

Draco laid his napkin aside and pushed back from the table, shooting an apologetic glance toward his parents. Narcissa shooed them away with a dismissive wave.

"Go. We'll be here when you return," she said, lifting her cup of tea. "I dare say we'll be here a good deal longer than that, even."

Draco nodded, grateful that his parents were willing to offer their support. He may be acting Lord Malfoy, but Narcissa and Lucius still held enormous sway. Many in the Wizarding world had yet to forgive them for their actions during the wars, but the couple still had considerable influence.

"Hermione's ready. She's waiting in the entry way," Harry said, grabbing Draco's hand as they left the room. "She's still eerily calm. I think we may want to consult a Mind-Healer. She's been through so much, and the next few weeks will be incredibly stressful."

Draco squeezed Harry's hand, nodding.

"I've already scheduled an appointment. Even if she decides she doesn't want to keep it, it's at

least there as a safety net for her," he said, leaving out the fact that he'd also made arrangements for Harry to see the same witch.

Harry leaned over, pressing a kiss against Draco's jaw.

"I love you," he whispered.

Draco forced a chipped mug of weak coffee into Hermione's hands, crouching down so he could look into her eyes. She shifted on the uncomfortable Ministry chair, her robes snagging the already-ripped vinyl, tearing it a little more.

"They're almost done with Harry, so you'll go in next," he said softly, leaning in so no one would overhear their conversation. "They want to talk to me last. Abramson will be there, as will your attorney, a witch named Allison Jacoby."

He waited until Hermione gave him a tentative nod before continuing, his face serious.

"They are there to help lead the questioning and to make sure the Auror memory specialist does the Pensieve collection correctly. They won't be able to shield you from legitimate questions, but they should help keep the testimony to relevant areas only," he continued, motioning for her to drink the coffee in her hands.

She grimaced at the taste, and Draco wondered if the coffee was really that bad or if she was reacting to the nutrient potion he'd slipped in it. The woman was rail thin; it was obvious she hadn't been eating or sleeping well for months, if not longer.

"This isn't the divorce trial, but allowing the Ministry to collect your memories while they are fresh will speed along your case." He held her gaze, his grey eyes full of sympathy.

Hermione had to hold back an inappropriate laugh; she'd never have guessed the Slytherin Prince was capable of that emotion, let alone directing it at *her*.

"I know. And thank you," she said, setting the mug aside to grasp his hands. "Thank you for arranging an attorney for me, and for setting this up. I'm not sure I would have had the fortitude to do it myself."

Draco brought her cold hand up to his mouth, brushing it lightly with his soft lips. Eyes downcast, he failed to notice the brief, delighted smile that flitted across Hermione's drawn face.

"You would have, but there's nothing wrong with a little help from a friend," he said solemnly, drawing away when he heard the door behind him open.

A distraught-looking Harry wandered out, followed by a grim Auror. The attorneys remained in the small questioning room, waiting for Hermione's turn. A clerk came forward to lead Harry to a different waiting room, ensuring he and Draco wouldn't have the opportunity to compare notes.

Draco sighed. They were there of their own free will, reporting these crimes. Why did it feel like *they* were the criminals?

"Mrs. Granger-Weasley?" the Auror said, motioning Hermione into the room. She glanced back at Draco, shooting him a small smile and mouthing the word "friends" before disappearing from view.

Draco stretched, sighing as he felt his mother's slender fingers against his scalp. He'd come home from the Ministry with an exhausted Harry and an emotionally wrecked Hermione about an hour earlier, immediately putting them to bed. He left them in the master suite again, sitting with them until he was certain they'd both fallen asleep. He had just finished bringing his parents up-to-date on that morning's events. His own Pensieve memory retrieval had been brutal. Abramson and Jacoby had been there, thank Merlin, and kept the Auror on track as much as they could.

He rubbed his temples, willing away the headache blooming behind his tired eyes. He had only gotten a few hours of sleep the night before, and the exhaustion, coupled with the aftereffects of the Veritaserum the Auror had forced on him, had led to a migraine. Lucius' eyes narrowed at Draco's gesture.

"Headache?" he asked, his tone sharp.

Draco sighed again, letting his hands fall to his sides. He'd hoped to keep the nasty methods the Auror had used in his questioning to himself, lest Harry find out, but it wasn't possible to hide things like that from his father.

"Yes," he said shortly, meeting his father's stony gaze. "And yes, it is Veritaserum-induced. The Auror jumped at the chance to question a Malfoy, and legally he was within the law to demand my Pensieve memory be taken under the effects of the potion. The attorneys were very successful in limiting his questions only to relevant areas."

Lucius' grey eyes flashed, and he threw his hands up in the air.

"For Merlin's sake, Draco, I'm not accusing you of giving away family secrets! The Ministry had no reason to doubt your testimony. The only reason they subjected you to that vile potion was to try to get information about me. I'm sorry."

Tizzy appeared with a vial of Headache potion, but Narcissa waved her away. Potion-induced headaches couldn't be cured; they simply had to run their course. The house-elf Disapparated, returning seconds later with a pot of chocolate and a tattered stuffed animal that had lost most of its fur long ago. The drooping ears and small tail were the only features that identified it as a bunny. Narcissa hid a smile behind her hand, and Lucius laughed. Draco's ears turned red as he accepted the proffered bunny, burying his head in the worn, nubby material.

"Tizzy is thinking Master Draco is needing his Bun-Bun," she said gravely. "Master Draco is sad."

Tizzy had been Draco's house-elf nanny when he was small, and she knew better than most how to turn his dark moods around, and how to comfort him when he was sick or upset. Bun-Bun had been his constant companion until he was 8 or 9, and on special occasions after that. Only Tizzy knew that the lovey had accompanied Draco to Hogwarts, tucked safely in a hidden chamber in his trunk.

"Thank you, Tizzy. Would you have the elves prepare dinner for Master Harry and Miss Hermione? Some sort of soup, perhaps."

The house-elf gave a low curtsy, smiling at the sight of her former charge with his beloved bunny before Disapparating. Narcissa poured Draco a cup of the chocolate, exchanging the steaming cup for the bunny, which she petted absently.

"I had no idea you still had this, Draco," she said, a fond smile lighting her face.

"Yes, well. Apparently I do," Draco said, embarrassed beyond measure to have been caught out with his childhood lovey. His mortification couldn't completely disrupt the sense of comfort he'd felt when Tizzy had placed the bunny in his hands, but he wasn't going to let his parents know that. "You know Tizzy. It's impossible to get that elf to throw *anything* out."

Draco awoke to soft lips against his bare chest. Disoriented, he opened his eyes and looked down, startled to find Harry's bright green eyes staring back at him.

"Hi," Harry said shyly, resuming his worship of Draco's naked chest.

"Hello," Draco said, shifting in his chair. He looked around the room, which was empty save for himself and Harry.

"She decided to sleep on her own tonight," Harry explained, rising to settle himself in Draco's lap. "I didn't want to send her to the guest wing, so she's just next door."

Draco nodded, his breath hitching when Harry dove in for a kiss. Hands slid along his chin, positioning his face so the kiss could deepen. He felt Harry's warm chest against his, and he relished the feeling of skin-on-skin.

Harry scooted off Draco's lap, retreating to the empty bed. Draco followed, nearly tripping over the worn bunny that fell to the floor at his feet. His cheeks colored, and he looked up to see Harry stifling a laugh.

"Tizzy brought that in an hour ago. She saw you sleeping in the chair by the bed and decided you needed your Bun-Bun and a blanket."

Draco groaned, covering his hot face with his hands.

"I think it's adorable that the big, bad Ice Prince of Slytherin has a lovey," Harry cooed, forcing Draco's hands away from his face. "It's good to know that the man I'm going to marry and have children with has a softer side."

Draco's eyes lit up, all musings on his humiliation cast aside. After everything that had happened in the last few days, Harry still wanted to marry him. He still wanted to raise a family together, to publicly claim Draco as his own. Harry's mouth curved into a smile, his eyes still somewhat haunted, but happy.

"I've spent a lot of today recounting the past, and thinking about everything I have lost," he said carefully. "It just served to reinforce what I want out of my future. That's you, Draco. *You're* my future."

Harry didn't give Draco a chance to respond, instead capturing his slack mouth in a sloppy kiss, pulling him down onto the bed. The day had been stressful and grueling for both of them, and Harry was tired of walking on eggshells. He wanted to lose the horrors of the last few days by focusing on pleasure and release. Deft movements born from years of practice had both of them unclothed, and Draco hissed as Harry's callused hand closed around his throbbing erection.

"Merlin Harry," he gasped, nipping at Harry's full bottom lip. "Give a guy some warning before you say something like that and then strip him naked."

Harry chuckled, lowering his head to suck on Draco's pale neck. He watched, fascinated, as the faint thrumming of Draco's pulse quickened in the hollow of his throat. He was overcome with the impulse to feel Draco's strong heartbeats, and he licked a swirling pattern across the thin skin, feeling the almost imperceptible beats with his tongue. Draco drew in a breath, his cock now throbbing in time with his pulse. His eyes drifted shut as he reveled in the feeling of absolute vulnerability, shuddering at the incredibly erotic feeling of Harry's tongue trying to lap up the steady tattoo of his pulse.

Harry arched against him, grinding his aching cock into Draco's hip. He wasted no time, frantically parting Draco's legs and settling between them. A whispered, wandless spell prepared Draco, and the blond writhed at the feeling of cool lubrication spreading inside him as the spell stretched him, readying him for Harry.

"I'm sorry, Dray," Harry panted, one hand steadying himself against the bed while the other positioned his cock at Draco's now-loosen entrance. "I can't wait. I'm sorry."

Draco wanted to tell Harry it was alright, that he wanted to be hard and fast as much as Harry did, to smooth away worry and anguish that furrowed Harry's brow. But he was too far gone to form a coherent sentence, too needy to be able to reassure his lover that he wanted this as well.

"Harry," he managed, gasping at the feeling of being abruptly filled. Harry's green eyes were still downcast, so he tried again, more urgently. "Harry!"

Harry's rapid thrusts stilled, his eyes clouding with fear that he'd hurt Draco in his haste. He met the grey eyes guiltily, ready to pull out.

"No, don't stop!" Draco moaned, his body aching at the loss of friction and pressure. "Faster, harder, deeper, anything, just *more*."

A wicked grin lit Harry's face as he absorbed Draco's words. He whipped his hips forward, driving all the way into Draco with one firm thrust. Draco cried out, his fingers painfully digging into Harry's back. Draco gasped again when a warm hand grasped his cock, squeezing hard and then pumping up and down the shaft in time with Harry's thrusts. The rough treatment was just what Draco needed; his vision began to grey as he neared his release, exploding into starbursts of color every time Harry's thick cock ran across his prostate. Harry could easily read the cues from Draco's body, and he quickened his pace to help drive the blond to orgasm.

"Holy fuck!" Draco screamed, his body tensing beneath Harry as his cock spurted his release.

Harry's body responded instantly, his own orgasm following as Draco's tight channel convulsed around him. When both their shudders had finally calmed, Harry pressed a gentle kiss to Draco's sweaty forehead and pulled out, twisting around so they were side by side on top of the wrinkled duvet.

"I think you broke me," Draco whined, too tired to crawl under the covers. He made a feeble attempt to move, lifting his torso a few inches above the bed before falling back in defeat. "Scratch that. I *know* you broke me."

Harry laughed, a deep sound that made Draco's chest tingle. The fact that he could provide Harry some relief after all that had happened recently made everything worth it. Draco knew in that instant that he'd face down an entire army of Veritaserum-wielding Aurors just to hear Harry make that delighted sound again.

"I love you," he said, his voice thick with emotion. He sought out Harry's hand in the disheveled bedclothes, gripping it tightly.

"I love you too, Draco," Harry said softly.

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Chapter: 6

See disclaimer in chapter 1. I own nothing, JKR is a god.

Harry and Hermione had spent a good portion of the day sequestered in Draco's study with their lawyers. Draco himself had used the opportunity to catch up on some much-neglected work. His father passed the torch to him years ago, and he chaired the family business, Malfoy Industries. The company was actually dozens of different businesses, all controlled by the head of the Malfoy family. As chairman, it fell to Draco to oversee all aspects of the company.

Draco muttered darkly as he leafed through a sheaf of parchment, squinting at the small numbers in front of him. Each year, he ordered a comprehensive audit of a few of the smaller companies, rotating through his holdings. The report on the winery he'd purchased three years earlier in the United States had an alarming number of discrepancies. He held the parchment up in front of him, leaning forward slightly to scrutinize the columns of tiny numbers.

"It's not admitting weakness to wear reading glasses, you know," Harry said, his voice tired, but amused. "I dare say you'd rather spend a few hours a day in glasses than the rest of your life with unsightly wrinkles."

He moved Draco's parchment aside, walking around the desk to smooth out Draco's furrowed brow with a kiss. Harry rested a hip on the mahogany desk, scattering parchment.

"You won't live long enough to see the wrinkles if you don't get your arse off my father's desk," Draco said archly, pulling Harry so the man slid forward onto his lap.

"Territorial, is he?" Harry asked, eyebrow quirked.

Draco laughed, the tension in his shoulders from spending hours poring over monotonous data easing.

"Mmm," he said, kissing Harry on the mouth. "Not so much territorial as proper. A *proper* wizard would never sit on a desk, let alone an antique Georgian piece like this."

Harry squirmed in Draco's lap, letting him know exactly what he thought about propriety.

"I have been called many things, Draco Malfoy," Harry said, his tone menacing. "But a proper wizard has never been among them."

Harry felt Draco's chest rumble as he cuddled him close with a chuckle. The day had been horrid, full of heavy legal language and probing inquiries about what else Ginny or Ron might throw out during the divorce hearings. They'd been at it for hours; he hadn't even seen Draco at lunch, since the other man was busy making Floo calls during the meal. He relaxed against Draco, letting the blond's warmth seep through his robes.

"You didn't have to vacate your study for us, you know," Harry said, his tone suddenly serious. "We could easily have Flooed to their office today."

Draco dipped his head, placing an affectionate kiss at the corner of Harry's downturned mouth.

"I can work from anywhere, and Father wasn't using his study. I thought you and Hermione would be more comfortable if you could work at the Manor, and my study was the obvious place for that. You could have done it in here, but I thought you'd be more at ease in familiar surroundings," he said, casting a glance around the room, which was full of dark paneling and ornate rugs.

Harry's frown softened. An entire day of drudging up his painful history with Ginny – and facing some uncomfortable truths about Ron – had left him a bit tetchy. Of course Draco had given them his study; the room was full of natural light and cozy furniture. The discussions would have been even more depressing if they'd been held in this darker, more sinister room, or one of the lawyers' drab offices.

"Of course," Harry said lightly, returning the quick kiss. "You high-powered chairman-types can set up shop just about anywhere, I suppose. I came to fetch you for dinner. Narcissa said she'd blast down the door herself if you missed another meal."

Draco grimaced, looking back at the pile of parchment on the desk. He'd made some progress, but the winery's audit had taken up much more time than he'd anticipated. He needed to have a meeting with his financial managers about the company's performance. It might require a site visit, if things were really as bad as they looked on parchment. He sighed, a feeling of dread filling his stomach. His business instincts were good, and those instincts were telling him he needed to hop the next Portkey to California and inspect the company's books in person.

"I didn't miss lunch; I simply wasn't free to join the rest of you," he complained, shifting as Harry climbed out of his lap and offered him a hand to help him up. "I had an important Floo call with a supplier in Armenia, and I needed to catch him before he left the office for the day."

Harry propelled a protesting Draco through the doorway, leading him to their suite so he could change for dinner. With Narcissa in residence, dinner at the Manor had become a formal affair. Hermione objected initially, worried about the extra work the house-elves would have to do, but Tizzy had quickly set her straight. The Manor's elves loved black-tie dinners and parties; they'd been quite bored serving only Draco over the last few years.

Hermione was already there, seated at Draco's writing desk. Narcissa had taken the liberty of outfitting both Hermione and Harry with proper formal attire, and Hermione looked lovely in the pale rose-colored gown. Both Harry and Draco murmured in appreciation as she turned to greet them, her hair tumbling in loose waves around her face. Skillfully applied make-up softened her face, which was drawn and pale from stress and sleepless nights. The tight smile she gave them didn't reach her eyes, which were full of anger and hurt.

"What happened?" Harry asked, crossing the room to be near her.

Hermione's steady breathing hitched, and her chocolate eyes filled with tears. She motioned to

the discarded scroll on the desk, looking at it with such disgust that Harry half expected it to move or threaten them in some way. Harry picked it up, and Draco came close to read it over his shoulder. Both men tensed as they saw the vitriol spewed across the page, the writer so furious that the quill actually broke through the parchment in several areas.

"She had no right to speak to you this way," Draco said softly, shifting his gaze to Hermione. Her lips trembled as she held back tears. "We'll get an injunction. No one from that family will be able to say a word to either of you."

Hermione's eyes darted over to the bedside table, where an unopened scroll lay next to Harry's wand. His gaze followed hers, his eyes widening as he realized what it was. Draco lifted his wand to Banish the letter, but Harry's hand stilled him.

"No, Draco. We need to read it, and we should save both of them," Harry said, his expression troubled. "They could help at the hearings. And we'll need evidence to get the injunction, in any case."

Draco wanted to insist that only he read the missive, but Harry beat him to it, wandlessly Summoning the scroll. His fingers tightened around the parchment as he struggled against the urge to destroy it, but he mastered the impulse and opened it instead. The three of them huddled around the letter, longer than Hermione's, reading in silence.

Harry tried to lighten the mood with a shaky laugh after they finished.

"Merlin. Who would have guessed she *knew* all those words, let alone could use them correctly? I mean, did you really think you'd ever have the chance to see Mrs. Weasley call someone a 'flaming poofter'?"

Draco's murderous glare cut off further self-deprecation from Harry, who ignored him but bristled at Hermione's pitying look.

"What? Am I supposed to be upset over this?" He gestured with the letter, waving it in the air between the three of them. "Let's see, shall we? Here she says I ruined Ginny's life. I've heard that before. Oh, and here, she says she curses the day Ron and I met on Platform 9 ¾. To be expected, really. And let's not forget her *piece de resistance*; it's quite impressive, as far as ill wishes go."

Harry squinted at the letter, reading from it verbatim in a high-pitched, mocking voice.

"'My only comfort is the knowledge that you will never reproduce, and your perverted, degenerative tendencies will die out with the Potter name when you finally get what you deserve,'" Harry mimicked, finishing with a menacing flourish.

Harry shrugged, releasing the letter and letting it float to the floor. Draco and Hermione followed its path before looking up to examine Harry's impassive face.

"Harry – " Hermione started, but Harry cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"It's hardly surprising. She's always thought I was dangerous. She only wanted Ginny to marry me because of my prestige and money," he said, his voice bitter. "The same reasons Ginny wanted to marry me, apparently."

Draco pulled Harry close, resting his hands lightly on Harry's shoulders. The dark-haired man refused to meet his gaze.

"She was practically your foster mother, Harry. It's alright to be hurt and upset," he said gently, lowering his head until he could catch Harry's downturned eyes.

Draco stepped back in surprise as Harry fought off his grip, raising his head. Blazing green eyes bore into him, cold and remote, something Draco had never seen in Harry before. Hermione shook her head slightly, assuring Draco this wasn't unprecedented.

"It's not alright. That family has manipulated my life for years, and I've let them. Molly Weasley is obviously as insane as the rest of them, which means her opinion means nothing to me. I'm angry that she was able to get these to us, and I'm upset that Hermione had to read the hate Molly directed at her. But I'm not upset for myself, because there's nothing to be upset about."

He Summoned his wand and cast a Freshening charm on Hermione, erasing all signs that she had been crying moments before. Another spell sent his and Draco's dress robes careening out of the closet, draping them neatly over the end of the bed. He looked at Hermione, who simply nodded and left the room, closing the door softly behind her to wait in the corridor.

"The sooner we get to dinner the sooner we can Floo Abramson about that injunction," Harry said quietly, removing his robes to change into the more formal attire.

Draco nodded, somewhat shocked by this aloof, hateful side of Harry. He went through the motions of dressing, fervently promising himself he'd never give Harry cause to turn that coldly furious look on him.

Hermione excused herself almost immediately after dinner, going back to her room to write a letter to her parents, while the others retired to the drawing room for drinks. Harry left shortly afterward, heading to Draco's study to Floo his lawyer about getting a restraining order against the entire Weasley clan.

Draco sipped the Firewhisky in his crystal glass, admiring the way the way the glass refracted the firelight. Harry told Narcissa and Lucius about the letters after Hermione left, sparing her the re-telling. Draco hadn't said a word all evening, his attention held captive by an internal battle about how best to punish the Weasley family.

"Neither of them would thank you for interfering," Lucius said in a low voice, his calm gaze

raking over Draco's form.

Draco sighed, at once comforted and annoyed that his father knew him so well.

"Which is why I'm here, allowing myself the pleasure of plotting their painful deaths in my mind, instead of tearing the Burrow apart right now," he said flatly, his gaze still locked on the colorful patterns the glass projected on the wall.

Narcissa choked back an inappropriate laugh, earning her twin glares from Lucius and Draco.

"I'm sorry," she said, her smile not remorseful at all. "It's just so fascinating to see you in love, Draco. Your restraint is admirable, and borne wholly out of your regard for Harry. It's simply adorable."

Draco huffed, setting his glass aside.

"Mother, my *regard* for Harry is the reason I want to annihilate the entire Weasley family. It's hardly adorable."

Narcissa shot him an indulgent smile, and this time Draco chose to ignore her. He turned back to the chess game he and his father had been engaged in since Harry's departure, directing his knight across the board with more force than necessary.

Draco ran a hand through his hair, hesitating once again in the act of packing his valise. He knew Narcissa would scold him for not having one of the house-elves pack for him, but the last time he'd trusted Tizzy to pack for a business trip he'd ended up with a case full of robes better suited to a night in a club than a board meeting. He'd had to send an assistant out to purchase new robes in Brussels' version of Diagon Alley at the last minute.

Indecision about which robes to bring was the least of his worries. Further study of the reports on the troublesome winery had turned up even more discrepancies. He was reluctant to leave Harry, given everything that was going on, but the company was losing what amounted to several million Galleons a quarter. There was definitely a problem. Draco had spent the last month trying to find someone else to send in his place, but all of his executives were in the middle of important projects. That left only him. The divorce hearings weren't scheduled to begin for another week, thanks to Ginny's petition for an extension, and Harry was adamant that Draco should go to California to sort out the problem.

Draco didn't want to be thousands of miles away, but Harry had easily countered every reason he gave to stay. As a last ditch effort, Draco had tried to convince Harry to come along, but Harry said Abramson had advised him to stay in Great Britain, since leaving the country could give fuel to Ginny's claims that Harry was attempting to hide his money abroad to shield it.

Dinner tonight had been an uncomfortable affair, with Draco practically hovering over Harry, hoping he'd change his mind and tell him to stay. Harry had stalwartly maintained his position;

Draco needed to attend to business, and Harry was fine.

Draco shifted a pile of robes from one side of the bed to the other, his mind straying to everything that could go wrong during his absence. *This is madness*, he thought. *Bugger the business. I have to stay here to be with Harry. I'm staying.*

"Your Portkey leaves in 20 minutes, Dray," Harry said, his tone fond, as he wandered into the bedroom.

Harry pointed his wand at the pile of robes beside the valise, directing them to fold neatly and levitate into the open case. Draco loosed a dramatic sigh. *So much for my latest resolution to stay,* he thought grimly. Harry was here now, and he knew Harry would have none of it.

"It's only until Wednesday, and we'll Floo every day," Harry continued, sealing Draco's toiletries with a water-tight Bubble spell before laying them on top of the robes. "You'll be so busy with work that you'll hardly notice the time pass."

Draco cuddled up behind Harry, nuzzling against his neck.

"I assure you, I will most definitely notice the time pass. Three days is an eternity," he said, leaning around to kiss Harry's cheek.

Harry laughed at Draco's whiny protests, turning in his embrace so their lips met. He drew back, reaching into his robes and withdrawing a small velvet case.

"I ordered these a few weeks ago, and I was going to wait to give them to you until after the divorce was final," he said, squinting at Draco. "But I think you could use the reassurance now, which is why I'm giving them to you to take on your trip."

Draco opened the box, finding a pair of platinum cufflinks nestled inside. They were gorgeous, but a little plainer than his normal style.

"Thank you, Harry, they're beautiful," he said, lifting one out to examine it more closely.

Harry smiled at Draco's attempt to act as though the unadorned cufflinks pleased him, which Harry knew wasn't true. Draco's style was ornate, and his taste in jewelry reflected that. All the cufflinks he owned were jeweled, or elaborately engraved.

"They are, but that's not why I bought them," Harry said, reaching into the box to extract the other cufflink. "They're enchanted. The face is blank now, but as soon as we have our first child, that child's initials will appear here."

Harry tapped the blank face of the cufflink, enjoying seeing Draco's eyes widen as he looked closer at the one he held.

"The same will happen for every child we have, though the jeweler warned me the writing would get cramped if we had more than three."

Draco couldn't stop the giddy grin from overtaking his face. Even amid his hellish divorce, Harry was planning for their future.

"They're beautiful," Draco repeated, his voice husky. "I love them."

Harry found Hermione, predictably, in the Manor's main library, curled up in a chair by the fire with a book.

"Finally convince him the world wouldn't end if he left, did you?" she asked without looking up.

Harry grinned. Hermione had been returning to her old self ever since her arrival at the Manor nearly two months ago. Harry couldn't believe he hadn't noticed that his vibrant, witty friend had retreated into herself so much; when he thought back on their interactions over the past year, he couldn't come up with a single one where Hermione had spoken more than a few words before the night she came to stay.

"I had to threaten to withhold sexual favors if he didn't go, but yes. His Portkey left a few minutes ago. He should be in California by now," Harry said.

Hermione looked up, but her face held none of the censure Harry had expected. Instead, a radiant smile lit her features.

"I don't know how I never picked up on your relationship," she said almost wistfully. "It's so obvious you both think the sun revolves around the other."

Harry blushed, pleased that she thought Draco loved him as much as he loved Draco. His playful smile turned to a look of horror when he saw the *Daily Prophet*, which was waiting on the table beside a pot of tea. Hermione, noticing his sudden stillness, glanced over, her eyes catching the headline dancing across the page for the first time.

"Youngest Parkinson to wed Malfoy heir: 'We're pregnant!' she says" was emblazoned across the page, a picture of a flush-cheeked Pansy smiling outside a Wizarding baby clothing store as though caught out unaware.

Harry sat down on the sofa heavily, pulling the paper toward him to read the article. Pansy Parkinson claimed she was three months pregnant with Draco's child. The story said they had a clandestine affair in early September – which would have been a week before Harry came to Malfoy Manor to propose, he mused – resulting in the pregnancy. They'd been in contact since, the article revealed, and seeing each other secretly for the last month.

"You know it's a lie," Hermione said, glaring at the photo. "Your divorce hearing is scheduled to start next week; I'm sure this is some sort of diversion orchestrated by Ginny."

Harry nodded numbly, unable to process anything she said. It couldn't be. Draco loved him. There was no way he would cheat on Harry. The thought made Harry cringe; his entire relationship with Draco was built on cheating. If Draco had no qualms about sleeping with Harry when Harry was with Ginny, why would he have any about sleeping with Pansy while he himself was with Harry?

Posie chose that moment to Apparate in to refill the teapot. She took one look at Harry's white face and Hermione's set jaw before popping back out. Draco had left explicit instructions with all of the house-elves; if Harry or Hermione seemed distraught, fetch Narcissa or Lucius at once.

Less than a minute later, Narcissa flew into the room, her elegantly cut robes billowing behind her. She stopped abruptly, scanning the room to see what had upset Harry so much. Hermione stepped forward, silently handing the paper to Narcissa. The usually graceful woman all but slumped in relief as she saw the cause of the tumult.

"Oh, this. Lucius saw it this morning and gave orders for all copies to be destroyed; the house-elves must have missed this one," she said dismissively, raising her wand to Banish the offending newspaper.

Hermione nodded as though Narcissa's reaction was understandable, but Harry leapt up from the couch in a rage.

"Oh *this?*" he yelled, parroting her words. "You knew about this?"

Narcissa paled slightly, obviously realizing her words had been misinterpreted.

"Harry," she said calmly, taking a step toward the livid man. "Yes, I saw the article this morning. Lucius wanted to get rid of it before you or Draco had to see it."

Harry calmed slightly, his green eyes still wide and panicked.

"Draco hasn't seen this?"

Narcissa shook her head, tendrils of fine, blonde hair escaping from the pewter clips that held it back.

"No, and I'm sure he'd be as enraged as you. The nerve of that Parkinson chit, making up a story like this! And one that can be so easily disproved with a simple Paternity Spell. Really," Narcissa said, shaking her head again remorsefully, "the standards for Slytherin House must be dropping. Anyone with the capacity of an average Hufflepuff would have thought this plan through more thoroughly than that little idiot."

Harry's shoulders relaxed a bit as he mulled over Narcissa's words. Hermione fingered her wand, muttering a book summoning incantation. Seconds later, a tattered leather volume slid off a high

shelf, careening into her waiting hand.

"Paternity Spell," she said quietly, as though she were talking to herself. "Paternity, paternity. Ah. Here it is."

She held the book out to Harry, who took the proffered volume gingerly, as though he was afraid the page would bite him. Hermione smiled sadly at him, aware of how hurt and bewildered Harry must be. He was so trusting that any hint of betrayal by those he loved cut deep. He scanned the entry, memorizing the simple incantation. He would have set off to find Pansy at that moment, but the spell was useless unless the father was nearby.

Narcissa looked from Harry to Hermione, nodding slightly to herself.

"I'll Floo Draco," she said, moving toward the door.

"No!" Harry yelled, startling her. "I'm sorry. I just – I just don't think we should tell Draco about this yet."

Narcissa quirked an eyebrow at Harry, inviting further explanation. The gesture was so Draco it made Harry's chest constrict.

"You know he'll cut his business trip short if we Floo him right now. He's only just gotten there. Let's give him a day at least to see the winery's books before we tell him." Harry's tone was slightly desperate, and he hoped Narcissa would think it was because he was too upset to talk about the article, not because he was dying inside at the thought of Draco having an affair – not to mention a child – with Pansy.

Narcissa's eyes clouded for a moment, and she hesitated in the doorway, unsure of what to do. Finally, she gave Harry a slight nod.

"Of course," she said stiffly. "We both know how important this trip was to him. I will leave it to you to tell him about today's events."

Harry sighed in relief, thankful he had bought himself a little more time to think things out.

"If you haven't spoken about it with him by tomorrow afternoon, Harry, I'm afraid I will have to," she continued as she disappeared around the corner, her tone sharp.

It was Harry's turn to nod in agreement, though Narcissa couldn't see him. His mind was racing, filled with questions, accusations and, worst of all, unbidden images of Pansy and Draco lying together in bed, curled around each other. Glimpses of what their life together would be like – perfectly behaved tow-headed Pure-blood children seated around a table in the formal dining room at Malfoy Manor, their conduct above reproach; several immaculately attired children sedately opening gifts in front of an enormous Christmas tree, with Pansy and Draco in the background, near but uninvolved; the children, older now, lined up along Platform 9 ¾, all in

their Slytherin robes, Draco and Pansy standing, expressionless, behind them.

It was so different from the future he'd envisioned. His children would be encouraged to be boisterous, to play so hard they broke things. There would be noisy dinners crowded around a table in the kitchen, and Christmas would be the spectacle it should be, with pajama-clad children throwing wrapping paper about while he and Draco drank coffee and yelled and laughed right along with them, in pajamas and slippers themselves. He'd fret over them on Platform 9 ¾, straightening robes and double-checking trunks, squeezing them all within an inch of their lives when the Hogwarts Express finally made its last boarding call. He knew he'd stand there, emotional and proud, as he watched his babies head off to school. None of that meshed with the visions of Pansy and Draco in his mind; yet he knew those were closer to what Draco's own upbringing had been. No overt displays of emotion, especially in public. Decorum at all times. Attention to appearance and manners above all else. That wasn't the way Harry wanted to raise his children. They'd never talked about it, but Harry was suddenly sure his parenting style would clash horribly with Draco's.

If Pansy is *pregnant, maybe it's for the best*, Harry thought darkly. *She may be saving me from another bad marriage.*

Hermione watched as a range of emotions flitted across Harry's face. She could read him like a book. She knew his dismissal of Narcissa was just that – a dismissal. He had no intention of talking to Draco about this. *Knowing Harry, he's already planned out Draco and Pansy's life together,* she thought, suppressing a growl of impatience and frustration.

"Harry James Potter!" Hermione snarled, snapping Harry out of his brooding reverie. "Stop it this instant! Do you think I don't know what you're doing?"

Harry bit his lip, looking away guiltily. Hermione was one of his oldest friends, and he knew she could easily read his emotions and intentions.

"I, for one, cannot fathom Draco doing this," she said matter-of-factly, looking Harry directly in the eyes. "And I don't think you can, either. Not deep down. You *know* he wouldn't do this, Harry. So get past it, and Floo him right away."

Harry shook his head, looking down, suddenly engrossed in studying the whirling patterns on the rug beneath their feet. His breath hitched, his chest tightening at the thought of confronting Draco.

"Harry," Hermione said, her voice softening. "Listen to me. You *must* talk to Draco, the sooner the better."

He looked up, his eyes searching hers for some clue about what to do next. Hermione always seemed to have all the answers, and Harry desperately needed some right now.

"If you don't, he'll think you don't trust him. He'll think you believe Pansy's story," Hermione

said, her voice tinged with desperation to protect both Harry and Draco, the man she'd so recently come to know and begun to love. "It would kill him to think you believed it, Harry. You're everything to him."

Harry let out a breath, nodding slowly in agreement. Hermione was right. He needed to talk to Draco about this, but he was in no state to do it now.

"There's an eight-hour time difference," Harry said, looking down at his watch.

It felt like an eternity, but only an hour had elapsed since Draco's departure.

"It's only just after lunch there. He took a Pepper-Up potion with him to counter the time change; he said he was planning to work until about 8 p.m. local time tonight," Harry said, staring into the fire. "I don't want to spring this on him when he's been up for nearly 20 hours. I'll let him get a good night's sleep, then Floo him around lunchtime tomorrow. It'll be about the time he's getting up."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, trying to determine whether or not he meant what he said. On one hand, it was a good plan – hopefully Draco could get a lot accomplished today and be able to Floo home immediately after Harry spoke to him. And waiting until Draco had slept was a good idea, too, since he'd take the news even harder if he was exhausted and Portkey-lagged when they told him. But Hermione had a bad feeling about the whole thing – a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach that Harry was going to dash off and do something reckless and stupid like the Gryffindor he was.

"I don't know, Harry," she said reluctantly, her mind churning over all the possible things that could happen if they waited.

"It's fine," Harry said shortly. "It won't be any less devastating tomorrow afternoon than it is today, so it can wait."

Hermione nodded, watching as Harry strode briskly out of the room. She saw him hesitate slightly as he turned toward his and Draco's suite, as though he was reluctant to go somewhere so full of Draco's presence. He steadied himself, though, and continued on toward the bedroom, passing out of Hermione's sight.

I'll give him tonight, she thought, turning back to the passage about the Paternity Spell. *But if he hasn't talked to Draco by lunch tomorrow, I'm Flooing him myself.*

The Harry who appeared at breakfast the next morning was a world away from the one that had left Hermione the night before. He entered the room with a smile, grabbing a plate and heaping it with sausage and eggs. Hermione and Narcissa exchanged a discreet glance; Harry's appetite had been waning lately, and both women were surprised to see him with such an interest in food this morning.

"Good morning," he greeted them, nodding in everyone's direction as he took a seat next to Hermione.

Tizzy appeared to pour him a cup of tea, and Harry thanked her quietly. He was half-way through his breakfast when the *Daily Prophet* arrived, a house-elf appearing instantly to relieve it of its burden and place a Sickle in the bag attached to its leg.

"I'm going to Floo Draco this afternoon," he said, directing his comments toward Narcissa, since Hermione already knew. Lucius didn't look up, his head hidden behind the paper. "I wanted to give him a chance to catch up on some sleep before I talked to him. He'll just be getting up around lunchtime, I think."

Narcissa smiled, her features relaxing. Harry's mood was much better than it had been last night, and it seemed he had accepted the *Daily Prophet* story for the lie the rest of them thought it so obviously was.

Harry munched on a piece of toast, looking up when Lucius threw down the paper with a curse.

"As considerate as that plan is, Harry, I think we should wake him up," Lucius said, his voice hard. He moved the paper, showing everyone a photo of Draco and Pansy sharing a kiss.

"It can't be," Narcissa said, her voice insistent. "They dated for a bit back in school. It's obviously an old photo."

Hermione shook her head, her eyes wide.

"No," she whispered, pulling the paper closer to her. "Look in the background. They're in Muggle London, and there's a movie poster behind them."

She looked at Harry, her eyes full of tears.

"It's for that comedy you joked about seeing," she said to Harry, her voice barely audible. "This photo can't be more than a week old. The movie isn't even out yet."

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Chapter: 7

See the disclaimer in Chapter 1. They're only mine in the recesses of my fevered brain.

In the end, the four of them decided it would be best to confront Draco about the disturbing revelations in the *Daily Prophet* in person instead of by Floo. Lucius was able to get his hands on a barely legal Portkey to California in record time; he left the distraught group just less than 20 minutes after the newspaper had been delivered.

Harry's initial reaction had been to try to leave. He no longer felt comfortable staying in the Manor with Draco's parents; he was sure they'd take Draco's side, and he didn't want to be there for any more rationalizations or explanations. But both Narcissa and Lucius had surprised him. There had been nothing but white-hot anger at Draco from Lucius, and disappointment and hurt from Narcissa. Even Hermione had been taken aback by their reactions.

The three of them sat together in the drawing room, the silence buzzing around them. Harry swore he actually *felt* his heart rip out of his chest when he saw the photo, and he could still feel the phantom pains even now, sitting in near catatonic-stillness on the sofa he and Draco had cuddled up together on the night before.

Fuck, he thought bitterly, his muscles screaming out to destroy something. *Last night we sat here kissing and cooing at each other, when all the while he knew Pansy was* pregnant*? Knew he intended to* marry *her?*

Draco had been absent a lot lately, but Harry figured he was just catching up on work that he'd put aside to help Harry and Hermione. Draco had told him he intended to be with both Harry and Hermione during their divorce hearings, no matter how drawn out they became. So Harry hadn't thought anything of the missed meals and the late-night Floo conversations, to say nothing of the nights Draco came to bed too exhausted to do anything but sleep.

Fuck me, I'm an idiot, Harry thought viciously. *All the damn signs were right in front of my fucking face, and I couldn't be arsed to see them. Merlin on a bloody stake, how could I* not *have seen this coming? Me, of all people? I cheated on Ginny for more than four years.* I *should have been able to tell Draco was cheating on* me. *I'm a fucking expert on the subject.*

Hermione's inner monologue wasn't much more forgiving than Harry's. She was torn between berating herself for falling for Draco's act and still believing he hadn't been unfaithful. The photo was convincing, but photos could be faked. *Could Draco really have been acting all this time,* she wondered? *I don't think it would be possible. Then again, what kind of a character judge am I? I married* Ron*, didn't I? Merlin help us all if that baby is Draco's. Merlin help us all.*

Harry's stillness was concerning. His response to anger or betrayal was usually to destroy things. His innate wild magic drove him to tear things apart, but here he was, with more reason than he'd ever had to be angry, sitting absolutely stock still. Hermione studied him, biting her lower lip anxiously. She'd never known Harry to be so still. He wasn't fidgeting at all; it barely looked like he was breathing.

She examined him more closely, since he wasn't paying her any attention. His normally golden skin had turned a chalky white, and his lips were nearly bloodless. Her gaze shifted to his

near-vacant glare, then dropped to his chest, which was hardly moving at all as he inhaled and exhaled.

"Narcissa?" she said quietly, trying to avoid startling Harry. "Could I speak with you in the corridor?"

Narcissa's head rose quickly, her glance darting from Hermione to Harry. Hermione saw alarm steal over her usually cool face, her eyes narrowing as she took in Harry's condition. Without a word, she rose and followed Hermione out of the room.

"I think he might be in magical shock," Hermione said, pitching her voice low so it wouldn't carry through the open door. They were still staring at Harry, though he had taken no notice of their departure. "I read about it when I took a basic Healing class as an elective a few years ago. If it is, we need to get him to St. Mungo's."

Narcissa examined Harry, coming to the same conclusion Hermione had. Magical shock was rare, but it was potentially life-threatening. A person's magic was tied to their emotions, which is why someone must harbor feelings of hate and anger to make the Unforgivables work.

"I'll contact Lucius," she said, calling for Tizzy and giving the house-elf instructions to retrieve the mirror she kept in her bedside table. The elf reappeared with the object, her eyes wide with fright as she looked in on Harry.

"*Citatio* Lucius," she intoned, tapping the mirror with her wand. Seconds passed before Lucius swam into view, his face annoyed.

"Narcissa, I told you I'd contact you when I had anything new to tell you. The Portkey ride itself was nearly 15 minutes long, and I've only just found Draco. I haven't even shown him the paper," he said, his irritation evident in his voice.

"Lucius, bring him back *now*. We're taking Harry to St. Mungo's," Narcissa said, her voice frantic. Fear sparked in her normally clear eyes, and Lucius immediately snapped to attention. "Something's wrong."

Narcissa paused, glancing up to watch Hermione try to engage Harry in conversation. She was right next to him, but he didn't even flinch as she spoke directly in his ear. Narcissa brought her own hand up to touch her forehead, and Hermione instantly mimicked the gesture, touching Harry's forehead lightly.

Hermione's fingers met with cool, clammy skin. She looked up, her eyes wide with fright, and shook her head at Narcissa.

"We think it's magical shock, Luc," Narcissa said, so worried that she used Lucius' boyhood nickname, something she only called him in private.

She heard Draco's yells in the background; he must have heard her words as well.

"Get him to the hospital. We're on our way," Lucius said, disappearing from view as he leaned over to grab Draco's arm. "The Portkey brings us back to the Manor, and we'll Floo to St. Mungo's from there after I've had a chance to explain things to Draco."

Narcissa nodded faintly, handing the mirror to the house-elf frozen by her side. Tizzy disappeared immediately, understanding the unspoken direction to return the mirror to its proper place. Narcissa and Hermione had opened the Floo to take Harry to St. Mungo's when Tizzy returned, bearing heavy blankets and a bag with Harry's pajamas and a few toiletries. She pushed the bag into Hermione's hands, handing the blankets to Narcissa to wrap around Harry.

"Cast a Lightening spell on him, Hermione," Narcissa said, groaning as she tried to support his weight. It was considerably easier after the spell, but still unwieldy to navigate into the Floo with the nonresponsive man.

"St. Mungo's!" Hermione cried as Narcissa staggered into the Floo. As soon as they were gone, she threw in another pinch of powder and followed, her body wracked with trembles of fear.

Draco ran for the fireplace as soon as he and his father arrived at the Manor, desperate to get to Harry. Lucius stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder, spinning Draco around.

"I have to get to St. Mungo's," Draco bit out, his jaw clenched.

"No. You will stay here until I get some answers out of you, and if those answers are acceptable then, and *only* then, will you be going to St. Mungo's," Lucius spat, his voice filled with venom.

Draco had absolutely no idea what was going on. His father had interrupted a business meeting to talk to him, and his sudden presence was enough to worry Draco. But then he'd received a message from his mother, the gist of which seemed to be that Harry was in the hospital. Draco had tried to question his father during the Portkey ride, but the whipping winds had made it impossible.

"What is your relationship with Pansy Parkinson?" Lucius asked, his eyes locked on Draco's face, looking for the slightest twitch or tick that would give away a lie.

Draco's face was a mask of confusion, his posture open and honest.

"*What*? Harry is in the hospital and you delay me with questions about a witch I haven't talked to in *months*?"

Lucius latched on to Draco's statement, clearly tensing at Draco's admission he'd seen Pansy fairly recently.

"When, Draco? When did you last see her?"

Draco shut his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"I don't know, months ago. I ran into her at a coffee shop in Diagon Alley. We had lunch. It was sometime before Harry came back. Why? What does this have to do with Harry?" Draco's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Did that bint hex him? I will *kill* her!"

Lucius studied his son, watching for any sign that Pansy Parkinson was anything to him.

"She says she's pregnant, Draco," he drawled, his steely eyes not wavering from Draco's face.

"So? What does that have to do with Harry?" Draco was puzzled. He knew he was panicked, but he usually didn't have this much trouble piecing things together.

"She said it's yours, Draco," Lucius said, wholly unprepared for Draco's reaction.

Draco let out a genuine laugh, fueled by relief. Harry certainly couldn't be that badly injured if his father was wasting time with this gossipy drivel, could he?

"Listen to me, Draco," Lucius said, stepping closer to his son. "She announced her pregnancy in the *Daily Prophet* yesterday, along with her engagement to you. Harry was going to tell you about it today when he Flooed you."

Draco blinked, having a hard time keeping up with the conversation. He didn't care about any of this; he just wanted to get to Harry. Lucius waited for a response, but getting none, continued.

"This morning, though, the paper ran another article about it. With photos," Lucius said, watching Draco carefully. The severity of the situation didn't seem to register with the younger man, so he pressed on. "They were of *you*, Draco. Photos of you. You and Pansy kissing."

The words finally shocked a response out of Draco, who staggered back, his eyes cold.

"I assure you they were not photos of *me*. I've not been anywhere near that bint's lips since fourth year. And unless she's perfected some sort of immaculate conception potion, that baby's not mine, either," he said, his voice hard.

"Is that all? Because I'd like to get to Harry now," he said, his eyes narrowing as he glared at his father.

Lucius squeezed his shoulder, drawing him closer.

"Your mother said Harry went into magical shock, Draco. It's very serious. And I'm not sure he'll be up to seeing you, given that you're the reason he's there in the first place," Lucius said, gentling his voice as much as he could. He was still murderously angry, but now the entirety of it was turned on the Parkinson girl.

Draco shook his father off, striding toward the Floo.

"I don't care if he wants to see me or not, I need to know if he's alright. I'll stay in the corridor if I have to, but I *will* go to St. Mungo's."

Lucius nodded, following his son into the Floo. He just hoped he had a chance to talk to Narcissa and Hermione before they saw Draco; feeling the way they did, they'd likely tear him to pieces.

" – Mr. Potter receive some sort of emotional blow or physical injury?" the mediwitch asked, her Quick-Quotes Quill hovering nearby, jotting down all the information on Harry's chart.

Narcissa looked at Hermione, who nodded slowly.

"He recently was confronted with some – " she paused, her voice catching. " – evidence that suggests his fiancé is cheating on him. He's in the middle of a very public divorce, so it was even harder to deal with in light of all the stress he's been under."

The mediwitch nodded thoughtfully, glancing back to make sure the quill was recording everything.

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you that Mr. Potter's presence here should be kept out of the media," Narcissa sneered, using her most intimidating Malfoy mask to try to safeguard Harry's privacy. "Should any reporters be notified of his treatment here he will have no choice but to sue the hospital."

The mediwitch bristled at the overt threat, nodding abruptly. Hermione almost sighed in relief. Harry's life was such an open book, with reporters following him everywhere and writing about every little thing he did. Things were bad enough with all of the divorce proceedings getting leaked to the papers, and now, with Draco's alleged exploits pasted all over the front page, the last thing Harry needed was someone like Skeeter finding out he was having the magical equivalent of a mental breakdown.

"I assure you, Mrs. Malfoy, the staff at St. Mungo's uphold the highest level of patient care and privacy," the mediwitch said, her tone frosty.

"Oh, I'm sure you will," Hermione said sweetly, smiling at the witch. "Which is why I'm sure you won't object to Mr. Potter using an alias, which will be used in all references to him."

Hermione flicked her wand at the Quick-Quotes Quill, which paused before resuming at a quicker pace than before.

"I am sure you will give Mr. Evans the best care possible," Hermione said, her wand moving nearly imperceptibly as she said the name.

The medwitch's eyes glazed over for a moment before she nodded, blinking rapidly.

"Of course. We will give," the witch paused, looking over at the chart briefly, "Mr. Evans the best care possible. Poor chap. You can sit with him if you like. The Mind-Healer will be in shortly."

Narcissa snickered as the slightly befuddled woman walked away, shaking her head and glancing back at the chart again.

"Memory Modification spell?" Narcissa asked, opening the door to Harry's private room.

Hermione had the grace to blush slightly, nodding.

"And a barely legal one at that," she said, smirking slightly. "It's hard keeping Harry out of the press. I've used this method a few other times here at St. Mungo's, and it's always worked. There's a Suggestion Spell on the chart, too, which will ensure anyone who treats Harry won't realize he really isn't James Evans."

Narcissa smiled at Hermione's cunning, lifting an appraising eyebrow at her. They both jumped when the door swung open again, stiffening as they saw Lucius stride into the room. As promised, Draco remained out of sight in the corridor.

"How is he?" he asked, studying Harry's pale form on the bed.

"Stable right now, but we won't know more until the Mind-Healer sees him," Hermione answered quietly, her gaze straying to the door. "Is he here?"

Lucius nodded curtly, stepping closer so he could speak softly.

"He is. He's agreed to stay out of Harry's sight until he recovers and we can get to the bottom of this," Lucius said, his voice weary. "He swears he's had no contact with that Parkinson girl, aside from a chance meeting that led to a lunch a few months ago."

Narcissa and Hermione exchanged a look, prompting Lucius to sigh and shake his head.

"*Lunch*. That's all. I believe him. Cissa," he said, looking at his wife, "I believe him."

Her jaw tightened as she willed away the tears that threatened. A Malfoy, even a Malfoy by marriage, does not make public scenes. She could have melted in relief, but her stiff posture revealed nothing. This was all some kind of a mistake, or some elaborate plot to publicly humiliate Harry. She nodded.

"And that's it?" Hermione asked, her whispered words harsh.

Lucius shrugged elegantly, offering Hermione a small smile.

"That's it. He's a bastard, Hermione. I taught him to be one. But he's not a liar. There was no sign he had the slightest inkling of what I was talking about. I believe him," Lucius repeated, emphasizing the words.

"This type of magical shock is very rare," the Mind-Healer said gravely, standing in the corner of Harry's room with Hermione and Draco.

Narcissa and Lucius had Flooed home, offering to sit with Harry later when Hermione needed a break. She had taken pity on Draco when the Mind-Healer finished his examination, beckoning him to join her in Harry's room. Harry was still catatonic, and the Healer assured her that Draco's presence was unlikely to worsen things.

"What can be done?" Draco asked, his voice raw with worry. He couldn't take his eyes off of Harry, who looked frail and vulnerable in the hospital bed.

"Can either of you tell me if Mr. Evans ever mastered Occlumency?" the Mind-Healer asked, looking from Hermione to Draco.

"Yes," Draco answered, even as Hermione was saying "no". She shot him a questioning look, and he continued.

"Yes. He is able to build impenetrable shields, and he has some talent for Legilimency as well. Why do you ask?" Draco said, his brow furrowing as he tried to draw a connection between Harry's current state and his Occlumency shields.

The Mind-Healer made an undecipherable noise, nodding to himself and jotting down a note on the chart.

"Usually, victims of magical shock lose control of their magic. The traumatic event literally severs the connection they have with their magic, which pushes the magic out of the person's body by force, resulting in explosions of wild magic that are dangerous both to the patient and those around him. Mr. Evans," the Healer said, nodding toward Harry, "suffers from a different kind of magical shock. The traumatic event didn't sever his connection with his magic, it severed his connection with the outside world. His magic is so focused on protecting him that is drew him inside his Occlumency shields, essentially trapping him in his own brain."

Hermione looked horrified. Draco grabbed her trembling hand, holding it tightly. He nodded, and the Healer continued.

"The more common type of magical shock is cured by putting the patient's magic in stasis, preventing it from degenerating further. The patient's physical and mental traumas are then dealt with, and their magic is returned when they are stable."

Draco nodded woodenly, his gaze locked on the dark-haired man across the room. Hermione

sobbed softly; she could tell where this was going.

"For Mr. Evans, the treatment is not so clear-cut. We can't extract his magic without harming him, which means we can't force his Occlumency shields to retreat so we can deal with his emotional trauma. In Mr. Evans' case, I'm afraid attempts to break through those shields could result in permanent damage," the Mind-Healer said, his gaze apologetic.

Draco whirled to face him, his expression disbelieving.

"So, what? You leave him like that?"

The Healer nodded, and Draco's knees gave out. Hermione's tight grip on his hand saved him from falling to the floor face-first; instead, he sank into a heap at her feet. She knelt quickly, not releasing his hand.

"Draco, listen to me. *Draco*. This is Ha- er, *James* we're talking about here. He's pulled out of situations a lot worse than this. He'll make it back to us," she said, tears streaming down her face.

She turned to the Healer, who crouched down so they could converse easily from her spot on the floor.

"*Can* anything be done?" she asked, her eyes flickering from the Healer to Harry's bed.

"There have been several cases of an extremely strong Legilimens entering the patient's mind without breaking the shields," he said slowly, as though he was reluctant to share the information. "In those cases, the person was able to help the patient drop the Occlumency shields, essentially coaxing the patient out of the self-induced catatonia."

Draco's eyes were shut tightly, but Hermione knew he was listening. His grip on her hand had tightened painfully when the Healer spoke.

"In those cases, the Legilimens was a loved one of the patient's," the Mind-Healer continued. "The theory is that the patient's Occlumency shields had a natural chink in their armor for the person, so it would have to be someone who is very close to Mr. Evans, and an exceptional Legilimens."

Hermione's heart sank. She suddenly knew how Harry had finished his Occlumency lessons. It had to be Draco; they must have worked on the skill early in their relationship to help Harry hide his infidelity.

The Mind-Healer left them, telling Hermione he'd be back in a few hours to check in. It was clear he expected no progress; most people with Harry's type of magical shock remained in their catatonic state for the rest of their lives.

"Are you?" she whispered, afraid speaking normally would make the situation more real.

She felt Draco tense against her, and his death-grip on her hand made her eyes water.

"Yes," he answered in an agonized whisper.

"Are you certain?"

Draco swallowed, shifting his position on the floor so he faced her. He dropped her hand, and Hermione only barely resisted the impulse to flex her aching fingers.

"Yes," he answered, stronger this time. "Harry was never able to keep me out, even after he mastered Occlumency. We had Kingsley test it; his shields were solid against everyone but me."

Hermione was silent for several minutes, letting the words sink in. It was a risk, for sure. Draco's presence in Harry's mind could drive him over the edge. Or it could help guide him back to his senses, help him gain control over the magic that was keeping him there.

"Will you?" she asked, her voice a whisper again.

Draco didn't answer, and after a while Hermione thought he might not. She settled herself on the floor, content to sit next to him on the cold tiles instead of the comfortable chair by Harry's bedside. Harry didn't know she was there, she reasoned, and Draco needed all the support he could get. She was certain the stories and photos in the *Daily Prophet* were faked; there was no way the broken man before her would have ever done anything to hurt Harry.

Hours later, as Narcissa gently shook Hermione awake and Lucius helped lift her from the floor, to send her back to the Manor to rest, Draco finally answered.

"Yes."

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Chapter: 8

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. I wish I could say they are mine, but sadly, they are not.

A good deal of time passed before Harry realized anything was wrong. The last thing he remembered clearly before everything changed was sitting on the sofa in the Manor's drawing room, waiting for news from Lucius with Hermione and Narcissa.

The room had been so silent that he never noticed when he slipped inside himself. At least, that's what he thought happened. He'd been insensible, so stricken by the thought of Draco's betrayal that he'd blocked everything but his own thoughts out. It wasn't until later, when he tried to bring himself out of his pitiful reveries, that he realized something was wrong.

He looked around the room, realizing he was alone. He moved through the Manor, searching for Hermione and Narcissa, but found no one. He even called for several house-elves, but none came. In desperation, he'd reached for the Floo powder to try to call someone – anyone – but that hadn't worked, either.

Is this some sort of spell or curse? He wracked his brain, trying to come up with a hex that would send him to a different plane of existence , even searching the Malfoy libraries for one – both the large library and the smaller library attached to Lucius' study with a hidden door. Even the Dark Arts books hadn't offered any clue about his predicament.

Well, I did wish for some solitude, he thought wryly. In a way, he was almost glad something like this had happened; he could focus on finding a solution and getting out of this mess instead of thinking about Draco. He sank into a leather chair in the library – the main one, since Lucius' gave him the creeps – and started reading. *There has to be* something *that will give a clue here,* he thought, leafing through the books he'd found in the two libraries for the second time.

It was then, as he was poring over a Dark Arts book on Banishing curses, that he heard the faint sound of someone speaking. He paused, his body unconsciously leaning toward the voice, straining to make out the words. *Where is it coming from? Am I not alone here?* He tried to silence his frantic thoughts, which were practically screaming for help.

" … magical shock … rare …" he heard an unfamiliar voice say, his head ringing from the effort to discern even those broken words.

Magical shock? Is the voice talking about me? Harry jumped up, Summoning a copy of *Merriam-Webster's Wizarding Dictionary* from the shelves. He thumbed through the book, fingers flying, looking for more about the condition. He listened hard for the voice again, but all trace of it had vanished. He settled himself back into the chair, intent on the passage in the dictionary that defined the term.

Main Entry: mag·i·cal shock
Pronunciation:
-ji-k?l_äk\par
1 : a sudden or violent disturbance in the mental or emotional faculties

2 : sudden stimulation of the nerves or convulsive contraction of the muscles that is caused by the discharge through the animal body of electricity from a charged source

3 : a state of profound depression of the vital processes of the body that is characterized by

pallor, rapid but weak pulse, rapid and shallow respiration, reduced total blood volume, low blood pressure and loss of control of magic usually caused by severe injuries or major emotional trauma. See entries for **Uncontrolled Magic** and **Magical Catatonic state**.

Fuck, he thought. *This doesn't sound good.*

Harry paused again, straining to listen for any hint of the voice he'd heard before, but his efforts were met with nothing but silence. He didn't bother to look up uncontrolled magic. His was very familiar with the *that*, and there was no hint of the static charge that always accompanied his outbursts of wild magic. That left only magical catatonia. He reluctantly thumbed back a few pages in the dictionary, seeking out the definition.

Main Entry: mag·i·cal cat·a·ton·ic state

Pronunciation:
-ji-k?l 'tä-nik_at\par
: characterized by a marked lack of movement, activity or expression. Patient retreats into his or her own mind, usually behind Occlumency shields, as a form of self-protection against magical shock.

Think, think, think, he berated himself, pacing the floor in the library. He'd be more comfortable in the drawing room, but he didn't want to leave the library, just in case it was the only place the voice could break through.

Retreats into the mind, he thought, laughing at the irony of his mind placing him in the last place he wanted to be right now: Malfoy Manor. Seconds later, the room around him melted away, morphing into the Gryffindor common room. Harry gasped in surprise, turning slowly to look at the room he hadn't seen since he graduated Hogwarts nearly six years before. The fire was warm and inviting, and he wandered over to sit in an over-stuffed chair near the hearth.

I wonder if I have access to all the books here, too? Responding to his unspoken wish to see the library, the room swirled again, this time reforming around him as walls and walls of books. He wasted no time, racing through the stacks until he got to the Healing section. He scanned the books, reaching for several he thought might contain some useful information. Curiously, only two of the four he selected would budge.

What the hell? Why can I see them but not remove them? He cast a Summoning charm before noticing that he didn't have his wand. He'd performed several spells, and all of them had worked perfectly. *Maybe I don't need my wand, since I'm stuck in my mind?* Harry huffed gracelessly, his brow furrowing as he thought. He attempted several more spells, succeeding every time. He

suppressed a mirthless laugh, choosing to move forward with finding his way out of the labyrinth of his mind instead of dwelling on the oddities contained within.

On a whim, he headed to the Restricted Section, gathering all the books on Occlumency he could take off the shelves. An idea sprang into his mind as he Levitated stack of books back to Hermione's old favorite table in the corner. Depositing the books, he ran back into the stacks once more, this time looking for a book he knew he'd read at the Manor last week. He found it on the shelves, unsurprised when it slid easily from its resting place into his hand. He turned around, grabbing at random for something he knew he'd never read, his eyes resting on an old copy of *Hogwarts: A History*. His laugh rang through the library, and he was at once struck by how odd it sounded in the usually hushed room.

I'll have to remember this next time I want to wind Hermione up, he thought gleefully, his fingers wrapping around the spine of the book and tugging. It stayed firmly in place, confirming his suspicions.

I can only look at books I've already read. I wonder if that means everything you read stays in your subconscious? He replaced the other book on the shelf, cognizant of Madam Pince's rules, even though this wasn't actually the Hogwarts library, just his mind's approximation of it. An ironic thought flashed through his mind, his lips twisting into a smirk. *I suppose I should send Vernon a thank-you letter. If he hadn't locked me in my room all those summers, I'd never have had the chance to read the* entire *dictionary.* What a thought, he mused. He had Vernon Dursley to thank for the knowledge he now had about his current predicament.

Sliding into the seat, he rifled through the stack of books, pulling out one that focused heavily on the theory behind Occlumency. He knew he needed to get past his shields, but he hadn't been able to take them down.

Hours later, Harry's scenery had changed yet again. He was seated in front of his parents' graves in Godric's Hollow, tracing his finger over the inscriptions on their tombstones. He sat back, shivering in the cold, wondering absently why it always seemed to be cold and wet when he visited their graves.

Harry had tried meditation, introspection and every other technique that usually helped him slip into the relaxed state necessary to raise or lower his Occlumency shields. Nothing had worked. He came to visit his parents' graves in the hopes his inner self would be reminded of their sacrifice, and that somehow that would help him overcome this hurdle, just as it had helped him kill Voldemort. No such luck.

He grounded himself again, using his mother's grave as his focus. He tried to turn his thoughts inward, using the cold bite of the stone underneath his hand as his guide. He felt the familiar rush that signified he'd reached his meditative state, holding back a sigh of relief that would have brought him back outside of himself.

Bolstered by his progress, Harry set about envisioning his Occlumency shield. If he could just

visualize it, he might be able to take it apart or find a way out. He was instantly surrounded by thick stone walls that rose as far as he could see. He saw several tiny fractures in the walls, and he focused his energy on trying to expand those cracks. Nothing he tried worked, not even pushing against it with all his mental and magical might.

Exhausted, he allowed himself to slip out of the meditative state. His green eyes opened, taking a tired look around the graveyard. It had started to drizzle some time ago, he discovered, and he was shivering and damp.

No reason to be cold and wet, I suppose, he thought ruefully, changing his surroundings once more. The cold ground melted away, replaced by warm-hued wood. He looked around the room, taking in all the details he'd never noticed before. He was in his old bedroom in the Godric's Hollow house, a room he had only seen previously through the brief flashes of his own memories of the night his parents died.

The crib looked impossibly small to the tall man standing next to it. As he ran a hand across its smooth finish, a memory of his father singing softly as he tucked him in, then uttering an unfamiliar spell that cast a rosy glow throughout the room, overtook him. The memory continued as James cast several other spells Harry assumed regulated the temperature of the room and monitored for his cries.

How can I be remembering that? That baby was just a few months old; I shouldn't have any recollection of that. He marveled at the strength of the human mind, awed by the chance to view memories of the parents he never truly knew.

Harry moved to the nearby rocking chair, which was painted a bright, cheery yellow. As he sat, he was immersed in another flash of memory, this one of his mother. She was holding Harry, both of them laughing, as the nearby basket of laundry folded itself at her direction. She made a pair of tiny socks dance in front of baby Harry, who gurgled in delight and reached chubby hands out to try to grab the enchanted items.

Would it be so bad to stay? Harry felt his resolve to escape the prison of his mind lessen. He was being handed a chance to get to know his parents; to live the short time he'd had with them again, this time as a mindful, observant adult. His pulse sped up as he thought about witnessing hundreds – maybe even thousands – more scenes like the two he'd just seen. A chance to know his parents in a world that would give him whatever he wanted. He settled deeper into the chair, rocking absently, exchanging his damp clothes for dry ones with a thought.

It would be wrong to stay, his mind nagged, trying to shift his focus back to the present. But Harry was tired; he didn't want to leave. He had found a place far away from his contentious divorce, his problems with the Weasleys and the nightmare his relationship with Draco had become. A blanket appeared, and Harry wrapped himself in it, stretching out in the comfortable chair his parents had rocked him in hundreds of times. *Just a little while,* he thought sleepily, his eyes drifting closed. *I'll just stay a little while.*

Alarm spells were buzzing, bringing half a dozen mediwitches and Healers running into Harry's room. Lucius had to physically restrain Draco, holding him back from Harry's bedside so the Healers could examine him.

"What's happening?" Draco yelled hoarsely, his voice rough from lack of sleep and constant worry. "Someone tell me what's happening!"

Lucius tightened his hold on his son, drawing him close to his own body and restraining him by wrapping his arms around Draco's torso, pulling Draco's back against his chest.

"Let them do their jobs, Draco," he whispered in his son's ear. He didn't trust himself to speak in a normal voice; the fear in it would be too evident. "Just stand here and let them work."

The Healers poured potions down Harry's throat, poking and probing at him with their wands. Draco could only catch pieces of their hushed, hurried conversations, but what he heard wasn't comforting. Harry's pulse had shot up to an unhealthy range, which was very rare for victims of magical shock, whose heartbeats usually slowed, not quickened. His blood pressure had risen as well, and his core body temperature had dropped, despite the warm blankets he was wrapped in.

Draco fumbled in his pocket, coming up with a small tube of lip balm. Hermione had charmed it before she left, giving it to Draco so he could contact her if anything happened to Harry in the night. She and Narcissa had returned to the Manor to rest at Lucius' insistence, though neither had wanted to leave. Draco held the tube tightly in his fist, concentrating his thoughts on Hermione.

"*Arcesso*," he muttered, feeling the tube of balm heat in his palm, a sign the charm had worked. It was a simple Summoning spell, and he knew its mate, a hair clip Narcissa had donated to the cause, would warm on Hermione's end, alerting her to the need to get to St. Mungo's quickly.

Draco had initially been scornful of Hermione's idea, especially since she'd performed the spell on the lip balm – the only thing she'd had in her pockets – and his mother's hairclip. Now, he was simply grateful for her foresight. Though there was no need, he kept the tube in his hand, squeezing it so tightly he felt the edges of it imprint into his palm. He needed to cry out, to hurt something, to do *anything* to deal with this impossible situation; the bite of the tube breaking his flesh was welcome relief from the ache that was building in his chest as he watched the Healers work on Harry.

" … vitals are dropping …" he heard one of the mediwizards mutter as he checked the read-out from his latest scan of Harry's body.

Another Summoned a cart of potions, grabbing one and forcing it down Harry's throat.

"His body is shutting down," another Healer said briskly, turning to a mediwitch standing near him. "Fetch Mind-Healer Patil. We need to put Mr. Evans under *Corpus Stasis*."

Draco felt his father's arms tighten around him at the order; the *Corpus Stasis* spell was only used in the most dire of situations. The risk of stopping a body's processes with the spell were enormous, so it was reserved for those who might die without its intervention. Harry's body would essentially be frozen in time; he wouldn't breathe, his heart wouldn't beat. It was much more invasive and drastic than the traditional Stasis spells, which targeted a single failing organ or bodily process; it meant Harry's entire body was failing. It meant Harry was dying.

TBC

Author's note: Sorry for the super-dramatic cliffhanger, guys, but it was a natural stopping point. I promise there will be another update soon.

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Chapter: 9

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. JKR owns them, I just play with them.

Harry napped peacefully in his mind, unaware that his body was struggling to survive. The *Corpus Stasis* spell had worked, but until his consciousness could be coaxed out of his self-made prison, he'd never wake up. The Healers warned Draco and Hermione that Harry would likely die within hours of coming out of the spell unless his mental status changed.

"You have to do it, Draco," Hermione whispered, her eyes locked on Harry's unresponsive face. She stood near the bed, the Protective Bubble conjured by the St. Mungo's staff keeping her a few feet away from Harry.

"I don't know if I can," Draco whispered, fingers pressed to his eyelids, holding back the threatening tears.

"There is no other option," she said insistently, her own eyes dry. The two of them had cried almost nonstop since the Healers had placed Harry under the Stasis spell; she had no tears left.

"What if I kill him, Hermione?"

Hermione turned, looking at Draco for the first time in over an hour. They'd both been transfixed on Harry, studying him intently as though trying to memorize his features and the curves of his body in case he didn't make it out of this.

"So what if you do?" she retorted, startling Draco with her hard tone. "He's not alive *now*, Draco. So what if you kill him? He's already fucking dead!"

Draco shook his head, unable to accept her harsh words.

"He's not dead. Harry. Is. Not. Dead!" he hissed, his eyes narrowing as he glared at Harry's best friend, one of the only true friends Harry had left in the world.

"Semantics," she said dismissively, choosing to continue to antagonize Draco in the hopes of forcing a decision. "He's not dead, but he's not alive, either."

"Don't you fucking say another word, Hermione," Draco said, advancing on her menacingly. "Not another fucking word. Harry is alive. Harry will be fine."

Hermione shook her head sadly, her brown eyes softening as she watched Draco draw a tortured breath. Pieces of her were breaking inside. She hated forcing Draco to break down, but he needed to find the resolve to save Harry somewhere, and he needed to find it fast.

"He has to be fine. He has to be fine, Hermione, because I'm not fine without him," Draco whispered, his tone defeated. "I'm nothing without him."

Hermione gathered a sobbing Draco in her arms, stroking his hair as he cried against her neck. She whispered soothing words until he regained control, her gaze locked on Harry's unmoving form all the while. *I'm doing this for you, Harry*, she thought as she rocked Draco. *I'm doing this for you, but Merlin, I'm not sure any of us will be alright if you don't pull through.*

"That's it! I don't care about propriety or the law, I want that bitch's head on a platter!" Lucius yelled, startling several nearby house-elves and bringing Hermione running to the foyer, brandishing her wand.

She stopped short, noticing first that there seemed to be no immediate danger, and second that Harry's lawyer was standing at the base of the stairs. *Oh for Merlin's sake!* She thought, exasperated. *What now?*

"The petition will be struck down, of course," Abramson was saying, not quite meeting Lucius' eye. "But I wanted to let the younger Mr. Malfoy know it had been filed. It won't help her cause; the judge will see it for the greedy ploy it is."

Lucius was still shaking with anger, so Hermione knew the news must be horrible. Everyone was at the end of their emotional and physical tethers, but both of the senior Malfoys still managed to maintain rigid control of themselves in front of others. Draco, on the other hand, had practically been living in Harry's hospital room for the past four days. He had long since discarded the polite, aloof mask his parents wore in public; the fact that James Evans had the ability to reduce the infamously cold Draco Malfoy to such a state was the talk of St. Mungo's.

Hermione touched Lucius' arm, turning his attention to her. She could feel his muscles practically vibrating beneath her palm; the man was furious. He nodded to Abramson, who caught her up on their discussion.

"Mrs. Potter has filed a petition to gain immediate and complete control over Mr. Potter's estate," he said, adjusting his glasses nervously. "She also seeks control over his medical treatment, as his next of kin."

Hermione gasped, her blood turning to ice.

"Can she?"

Abramson hesitated briefly before shaking his head no, and explaining the injunction he had filed with the judge just minutes after receiving the petition. Anyone could see that giving a soon-to-be ex-wife control over her deathly ill husband's estate and medical decisions would be disastrous, he assured her.

"How did she find out Harry was in the hospital?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowed as she mentally ran through all the possibilities. The hearing wasn't due to start for five days; they'd purposefully put off petitioning for a postponement to keep news of Harry's condition out of the papers.

"She said St. Mungo's contacted her when he checked in because she was still listed as Mr. Potter's next of kin," Abramson said, his voice regaining some confidence. "Of course, we know that is a lie, since he is using an alias. James Evans' next of kin has always been listed as you, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded. They'd set it up that way years ago, before he and Ginny had started dating again. Knowing what she did now about his long-standing affair with Draco, Hermione wasn't surprised Harry had never changed it. He and Ginny had obviously been having problems for a long time.

"Which means she either knows about the alias or has some way of monitoring Harry's whereabouts," Lucius said, his voice still rigid with anger.

"She doesn't know about the alias," Hermione offered, biting her lower lip. Of the two options, that had been the least troublesome.

"Are you certain?" Lucius asked, the intensity of his gaze making Hermione shiver.

"Yes," she said. She knew for a fact Ginny had no idea Harry masqueraded around as James Evans; he'd used the alias several times when traveling just to ensure she couldn't find him.

"And the other Weasleys?"

Hermione scanned her memory, trying to come up with a time she or Harry would have shared the information with any member of the Weasley clan.

"No. I never even told Ron. It was just between Harry and me," she said. "And Kingsley. But he'd never tell anyone."

Lucius' eyes flashed, and a chill ran up Hermione's spine. She remembered the days when Lucius Malfoy had been her enemy; she was just glad they were on the same side now.

"I think someone needs to pay Mrs. Potter a visit," he said, his calm tone more worrisome than the angry one it replaced. "Mr. Abramson, thank you for bringing us this news. Please let us know the moment anything changes."

The lawyer nodded, reluctantly shaking Lucius' outstretched hand.

"If there's anything I can do –" he said hesitantly, looking like he'd rather ride a Thestral than finish his sentence.

"No, no," Lucius said, nodding to a house-elf to open the door, "we can take it from here."

"That is concerning, but I'm afraid we aren't able to run any diagnostic exams at the moment," Mind-Healer Patil said, shaking his head.

"We have to know how his ex-wife is tracking him, and if she has a spell on him that could be dangerous," Hermione said, her voice insistent.

"I'm sorry, but we don't have any options. The Stasis spell halts *everything*, including curses, spells, jinxes and potions. Any diagnostic we ran would come up empty, since technically, nothing is active in Mr. Evans' body at the moment."

Hermione almost growled in frustration, thankful she'd forced Lucius to remain in the corridor for this conversation. She could easily see the man verbally – and maybe even physically – attacking the unhelpful Healer.

"I suppose we'll deal with it when the Stasis spell is removed, then," Hermione said, resigned. She didn't notice the flicker of sadness in the Healer's eyes, proof that he held no hope of Harry's recovery.

"Have you decided to go forward with the Legilimency, then?" he asked, gentling his voice.

Hermione cast a glance toward the bed, where Harry lay. Draco was sleeping in the chair beside it; she had Transfigured it into a chaise when she arrived, careful not to wake him from the first sleep he'd had in days.

"Yes. Draco knows a way in through Ha – James' Occlumency shields," she said, silently cursing herself for stumbling over Harry's name.

The Healer nodded thoughtfully, his gaze also resting on Harry's inert form.

"The consequences –" he began slowly, meeting Hermione's eyes with a serious look.

"We know the consequences," she said flatly, cutting him off before he could launch into a lecture about the risks. She and Draco both well knew the horrible risk involved. "In order for the Legilimency approach to work, the Stasis spell must be removed. From that point, Draco has a matter of hours to work with before James' body fails completely."

The Mind-Healer nodded, catching Hermione's hand in his own to focus her attention.

"That is true. It's also true that the procedure carries great risk for Mr. Malfoy as well," he said, his voice sharp. "The Occlumency walls may be strong enough to trap him as well, tying his consciousness to Mr. Evans'. If Mr. Evans were to die before Mr. Malfoy could retreat, the consequences for Mr. Malfoy would be profound."

Hermione managed to quash her urge to laugh. The consequences of Harry's death would be profound for Draco whether or not he was trapped in Harry's brain when it happened. It would almost be a mercy, in fact, if Draco's mind snapped when Harry died; she knew his will to live would die with Harry, no matter what.

"We are aware, as are his parents. They are Draco's legal next of kin, and they have agreed to sign the hospital's waivers. In the event he is incapacitated, decisions for his care would fall to them," she said stiffly.

The Healer nodded grimly, leaving the room with no further protests. Hermione walked to the bed, standing opposite Draco's sleeping form.

"Damn you, Harry!" she whispered, tears streaming down her face. "How could you do this to us? How could you give up?"

Harry was sitting in his father's study, relaxing on the sturdy leather sofa and breathing in the unique smell that must have been his father's cologne. Over the last few days he'd combed the house, taking in as many memories as he could. There had been many disappointments – like the fact that although he could roam the entire house, many of the closets and drawers were sealed, probably because as a baby, Harry would have had no reason or chance to delve into them – but even more joys, like discovering his mother loved Debussy, or that his father occasionally smoked a pipe on cool evenings.

Harry now had an entire library of memories of his parents. He knew which stories his mother had read to him as she rocked him to sleep, which songs his father had sung while they played in the yard. A wealth of information that he'd now be able to pass on to his own children. Family traditions.

Harry felt a momentary pang of loss at the thought of his own children. He was still no closer to a resolution about Draco than he had been when this self-imposed exile began. Were the stories

and photos in the *Daily Prophet* a hoax? Had Draco slept with Pansy? Was Pansy pregnant with his child? Was it a casual affair, or did Draco truly intend to marry her?

He fidgeted restlessly on the sofa, trying to center himself. He had examined his memories of the last few months with Draco at length; they didn't match up to the stories in the newspaper. Of course, Pansy claimed to be three months pregnant, which meant it was a possibility. Harry was delaying resuming his efforts to return until he worked out what he would do if the child *was* Draco's.

They'd talked about having children, and they'd talked about using surrogates to father their own heirs so their family names and fortunes would live on. Was this really that different from that plan? Harry snorted, shaking his head. *Of course this is different,* he thought, willing himself to calm down. It wasn't so different, not really. And if Draco had slept with Pansy before Harry proposed, there really had been no cheating. Not so long as that was the last time.

Hungry, Harry wandered down to the kitchen. He opened the cupboard doors, removing the ingredients for one of his mother's favorite indulgences; a peanut butter and marshmallow sandwich.

"I see your gastronomic choices are no better here than in real life," Draco drawled, startling Harry into dropping the items.

"D-Draco?" he asked, moving forward to touch the blond's face. Had he willed Draco here? He'd been thinking about the sandwich, and how his father used to tease his mother the pregnancy-indulgence-turned-favorite-food. Draco had nothing to do with that memory.

"Yes?" Draco answered, cocking his head at the bewildered man in front of him.

"This is new," Harry mused, wondering if the hallucination was a sign his mind was shutting down.

"No, this is old, actually. We've been waiting four days for your sorry arse to pull out of this, and you've been here eating sandwiches?"

"Are you really here, then?" Harry asked, his voice a whisper. He touched Draco's face again, running his hands over closed eyelids and skimming full lips.

"Mmm," Draco said, leaning into Harry's touch. He was trying so hard to hold it together, to be calm and authoritative. That's what Harry needed to help him pull out of this; not Draco falling to his knees, sobbing with relief at finding him whole and sane.

When Draco opened his eyes, they were standing in the Slytherin common room. He shot Harry a puzzled look, allowing the Gryffindor to lead him to the plush green couch near the fire.

"How -?"

Harry laughed, and the ice around Draco's heart melted. He'd steeled himself before he entered Harry's mind, positive the internal Harry would be as broken and fragile as the one laying in the hospital bed at St. Mungo's. Instead, he'd found his vibrant, gorgeous fiancé seemingly unchanged by the external trauma.

"I've been living in my memories. It's amazing. Every book I've read, every place I've been. Every detail, no matter how small, all saved in my memories."

Draco's mind was bursting with questions, but he knew time was of the essence. Who knew how quickly hours and days passed inside the confines of a mind? He had no way of telling how much time had passed since his arrival, how much time Harry's ailing body had left.

"You can tell me all about it after we get out of here. We have to – wait. Did you say memories? When were you ever in the Slytherin common room?" Draco looked around, surprised. All of the details were right, just like Harry had said.

Harry smiled, his amusement mirrored in his eyes. Draco felt another piece of himself thaw; he hadn't seen Harry's gorgeous green eyes open in days.

"A long story," he said, brushing Draco's question aside. His face turned serious, and he met Draco's gaze.

"I want to go back," he said carefully, noticing how Draco's shoulders sagged in relief at the simple statement. "But I want some answers first."

Draco nodded. He and Hermione had talked at length about what to tell Harry. They decided that Draco would answer any question Harry had about the alleged affair with Pansy, but not divulge anything about Harry's precarious physical condition or Ginny's latest posturing. Those were things best discussed later, when Harry had recovered.

"Did you sleep with Pansy?" The question was calm, but Draco could see the tension in Harry's body as he posed it.

"No," he said emphatically, not hesitating for a second.

"So Pansy isn't pregnant with your child?"

Here, Draco hesitated for the first time. As much as he wanted to outright deny it, he couldn't be sure Pansy hadn't found a way to impregnate herself with his child.

"I haven't had sex with her, but I can't be wholly positive her claims are false," Draco said, his heart racing as the words left his mouth.

"You can't be sure she's not – but you haven't – " Harry fumbled for words, his brow creased. The

room spun around them, and seconds later they were standing back in the house in Godric's Hollow. It had a calming effect on Harry, who managed to find his tongue. "Explain."

The sudden change of scenery shocked Draco, whose eyes hadn't been open the last time Harry shifted them from one memory to another. He swallowed, gathering his wits about him as he tried to make Harry understand.

"I know I did nothing to impregnate her, but that's not to say she didn't find a way to manage it," he said, watching Harry's reaction carefully. "We're wizards, Harry. Almost anything is possible through magic."

Harry said nothing, which Draco took as a positive sign. He rushed forward with his story, anxious to settle this so they could focus on tearing down Harry's shields and getting out of there.

"I had lunch with her a few days before you came back. We were together for a few hours. She could have taken a potion that makes conception possible with skin-to-skin contact, or she could have cast a Surrogacy Spell, which allows conception to occur with an incantation while the two people are touching," Draco said, almost sighing in relief as he saw Harry's eyes widen. The dark-haired wizard obviously hadn't thought of those possibilities. "However she did it, I wasn't a willing participant. You are my world, and I'd never to anything to jeopardize that."

Harry's knees buckled, but before Draco could reach out to steady him, a comfortable chair materialized. Harry sank into it, his eyes never leaving Draco's face.

"Wandless?" Draco asked, his eyes wide. Skipping from memory to memory was one thing, but wandless magic was another. It shouldn't be possible for Harry to do anything here that he wasn't capable of outside his mind.

Harry nodded, waving his hand again to Conjure a glass of water. He took a sip, handing it to Draco, who eyed it suspiciously before taking a sip himself.

"I assume you're here to help me get out?" Harry asked, apparently accepting Draco's explanations about Pansy.

"Have you *tried* to get out?" Draco countered, his voice slightly censorious.

"I have. I couldn't get through the walls. How were you able to get in?"

Draco shrugged. He didn't actually know how he had managed it; they had never been able to figure out why Harry could effectively block everyone but him.

"The same way I used to when you were learning Occlumency," he said simply. He knew that wouldn't help Harry break down the walls, but hopefully his presence was enough to bolster Harry's confidence in his ability to master his magic.

"That's helpful, thanks," Harry snapped, taking another drink of water. He hadn't really been thirsty or hungry while he'd been here, though he'd eaten out of habit. Now, though, he was absolutely parched.

Draco watched worriedly as Harry chugged the water, wandlessly refilling the glass when he was finished. Mind-Healer Patil had cautioned him to watch for signs of deterioration, and dehydration was one of the first that would appear.

"I'm here to help guide you out, but they're your shields; you know them better than I do. How did you try before?" Draco asked, careful to keep the desperation and concern out of his voice.

Harry sighed, closing his eyes and concentrating. A minute later, the cozy kitchen disappeared, replaced by imposing stone walls. Draco looked around, spotting the same small fissures Harry had days before. He reached up to touch one, surprised when pieces of stone chipped off as he applied slight pressure to it.

"That's new," Harry said, narrowing his eyes as he watched Draco's hands explore the wall.

Draco nodded absently, digging his fingers further into the crack. The stone yielded easily, allowing his hand to slip through the wall entirely. He pulled back, not surprised to find the fissure sealing itself as soon as his hand was free.

"I think we've found out how I breach your Occlumency shields," he said dryly, pushing his fingers through the wall again, fascinated.

Harry brought a hand up to another crack, pushing against it. Nothing happened, just like the last time he'd tried.

"It's tuned to you, Dray," he said, watching as Draco's hand disappeared again. "I can't get through."

Draco growled in frustration. They didn't have time to wade through all of the complex emotional ties that bound Harry inside his mind. Harry hadn't noticed yet, but Draco had noticed his hands trembling; another warning sign. His nervous system was shutting down. There wasn't much time left.

"Do you trust me?" he asked Harry, his grey eyes boring into Harry's. It was absolutely imperative that he have Harry's full trust before he attempted to literally pull Harry out. Anything less would be disastrous for both of them. "Completely. Do you trust me completely?"

Harry nodded slowly.

"I'm serious, Harry. No doubts. You have to completely trust that I would never deliberately hurt you in any way. What I'm about to try won't work otherwise."

Harry swallowed. His time in this enforced seclusion had been consumed with that very question. Until this moment, he hadn't been sure of the answer. He held his hand out for Draco to grasp.

"Completely."

Draco nodded jerkily, knowing his own certainty was also key to what he was about to do. He closed his eyes, forcing his swirling thoughts to still, placing himself in the meditative state he used when retreating behind his own Occlumency shields. Images shot past – Harry, laughing in the Slytherin common room, Harry lying motionless, all but dead, in the hospital bed, Harry's face in the throes of an orgasm, full of love and joy, Harry proposing. Draco's eyes snapped open, his resolve solid.

I can do this, he thought, believing it for the first time. Though he'd put up a confident front in front of Hermione and his parents, in truth, he'd had no idea whether or not his own Occlumency skills were solid enough to block the reverb from Harry's magical shock when he broke into Harry's mind. Draco could have absorbed whatever emotions had driven Harry into this state if his own shields hadn't held; he could very well have crippled himself the instant he entered Harry's thoughts. But now, awash in Harry's trust and love, Draco knew he could do what needed to be done.

"I'm going to open up one of the fissures so we can both pass through," Draco said, his tone authoritative and sure. "You will have to move through as I hold the passage open. I'll need you to follow any command I give you, and to do it without looking back. Can you do that?"

Harry nodded, studying Draco's face carefully. He was well-versed in Occlumency and Legilimency theory; he knew exactly how dangerous this was going to be for Draco.

"Alright, then. I'm going to concentrate on creating the opening we need. When I say 'now', I want you to push yourself through and not turn back, no matter what happens. Are we clear?"

He didn't trust his voice, so Harry simply nodded again. He stood behind Draco, ready to move at a moment's notice. Draco took a minute to center and ground himself, focusing his will on opening the passage. He raised his hands to the thick wall, the stone crumbling beneath his fingers. Draco moved quickly, opening a passage just large enough for Harry to pass through.

"Now," he said, gritting his teeth with the effort of holding the wall open.

Harry didn't hesitate for a second; he dashed through as soon as he heard Draco's pained command. He could hear Draco grunting with the strain of keeping the shield open, his breath coming in gasps as the walls tried to convulse around Harry, trying to keep him in the confines of his own mind.

"Go!" Draco screamed, his muscles trembling with fatigue as the crush of the wall became stronger.

Draco knew the moment Harry was through, because the wall began to collapse. He threw himself into the shrinking opening, the tumbling rocks battering him as he dove through.

Hermione was bent over Harry's convulsing body, her eyes wide with panic. Draco had been gone nearly three hours, which was the upper limit to the time Mind-Healer Patil had guessed Harry had left once he left the protection of the Stasis spell. His already thready pulse had been steadily weakening, and his breathing had degenerated into little more than a series of painful gasps.

She had forced everyone out of Harry's room before Draco entered Harry's mind. His parents fought to stay, but Draco threw his support behind Hermione; it would be easier to focus on what he needed to do in Harry's mind if he didn't have to worry about his mother fretting over his still body. The Healers had been happy to comply; the course of action was an extremely risky one, and the staff wanted nothing to do with it. A kind mediwitch taught Hermione a range of monitoring and light Healing spells earlier that afternoon, so she was prepared to watch over both Harry and Draco's conditions.

She cast several of those spells now, her heart sinking as she watched Harry's latest vitals appear on the chart in front of her. Worse. She turned to Draco, casting the same spells over him. His pulse was speeding up, and his blood pressure was rising. Bad signs.

She put her wand down on the bed, reaching out to grab both of their hands. She had enlarged Harry's bed after the Healers removed the Stasis spell , making plenty of room for the three of them to lay side-by-side. She sat in between the pale, motionless bodies, repeating silent words of encouragement and desperation in her head as she gripped the limp hands.

Suddenly, Harry moved. Hermione braced herself for another round of convulsions, her wand raised, ready to cast a Healer's spell similar to a Body Bind to keep him from injuring himself as he thrashed. She paused as she realized his movements were purposeful, his arms coming up as though shielding himself from some imaginary blow. She looked over at Draco, whose muscles had gone rigid. His face was contorted with pain, his breathing quickening to the point of panting.

She scrambled to her knees, watching both men struggle against invisible obstacles. Without warning, Harry's eyes flew open, and he heaved himself into an upright position. Hermione's mouth hung open in shock as she watched him gasp, drawing in a lungful of air.

Draco was moaning now, his entire body flailing wildly. Hermione watched in horror as Draco's movements became even more frantic, his cries more pained. Harry tried to move toward him, but his sluggish body was slow to respond. Both he and Hermione could do little more than watch as Draco's body suddenly stilled, his pained cries stopping. Hermione grabbed her wand, casting every diagnostic spell she knew. She sat back with a sigh, relief washing over her strained face.

"He's sleeping," she said, watching as Harry struggled to get closer to Draco. "It's the reaction we expected. He exhausted his store of magical energy."

Harry exhaled, shifting again so he was touching Draco. Hermione ran a full complement of scans over him, pleased with the results.

"Welcome back, Harry," she said quietly, leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead. "You gave us all quite a fright."

Harry gave her a small smile, his attention totally wrapped around the sleeping man beside him. Satisfied with his vitals, Hermione slipped off the bed, resting in a nearby chair until Harry fell asleep, curled around Draco.

She checked on both Harry and Draco once more, scanning the chart as the readings registered. She took it with her as she quietly left the room, on a mission to first find Lucius and Narcissa to give them the good news, then to locate a Healer to take over their care.

TBC

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Chapter: 10

See the disclaimer in Chapter 1. Sadly, they don't belong to me.

Harry stretched lazily, turning his face up to the sun. The late November sky was cloudless for once, and he was enjoying the feel of the weak sun on his skin after spending six days cooped up in St. Mungo's. Mind-Healer Patil had forced him to stay under observation for a day after he woke from his catatonia; the only reason he didn't protest too strongly was that Draco had been admitted, too. They had both returned to the Manor last night, and today he was supposed to be catching up on preparations for the divorce hearing.

Harry shook his head ruefully, reflecting on the sense of comfort and ease he'd felt the minute he'd stepped through the Manor's Floo the night before. *It felt like coming home*, he thought, a smile stealing across his face. *I've never felt that before.* The only feeling that had ever come close was Harry's attachment to Hogwarts, but even that paled in comparison to the fierce *rightness* he felt at the Manor.

Hermione cleared her throat, bringing him out of his silent reverie. He sighed, turning his attention back to the enormous pile of parchment in his lap. Scrolls spilled over onto the thick wool blanket they had spread under a tree in the Manor's orchard, spelled to repel the dampness and cold of the ground beneath them. A well-placed Warming charm held the cool breeze at bay,

and Harry and Hermione were enjoying the fresh air.

"You have to be familiar with the laws that govern divorce, Harry," Hermione said, a slight edge to her voice. "Your lawyer will take care of most of the talking, but the judge could ask to talk to you, too."

He smiled sheepishly, picking absently at a loose thread in the blanket. The fabric began to bunch and pull under his fingers, and he flinched when Hermione slapped at his hand. Sighing, he turned his focus to the parchment on top of the pile: *Wizarding Marriage and Magical Bonds*.His lawyer's latest tack was to try to annul the marriage on the grounds that the magical bond between Harry and Ginny had never taken true effect. Hermione had found some research that hinted that if a person's subconscious wasn't willing, his or her magic would fail to complete the bond. If that had indeed happened with Harry, as Hermione suspected it had, his marriage would be void. Personally, Harry thought it was a long shot, but it was another bit of ammunition against Ginny and her ridiculous claims. His glance flicked to the scroll sitting beside Hermione, though he made no move to reach for it. He was intimately familiar with its contents; it was Ginny's official list of remonstrance.

The words on the page in front of him blurred as he mused about Ginny's demands, and her absurd claims. She was seeking punitive damages for intentional infliction of pain and suffering, claiming Harry was abusive and had beaten her severely upon learning of her most recent pregnancy, resulting in the miscarriage. *Easily disproven, since Hermione has given us permission to enter her official medical reports into the record,* he thought. St. Mungo's records were spelled to be unchangeable once the patient was released; all Abramson had to do was use the counter spell to make the forgery become clear.

The more concerning claim revolved around Ginny's abortion. She was claiming Harry forced her to abort a pregnancy several years ago because having a child at the time would have been detrimental to his career. His heart clenched at the thought that Ginny had aborted a child; one that could have as easily been his as Dean Thomas'. *If she'd just told me*, he thought miserably, *I would have told her to have the baby. Even if it was Dean's, I'd still have raised it as mine, if that's what she wanted to do.*

He shook himself out of the pointless line of thinking. Ginny hadn't told him; she'd taken the decision away from him. He was learning that had been a pattern in their marriage; Ginny and her family manipulating him into decisions he wasn't entirely comfortable with – like marrying her in the first place.

Harry had given Abramson a Pensieve memory of the moment he decided to propose to Ginny. Looking back on it with the perspective and distance he had now, he could see the decision – one he thought he'd made himself – had been orchestrated by Ginny and her mother. He shifted on the blanket slightly, calling the memory up to the forefront of his mind, something he'd been able to do easily since his "magical accident", as Hermione had taken to calling his illness. Now, he was able to access his memories just like a Pensieve, recalling minute details he hadn't noticed before.

"*Harry dear," Molly said, wiping her hands on a dishcloth as she turned to him, a sink full of dirty dishes behind her. "I do so worry about you. It's so hard to see one of my sons struggling – and Arthur and I do think of you as one of our own."*

Harry moved to the sink, rolling up his robes and reaching into the hot, sudsy water. He was always more than happy to pitch in around the Burrow, though for the life of him he'd never understand why Molly insisted on doing things the hard way instead of using a few well-placed Scourgifies.

"*I appreciate that, Mrs. Weasley. The feeling is mutual."*

Molly nodded, now using the dishcloth to wipe at a stray tear or two. She sniffled, offering him a watery smile.

"*Especially after losing F-Fred," she said, her voice wavering as more tears coursed down her cheeks.*

Harry's insides seized with guilt; Fred's death had hit the Weasleys hard, and even now, a year and a half after his death, his presence was still a palpable feeling around the Burrow. Though he knew Voldemort and the Death Eaters had ultimately been responsible for the war's death toll, Harry couldn't help but take some of that guilt as his own. If only he'd been smarter, faster, better. It was his daily mantra, and he strove each day to right those shortcomings.

"*Especially after losing Fred," Molly continued, her voice stronger now, "I've been concerned about the future of this family. Bill has Fleur, and Ron has Hermione, but what about you, Harry? Who do you have? Who deserves happiness and family more than* you*?"*

Harry concentrated on the dishes, refusing to make eye contact with Molly. She pressed on, raising her wand slightly under the cover of her voluminous apron.

"*What will become of you? You should be married, starting a family. You should have someone to come home to every night, someone to make you dinner, to love you. I worry so. You're unable to commit to a future, Harry, and it breaks my heart."*

Harry's mind raced. It sounded like Mrs. Weasley was trying to convince him to marry. Marry who? Ginny? They'd dated on and off since the end of the war, spending most of his make-up seventh year as a couple, but that was over now. They'd broken up months ago, this time for good.

"*It's for your own good, Harry," Mrs. Weasley said, the edge in her voice catching Harry's attention. He looked up, just in time to see her raise her wand and say "*Adjicio!*"*

Harry pursed his lips, shaking off the memory. Right after casting the powerful Suggestion spell, which Draco had gleefully identified as Dark Magic after watching it in a Pensieve last night,

Molly had given him instructions to propose to Ginny, then Obliviated him. The spell obviously worked, since Harry had proposed to Ginny that afternoon with no memory of Molly casting either spell on him until he examined the thoughts this week.

"Thinking about it won't do you any good, Harry," Hermione chastised, correctly following the path of his thoughts. She could tell he was thinking about the latest revelation about the Weasleys from the look on his face. "And Pensieve memories aren't admissible in court, so it won't help you in the slightest."

Harry growled softly, turning back to the parchment in front of him once again. He needed to familiarize himself with the loopholes in the Marriage Bond; Abramson was betting that the Suggestion spell rendered the bond null, but they had yet to find a way to actually examine the bond, as it had no physical manifestation. Harry would have to answer a series of questions about how it felt when the bond was forged, and how the bond had felt since. In truth, he'd never really thought about the bond as actually tying him magically to Ginny, but Hermione assured him it did.

"I've got something!" a faraway voice yelled, just barely discernable. Both Harry and Hermione looked up, surprised to see Draco throwing propriety to the wind and running full-tilt across the Manor grounds.

"I've got something," he repeated, panting from exertion, when he reached their blanket. "Something good."

He thrust a book into Hermione's hands, collapsing heavily next to Harry. Pieces of parchment rose around them in a plume, scattering pages everywhere. Harry rolled his eyes, wandlessly casting a charm to return all the scrolls to their proper places.

In addition to his new-found nearly photographic memory, Harry had also gained proficiency in wandless magic during his "magical accident". The Healers were baffled; there was no mention of this particular side effect in the few other cases of Occlumency-induced magical catatonia that had been reported. They decided Harry had always had the ability, but his brain simply refused to accept it before; his capabilities had been hindered by his own inability to trust his magic. It wasn't an uncommon among Muggleborn, or, in Harry's case, the Muggle-raised. Draco and Hermione had explained some of the most common theories, though Harry wasn't sure how much of it he believed. Hermione argued that since so much of a person's view of the world is formed before age 11 for witches and wizards who were raised in the Muggle world lost out on crucial magical immersion in their formative years. Harry brushed away thoughts of the long conversation, filing a mental note to look into it further later.

Seeing he'd caught Draco's interest, Harry Conjured several small orbs of colored lights, juggling them with a twitch of his hand. Draco's lips pursed, and Harry held back a laugh. He knew his sudden ability to perform wandless magic was a sore point with the blond; Draco hated that Harry excelled at something he couldn't do. The balls of light swirled around Draco faster and faster, finally congealing into a solid band of light hovering in front of him. Another slight wave

of Harry's hand had the particles of light separating, forming the words "I love you, Draco" in the air before dispersing. Draco swatted at the space where the light particles had been just a moment before, scowling.

"Show off," he mock pouted, resting his head in Harry's lap and turning on his side so he could face Hermione.

She hadn't been paying any attention to Harry's antics, engrossed in the book Draco had provided. She looked up, a smile lighting her face.

"Brilliant! I'd never have thought to look in a book like this, Draco," she said, flipping the book over to look at the tattered cover. Its title, *Le Grimoire Complet du Mariage,* meant little to Harry.

"It's a collection of ancient marriage spells," Draco explained, running a finger over the raised letters.

The book itself was easily 200 years old, held together by magic in places where the ancient binding had failed. Hermione turned back to the page she'd read before carefully, taking care not to tear the fragile pages.

"Draco's found the spell Ginny used to track you to St. Mungo's," Hermione said, her voice gleeful. "And it's categorized as *magie noire du sang*."

Harry raised an eyebrow, craning his neck to get a glimpse of the page Hermione was reading. He looked up at her expectantly, waiting for her translation. It had to be something good, since both Hermione and Draco wore grins so large they looked like they must hurt.

"*Magie noire du sang*," Hermione repeated, a laugh escaping as she spoke. "That's Dark magic, and blood magic to boot. There's no way the Ministry would classify this spell as light; she used Dark magic against you, and what's better, we can *prove* it!"

Draco knelt over Harry's sleeping form, fully dressed and ready for the day. The divorce hearing wasn't until tomorrow, but Harry needed to finish working on a few theories with Hermione before his afternoon meeting with Abramson.

"Up you get, lazybones," Draco drawled, nudging a drowsy Harry with his knee. Harry groaned something unintelligible and moved out of range, burying his head underneath the pillow. "Up, or I'll cast an *Aguamenti* on you!"

Harry kicked a leg out, catching Draco behind his bent knees, sending his sprawling across the bed. Growling playfully, Draco took aim, casting a spell that sent cold water streaming out of the tip of his wand. Harry rolled again, not quite managing to dodge the icy wetness. His now-open eyes were lit with amusement, not irritation, as he cursed Draco roundly and wandlessly Conjured a small rain shower directly over Draco's head.

"Potter!" he shrieked, suddenly finding himself soaked. "These robes are *silk*!"

Harry laughed even louder, rolling so he joined Draco under the shower of warm water. He cast an appraising glance over Draco's now-ruined attire, clucking his tongue.

"I suppose we've no choice but to throw them away," he chastised playfully, nimble fingers unbuttoning the sopping robes.

Draco narrowed his eyes at Harry's tone, which held exactly the amount of sorrow Draco deemed appropriate for the ruination of designer robes. Harry's gleeful expression, however, was a direct contrast to the somber words. His green eyes darkened as Draco's bare skin was revealed, and he licked his lips as the sodden garment slipped past slender hips, leaving Draco naked.

"Mmm," Harry said, mesmerized by the sight of Draco naked in the Conjured rainstorm, fat drops of water rolling down his toned body.

Harry gathered the robes in his hands, guiding Draco down onto the bed. He eyed the wet silk, a smirk lighting his face.

"It would be a shame to waste these robes, Dray," he said, his voice husky. He rent the fabric in two with his hands, laughing as Draco's eyes widened. "I thought it best to get at least *one* more use out of them before we threw them out."

He used the strips of silk to gently tie Draco's hands to the headboard, his grin widening as he pinpointed the exact moment Draco realized the loosely tied bonds had been wandlessly spelled secure, ensuring the blond's arms remained above his head.

"I haven't had the chance to properly thank you for saving me," Harry purred, kneeling between Draco's spread legs. Draco shivered, and Harry's brow furrowed in mock concern. "Cold?"

He waved a hand, stopping the warm rain shower. Draco looked down at the bed, surprised it to find it dry. Harry smiled, shaking his head.

"It wouldn't do to have you uncomfortable," he said, his tone full of challenge. "After all, you're the guest of honor at this little party."

Harry bent, feathering soft kisses across Draco's cheeks. The blond's eyes drifted closed at the sensation, giving Harry the opportunity to ghost kisses across his eyelids. Draco made an appreciative noise, relaxing into the gentle caresses. The trail of kisses continued down Draco's throat, and he shivered as Harry's lips made the barest contact possible against his skin.

Watchful green eyes remained locked on Draco's face as Harry continued to sweetly kiss his way down his lover's body, making Draco squirm in anticipation. The blond's cock had been gaining interest as Harry's kisses delved lower and lower, finally standing at full attention in response to

the ghost of hot breath against it when Harry reached it. Draco tilted his hips up slightly, a silent plea for Harry's attention.

Harry laughed at Draco's frustrated groan of protest as he bypassed his erection, continuing to feather kisses down Draco's leg, paying special attention to covering every centimeter of his knee with light kisses before moving back up his inner thigh. Harry's hands urged Draco's legs up, and the blond caught on quickly, complying by resting them on Harry's shoulders. Draco couldn't help but shudder as the soft kisses continued, tracing a tingly path toward his entrance. Harry nuzzled his cheek against the spot where the curve of Draco's arse met his thigh, his own breathing quickening at the feel of the soft flesh against his own.

Harry settled himself against the bed, bringing his hands up to lightly spread Draco's arse cheeks, giving him free access to his puckered hole. He used a thumb to press gently against Draco's entrance, a shudder of pleasure rolling through him at Draco's surprised gasp. He massaged the area, feeling Draco relax beneath his touch. Without warning, Harry ducked his head, swiping Draco's hole with the flat of his tongue.

"Harry! Fuck!" Draco cried, his back arching at the overwhelming sensation of Harry's hot tongue caressing his hole.

Harry hummed softly, his tongue continuing to stroke and swirl around Draco's entrance. The blond moaned incoherently in response, lifting his legs even higher on Harry's shoulders to give him better access. When he deemed Draco's hole loosened enough, Harry gently eased his tongue inside, his cock jumping in anticipation.

"Oh Merlin, Harry! Yes!" Draco yelled, his breath coming in gasps. Unable to hold out any longer, Draco struggled to free his arms from their bindings, desperate to touch his aching, neglected cock. "Harry, please!"

Harry increased the pressure against Draco's hole, sliding his tongue further inside. He used his hands to steady Draco's hips, which were grinding against his face. He watched Draco struggle against the bonds, a hot streak of desire running through him at desperation he found in Draco's face. He pulled away, licking his way up over Draco's balls toward his leaking cock. Harry's tongue swirled a pattern up the hard length, lapping up the precome that coated the glistening head. Draco moaned louder, whimpering as Harry's mouth retreated.

Draco hissed out a breath as Harry slipped a long finger inside him, taking care to pass over the small bundle of nerves that always made Draco howl. Before the blond had a chance to recover from the jolt of pleasure, Harry gripped Draco's shaft in his other hand, squeezing as he slipped the head into his mouth.

"Harry," Draco panted, struggling against the bonds again. He wanted to be able to touch Harry, to feel his warm skin and soft hair and reassure himself this wasn't all a dream.

A second finger joined the first, scissoring inside Draco to stretch him even further. There were a

range of spells that had the same effect, but Harry wanted to take the time to prepare Draco slowly, lavishing attention on him to show Draco exactly how grateful he was for his rescue.

When Draco's persistent begging reached a fevered pitch, Harry deemed him ready. He withdrew his mouth and fingers, wandlessly casting a Lubrication charm on himself before positioning his cock at Draco's entrance. They both held their breath as he pushed inside, exhaling forcefully once Harry was fully seated.

He paused, studying Draco's face beneath him. Grey eyes opened, pupils so dilated they were nearly black. Harry's own intensely green eyes were full of tenderness and love, and Draco's heart swelled at the sight. Nothing – not even Harry's promise he trusted Draco as they escaped the prison of his mind – could have convinced Draco of Harry's love and devotion more than the look in his eyes right now. He knew with certainty now that no matter what horrors awaited them in Harry's divorce hearing, no matter what plans Pansy had in store for him, Harry's love for him would not waver. For the first time in their rocky relationship, Draco was positive they were on solid ground.

Harry began to thrust, angling so his cock brushed Draco's prostate nearly every time. As both their cries escalated, Harry wrapped his hand around Draco's erection, stroking him in time with his own thrusts. Seconds later, they were both coming hard, gasping each others' names.

Harry pulled out almost immediately, but Draco didn't have a chance to voice his disappointment at the loss, since he captured Draco's mouth in a scorching kiss. Sated, Harry collapsed onto the bed next to Draco with a heavy sigh, snuggling in to the covers happily.

"A little help?" Draco said dryly, shaking his bonds to remind Harry his hands were tied above his head.

"Hmm," Harry said, pretending to ponder the situation. "I'm not sure. I think I like you helpless."

Draco laughed, a sappy grin lighting his features.

"I'm always helpless when it comes to you. Didn't you know?"

Harry hit him with a pillow, waving a hand to release the bonds. He rolled his eyes, grinning at Draco as the blond turned on his side to face him.

"Hopeless, Draco. I think the word you're looking for is *hopeless*."

Draco smirked, raking his eyes over Harry's body. His gaze came to a rest on Harry's softening cock, which twitched at the attention. Draco raised his eyebrows suggestively, pressing his body against the length of Harry's. *Hermione can wait a little longer,* Draco reasoned, the beginnings of arousal already beginning to stir in his belly.

"Mmm," he said, wiggling his hips against Harry's. "You always give me hope, love."

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Chapter: 11

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. If they were mine, the Epilogue wouldn't exist.

"– cut and dried case, Mr. Malfoy," Abramson said, a rare smile breaking through his normally staid features.

"I would hope so," Draco said haughtily, sneering at the lawyer. "We've practically brought you the case on a silver platter. I suggest you use it to your advantage."

Abramson swallowed hard, nodding. He knew he was arguing the case of the decade today, and he didn't dare think of what would happen to him if he lost. He shot a nervous glance at Harry, who was seated on a bench outside the courtroom, fiddling with his robes. Lucius sat next to him, whispering rules of courtroom decorum for Harry to follow. Across the corridor, Narcissa and Hermione were engaged in an animated discussion about cuff links, of all things, if the snatches of conversation that drifted over to him were anything to go by.

Abramson focused on Narcissa's elegant face, which was currently tear-streaked. He moved to start across to question her – had she gotten some bad news about the trial? – when Draco's hand gripped his robes, stopping him.

Draco rolled his eyes, watching his mother and Hermione gossip like hens a few meters away. Hermione had commented on Draco's cuff links before they left for the Ministry, and he'd made the mistake of telling her the story behind them. And now it looked like his mother knew, too. *Fabulous*, he thought snidely, suppressing a sigh.

Abramson started off again, this time toward the now-open doors of the courtroom. He motioned for Harry to follow him, leaving the others behind to sit and wait in the emptying corridor. Draco's presence would do nothing to help Harry's case, and Hermione was on their witness list for later in the day. Lucius and Narcissa could have gone in to sit in the gallery, but Harry said he'd prefer it if they waited with Draco, offering him whatever support they could while Harry was stuck in the courtroom.

Harry turned just before the door closed, winking at Draco's worried face. *Everything is going to be fine*, he thought, forcing a sunny smile onto his face. *Everything will be fine. Everything will be fine.* He continued his inner monologue as he and Abramson made their way to a bare table at the front of the courtroom, two high-backed chairs waiting behind it. Lucius' coaching prevented

Harry from sitting; no one would be seated until the Wizengamot entered and settled in.

Harry felt Ginny enter the room before he saw her; her hard gaze boring into his back as she walked through the heavy doors. He forced himself to remain still, fighting the urge to turn around and glare back. *Everything will be fine,* he repeated again, straightening his shoulders and standing as tall as he could. He felt a momentary flash of gratitude for the Calming Draught Draco had slipped into his morning tea when he thought Harry wasn't looking.

"The Wizengamot will enter shortly, and then I'll get the chance to speak first," Abramson whispered, leaning over to speak directly in Harry's ear.

Harry nodded almost imperceptibly, his attention fixed on a blank spot on the wall in front of him. *Everything will be fine*, he reminded himself, pushing back the feelings of panic and nausea that threatened to overtake him.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to Harry, the first members of the Wizengamot began to file in, their plum-colored robes swishing as they moved to their appointed seats. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry could see Ginny's startled expression as she watched the members continue to file in. There were 50 in all: the entire Wizengamot. Harry allowed himself a small smile. Abramson had been betting on Ginny's lawyer's laziness; he'd filed a motion to have the case heard in front the Wizengamot itself instead of a single judge, as was the custom in wizarding divorce law. He'd sent notice of the change to Ginny's lawyer, buried in a stack of motions refuting Ginny's claims. From the looks on their faces, he'd never gotten around to thoroughly reading the papers.

Score one for the good guys, Harry thought, perking up. He stood patiently, waiting for the witches and wizards to take their seats. Amelia Bones took the high seat, presiding over the court as Chief Warlock. Directly below her was a line of 10 Interrogators, including Elphias Doge and Hestia Jones, two members of the Order of the Phoenix who had helped Harry out of tough spots before.

"Harry Potter," Madam Bones said, startling him slightly as she abruptly began the hearing, "and Ginevra Potter, you are here before the Wizengamot today to petition for a divorce and an official severance of your magical bond. If both of the petitioners enter this courtroom freely and of their own will, please say 'aye'."

Harry's gaze flicked unconsciously toward his wife, noting her pale face and trembling hands. If he didn't know better, he'd say she was upset about ending their marriage. *I know the truth, though*, he thought grimly, narrowing his eyes in disgust.

"Aye," he said clearly, looking up to face the witches and wizards on the dais in front of him.

Ginny hesitated slightly – *probably part of a carefully orchestrated act to appear vulnerable and broken*, Harry thought savagely – before raising her face and agreeing softly.

"Be seated," Madam Bones said, motioning for the four of them to take their seats in the massive wooden chairs.

Harry sat gracefully, sliding into the seat in one fluid motion, his case of nerves gone. He'd never felt so sure about anything in his life, and the certainty washed over him like a calming wave. He had no reason to be nervous, he reasoned, since he was the victim here. The appearance of the full Wizengamot only bolstered his confidence; Abramson's motion to include criminal charges against Ginny wouldn't have been accepted if they weren't valid, and Harry knew it.

"Mr. Abramson, if you would," the lead witch said, gesturing vaguely toward Harry's table.

Abramson took a fortifying breath and stood, a stack of parchment in his hand. He walked closer to the Wizengamot before turning so he half-faced Ginny and her lawyer.

"Thank you for agreeing to convene the Wizengamot in its entirety on such short notice, Madam Bones," he said, bowing graciously in her direction. "I realize it is uncommon for a divorce proceeding to include criminal evidence, but I think we all know Harry Potter's life is rarely common."

Several members of the Wizengamot twittered, and Doge sent Harry a small smile. Harry settled deeper into his chair, wandlessly casting a Cushioning charm on the hard seat. His smile grew as he thought of Ginny fidgeting on her own uncomfortable chair, likely panicking at Abramson's words.

"Today I will present evidence that no divorce is necessary, since Harry Potter and Ginevra Weasley were never properly married," Abramson continued, drawing outraged gasps from Ginny's side of the room.

"You bastard!" she shouted, her chair scraping loudly against the stone floor as she jumped up. "We were married in front of 300 witnesses, Harry!"

She looked around wildly, gauging the reaction of the Wizengamot and the murmurs from the small crowd in the gallery, mostly members of her family.

"I only wish there had been that many witnesses to the cruelties you inflicted on me, Harry," she said, her breathing harsh. "But you never wanted an audience when you beat me, did you?"

Harry's jaw clenched, but he steeled himself, forcing his body to remain in his chair. He didn't even look at Ginny, and he knew that infuriated her even more. He willed his breathing to remain steady, his eyes clear. He shook his head sadly, giving the Wizengamot a beleaguered smile. Look at this display, his sad smile said; look at what I've had to deal with for years.

"Contain yourself, Mrs. Potter!" Madam Bones shouted, nodding at the guards, who stepped closer to Ginny's table. Ginny sank back down into her chair, her face livid. "Further interruptions will find you in contempt of court, Mrs. Potter."

Abramson waited a beat, picking up his opening statement as though there had been no interruption. Harry's lips curved in admiration; the man was talented.

"You will see, through evidence and testimony, that Mr. Potter was forced into the Marriage Bond by nefarious magical means," he continued, shaking his head ruefully. "A preeminent expert on the topic of magical bonds will explain exactly why Mr. Potter's bond is incomplete, and a Dark Magic specialist will give us insight about how Miss Weasley has managed to fake the Marriage Bond for five years."

Gasps and mutters erupted from the gallery when Abramson mentioned Dark Magic, and Ginny's stiff body twitched minutely. Only someone watching her intently – which Harry was, through his peripheral vision – would have noticed it, but Harry took great joy in seeing her dismay.

"We can refute each of Miss Weasley's defamatory and frankly ridiculous claims of cruelty and abuse, but I am confident the Wizengamot will find in favor of Mr. Potter before such evidence is necessary."

Abramson paced, his gait measured, in front of the dais, his penetrating gaze locked on the members of the Wizengamot. He bent his head and paused, making a show of shuffling through the parchment in his hands, before looking up and smiling encouragingly at Harry, swinging his gaze back to the court.

"As you will see today, this hearing is the end of a more than five-year ordeal for Mr. Potter, involving the manipulation and lies of not only Miss Weasley, but other members of her family as well. His best friend since childhood, Mr. Ron Weasley, has been complicit in the farce of a remonstrance Miss Weasley is seeking against Mr. Potter. Their mother, Mrs. Molly Weasley, a woman Mr. Potter considers a surrogate mother, has also played a hefty role in the nightmare that has become Mr. Potter's life."

Abramson shook his head sadly, glancing at Harry with gentle, pity-filled eyes. Knowing his part, Harry allowed a small, sad smile to light his face, which was turned toward the Wizengamot.

"We ask for a speedy hearing, with no allowance for delays or lengthy recesses, for Mr. Potter's sake. What you will hear this morning will very likely shock you, but it's something Mr. Potter has been living with for years, though the cause has only recently been made known to him. An expedient trial will allow this brave young man to continue on with his life, and the sooner he can put Miss Weasley's heinous and illegal actions behind him, the better off he will be," Abramson said gravely, returning to Harry's side, raising one hand to rest on Harry's shoulder, smiling down at Harry's hopeful face.

The gesture wasn't lost on the Wizengamot, many of whom unconsciously mirrored Abramson's warm smile, several actually outright glaring at Ginny and the collection of Weasleys seated behind her in the gallery. Madam Bones nodded at Abramson as the lawyer sat, both of their

gazes on Ginny's table across the room.

"Mr. Giltrough, if you would," she said, motioning for Ginny's lawyer to begin his comments.

The thin man, who had been scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment throughout Abramson's remarks, stood, facing the Wizengamot.

"I must request an immediate recess to review the criminal activity Mr. Abramson alluded to in his opening remarks," the man said, his face pinched. "The judicial code clearly states all charges and evidence must be presented during pre-trial discovery, and neither the accusations nor the alleged expert witnesses appeared in the scrolls Mr. Abramson provided to my office."

He moved around the table, stalking toward the dais with barely controlled animosity.

"This underhanded tactic was orchestrated to catch my client off guard, and I'd like to see Mr. Abramson brought up on charges for his breach of the judicial code. Mrs. Potter is well within her rights to request a recess to review the charges levied against her, as well as a delay of trial to form a competent defense against them," he said, his voice full of censure.

"Mr. Giltrough," Madam Bones intoned, catching the seething lawyer's attention. "If you are quite finished attacking Mr. Abramson's character and professional integrity, I'd like to direct your attention to the filings in question."

She brandished her wand, pointing it at the pile of parchment that sat on the table in front of Giltrough's chair. Ginny flinched as she saw the wand point toward her, relaxing only marginally when she realized the Chief Warlock wasn't threatening her.

"*Accio* Discovery Findings, Potter vs. Potter," she said, holding her hand out to catch the two scrolls that came whizzing toward her.

Ginny sat stunned, her vacant gaze fixed on the now-disheveled pile of scrolls and paper that littered the table in front of her. She glanced up slowly, her eyes narrowing as she watched her lawyer approach the podium to talk with Madam Bones.

"Madam Bones, with due respect, you will not find anything in those filings," Giltrough said, though his voice wavered slightly, belying his concern.

Madam Bones paid him no notice, unwinding the second scroll. She scanned the parchment, which pooled on the floor at her feet, until she found the section titled "Discovery Findings Part 2A, amended with new charges and evidence", thrusting the scroll toward Giltrough.

The man paled, reluctantly accepting the proffered parchment. His cheeks pinked as he read, finding all of the charges Abramson alluded to there, plus a full disclosure of the expert witnesses, with their credentials and Floo addresses for confirmation, all in good order.

"Madam Bones," he began, his hot cheeks filling even more as he saw the anger in her eyes, "I apologize. It seems I had overlooked Mr. Abramson's filing."

Ginny shot up again, her own face purpling with rage.

"I object!" she screamed, her fists clenched at her sides.

"You cannot object, Mrs. Potter," Madam Bones said severely, her voice full of reprimand. "That is the purview of your legal counsel."

"I object to my legal counsel, then!" Ginny continued, her voice rising. "I demand a mistrial on account of incompetent representation!"

Madam Bones' lips pursed, and she appeared to be holding herself in check. The guards stepped closer to Ginny's table, ready to subdue her if necessary.

"You may not demand *anything*," she said, her tone cold. "This is *my* courtroom, and only *I* can call for a vote on a mistrial."

She looked around, silently appraising the Wizengamot members around her. Most of their faces were as stony as hers; outraged at the impropriety and breach of conduct they'd seen so far from both Ginny and her lawyer.

"Your objections, though we have no legal cause to even hear them, have been overruled," Madam Bones said, turning her narrowed eyes on Giltrough, who was still standing near her podium. "Though I am under no obligation to do so, I will grant you a 20-minute recess to meet with your client. I suggest you school her in proper courtroom behavior; future interruptions will have consequences Mrs. Potter is unlikely to appreciate."

Giltrough sagged in relief, eager to have even that short amount of time to devise a new game plan. He made his way back to the table, facing a furious Ginny.

"The Wizengamot will reconvene in 20 minutes. Use them wisely," Madam Bones said, standing and leading the rest of the members out of the room.

Ginny and her lawyer quickly exited the room, followed by equally red-faced members of the Weasley family. Harry watched, unconcerned, as Molly turned to glare at him before ushering a bewildered Arthur out into the corridor.

Abramson stretched lightly, turning to grin at Harry.

"Things are going very well, Mr. Potter. I suggest you take advantage of this break to check-in with Mr. Malfoy. I'm sure he's anxious for news," he said, standing and excusing himself to make a quick Floo call to his office.

Draco, Hermione, Narcissa and Lucius were all waiting at the door when Harry walked through. He could see they were all eager to find out why the court had recessed – and, more importantly, why a parade of furious Weasleys had just pushed past them, headed toward a conference room down the corridor.

"Nothing's been decided yet," Harry said quickly, watching their faces fall slightly. He grinned. "But Abramson said things are going very well. Ginny's already been warned to keep her mouth shut twice, and Madam Bones practically made her lawyer cry!"

Draco's face lit up, and he rushed toward Harry, grabbing the other man around the waist and hugging him hard.

"How are you holding up?" he asked quietly, his lips tickling against shell of Harry's ear.

Harry grinned, dipping his head so he could whisper back.

"I'm doing fine, partially thanks to that Calming Draught you slipped me."

Draco pulled back, his face guilty. Hermione laughed, clapping him on the back.

"So much for being a sneaky Slytherin, yeah, Draco?" she teased, leaning in to give Harry a quick hug.

"We're only on a 20-minute break," Harry said, steering them away from the doors and toward an empty bench. "Ginny's lawyer is trying to get a delay, but I don't think Madam Bones is going to let him."

Lucius nodded thoughtfully, his lips pursed.

"I didn't think Abramson's little ploy would work; I'm glad I was mistaken," he said, smirking.

They stood around, chatting idly about inconsequential things, everyone focused on keeping Harry's mood high. Harry had just started to excuse himself to return to the courtroom when a flash of red tore through the corridor, aimed straight at him. He unconsciously pushed Draco and Hermione behind himself before realizing it was just Ginny, and that the witch didn't have her wand drawn.

"Patting yourself on the back for a job well done, Harry?" she seethed, her eyes burning with hatred. "Think you're so brilliant, outmaneuvering me like that?"

Ginny laughed, and Lucius stepped up to Harry's side, his hand ready to draw his wand if necessary.

"Will the Malfoy family be so quick to defend you when I tell them what you've done, Harry?" she asked, tilting her head slightly, her eyebrows raised. "When I tell them what a slut you are,

and how you're only interested in Malfoy for his body?"

"Gin, don't." Harry's patience was at its end, his voice full of warning.

"Haven't you told him about the last time we were together, Harry?" Ginny asked, her tone sharp. "It's only fair he know the details. It *was* his body, after all."

Harry paused, searching Draco's face for the loathing and disgust he was sure he'd find there. Instead, he saw understanding and – guilt?

"I know."

Harry whirled on Draco, his voice hard.

"How could you know?" He saw the pain in Draco's eyes, and suddenly it clicked into place. "Of course. You sent her the hair. I never even thought to question where she'd gotten it."

Ginny laughed, the cold edge of it making Harry's spine stiffen.

"That's what you're fighting for, Harry," she all but purred, slipping up to look him in the eye. "What you're throwing your future away for. A man who's so indifferent toward you he'd let your wife Polyjuice into his body to pleasure you. Does that sound like a devoted lover to you, Harry?"

Draco tensed, but he said nothing. He simply turned his impassive gaze on Harry. He heard his mother's angry whispers somewhere behind them, but he ignored her, focusing on his fiancé's reaction.

"Get the fuck away from us," Harry spat at Ginny, gripping her by the upper arm and pushing her toward her family, which was gathering a few meters away, watching the spectacle.

"And *you*," he said, turning his anger on Draco as soon as Arthur had grabbed his daughter, hauling her back into the courtroom. "What the bloody fuck were *you* thinking?"

Draco remained silent, not reacting in the least.

"Merlin, could I have been any blinder?" Harry asked bitterly, his wand gripped in his taut fingers. He stepped toward Draco, who didn't even flinch. "Why would you have done that? What if it *had* been enough for me, Draco? Where would that have left you?"

Draco's impassive expression gave way to one of confusion, his brows drawing together slightly. He'd never had this much trouble reading Harry's moods before, and he had no idea where this was going. It had been underhanded and Slytherin to send the hairs to Ginny – a calculated risk devised to show Harry that it was more than sex between them. He knew the Gryffindor in Harry would never understand that.

"The same place I had always been, Harry," Draco said calmly. "I had nothing to lose."

Harry shook his head, his eyes flashing.

"If you believe that, you're kidding yourself," he growled, pulling Draco to him.

"You're the only person I know who can be both selfish and selfless at the same time, Draco," Harry whispered, his voice gravelly with emotion. Draco shuddered against him, responding to the tone. "Either way, I was sure to get everything I wanted. You, on the other hand, took a huge risk."

Harry crushed his lips against Draco's, nearly growling in frustration. The Wizengamot would be back any minute now, and Harry had to get back into the courtroom or risk being held in contempt.

"Later," he said to Draco, his tone full of both warning and desire. He wiped a hand across his mouth, his eyes narrowing. "We aren't finished."

Draco nodded, watching Abramson hurry down the corridor toward their group. The guards were holding open the courtroom doors, ushering the stragglers inside. Harry shot a look at Draco before turning and walking in with Abramson. The doors clicked shut behind them, leaving the corridor almost surreally quiet.

"Well, never a dull moment," Hermione said, her laugh slightly unhinged. "I'm going to the café to get a coffee. I need some time to burn that image out of my brain. Ginny in Draco's body. Gah."

Narcissa nodded in agreement, pressing kiss to Draco's temple before following Hermione down the corridor toward the lift. Lucius smiled at Draco when they left, squeezing his shoulder.

"That's my boy," he said proudly, drawing Draco down the hall to find a more comfortable bench.

TBC

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Chapter: 12

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. No amount of wishing will make them mine. Bah.

Harry squirmed slightly in his chair, his lips trembling with barely contained mirth. He'd just listened to Madam Bones completely cut Giltrough down, practically threatening to throw him in the Ministry holding cells downstairs if he uttered one more request for a delay.

"Madam Bones, respected members of the Wizengamot," the pasty-faced man said, bowing in their direction, "my client is most resolute in her demand for a recess of several days."

He swallowed, his face paling even more as he saw Madam Bones nod to the guards, who started forward.

"I would be remiss in my representation of Mrs. Potter if I did not bring her concerns before the court. Mrs. Potter feels justifiably railroaded by Mr. Potter and his attorney, and she seeks both the recess and an Order of Protection against Mr. Potter, the Malfoy family, and Mrs. Hermione Granger-Weasley, all of whom she has reason to believe present a considerable threat to her person."

"Mrs. Potter?" Madam Bones inquired, clearly asking Ginny to explain this perceived threat.

"Just now, in the corridor –" Ginny began, her voice trembling, her gaze shooting over to Harry as though afraid, "– H-Harry grabbed me and pushed me. He threatened me, in front of my entire family. It's – it's the first time he's done anything like that in public."

Ginny paused, biting her lip. She squared her shoulders, as though steeling herself, and turned to face Harry. His face was impassive, but hers was full of worry and fear. Her table was just meters away from his, and Harry was close enough to see the cold calculation in her eyes. From the dais, he knew, that gleam could be taken for tears.

"It was frightening," Ginny said, turning imploringly to the Wizengamot. She twisted her hands together, as though the words caused her agony. She lowered her voice to a near-whisper, and the Wizengamot had to lean forward to make out her words. "Frankly, I'm afraid for my life."

Ginny's gaze flickered to Harry again as she sat, primly resting on the edge of her chair. Her hair fell forward to cover her face, shielding the raised eyebrow she shot at Harry from the court. *Ah,* Harry thought. *A challenge, then. She actually thinks I'll lose my temper now, trying to protect my reputation.*

Abramson laid a restraining hand on Harry's thigh under the table, afraid Harry might try to respond to the baseless accusation. Harry just shook his head slightly, in full control of his magic and his emotions. He'd had no outbursts of wild magic since his "magical accident", but Ginny had no way of knowing that. He knew she was simply trying to bait him into doing something that would bolster her claims of abuse.

"Mr. Potter, what say you?" Madam Bones asked, and the attention of the Wizengamot shifted to Harry.

Harry stood, his gaze sweeping the court. He shook his head ruefully, resting his hands on the table in front of him.

"I have never abused Ginny, nor was I out of line in the corridor," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "She approached me, threatening my family. I pushed her away before she could do any damage."

Harry looked over at Ginny. He almost pitied her; her ridiculous actions were winning this case for him before any of his witnesses even came forward.

"Feel free to check the Observation spell if you like," he said, smiling at Madam Bones. "We were just outside the door, so I'm sure it picked it up."

Ginny's mouth fell open in shock; she'd never been to a Ministry hearing before, and as such was unaware of the spells that monitored the courtrooms and the corridors near them. Harry mentally thanked Lucius for his primer in courtroom protocol once more, suppressing his smirk of triumph. Madam Bones nodded once, and the court clerk hurried forward, carrying a large basin that looked like a modified Pensieve. The Chief Warlock dipped her head inside, emerging a few seconds later looking enraged.

"I will tolerate no further interruptions, Mrs. Potter," she said, narrowing her eyes at Ginny. "Mr. Abramson, proceed with your case."

Harry sat back down, exchanging a covert grin with Abramson as the lawyer rose to walk toward the witness box.

"I call Declan Malven, chief researcher at the Irish Institute for Magical Bonds," Abramson said, stepping aside as the short, stocky wizard took the stand.

Abramson turned to Madam Bones, a serious look on his face.

"We convened as a simple divorce hearing, but I move to adopt the practices of a full Wizengamot trial, with the customs and bindings it entails."

Madam Bones conferred with her fellow Wizengamot members, reaching a consensus. Ginny's stony face didn't change, nor did the slightly sick look on Giltrough's.

"Agreed. Mr. Giltrough, do you object to the use of Veritaserum?"

After a hushed conversation with Ginny, the lawyer stood.

"We do, Madam Bones. We feel the use of Veritaserum is unnecessary in a divorce proceeding."

Whispers shot through the gallery as people speculated about why Ginny would oppose the use of the truth serum. Madam Bones nodded, raising a hand to call the room to order.

"Mr. Abramson, will you agree to question your witness without the aid of Veritaserum?"

"I will," he said, smiling at the man sitting on the stand. "I have no reason to doubt the illustrious Mr. Malven's testimony."

Abramson stepped back a few meters, allowing silence to settle in the courtroom once more before beginning his line of questioning.

"Please state your name, occupation and qualifications for the record, Mr. Malven."

The stocky wizard straightened, speaking clearly.

"My name is Declan Malven, and I am in charge of the research division at the Institute for Magical Bonds. I have my mastery in both Charms and Spell Theory, and my own research focuses on Marriage Bonds."

Abramson nodded thoughtfully, clasping his hands behind his back as he paced in front of the witness stand.

"Have you had a chance to examine Mr. Potter's Marriage Bond?"

"No," the wizard said, drawing gasps from both the Wizengamot and the gallery.

Harry merely smiled, enjoying the show. Abramson whirled around, a shocked look on his face.

"You haven't? How can you testify in this case if you have not examined Mr. Potter?"

The wizard smiled, spreading his hands in front of him for emphasis.

"I did examine Mr. Potter, quite thoroughly, in fact. I merely indicated I had not examined Mr. Potter's Marriage Bond."

"And why is that, since this alleged bond is the entire reason for your presence here?"

The Irish wizard smiled, clearly relishing his part in the show Abramson was putting on.

"Simply put, because Mr. Potter *does not have* a Marriage Bond."

The courtroom erupted. Ginny jumped up, screaming about weddings, guests and official paperwork. Molly had also risen, shaking her fist at Harry and calling him all manner of names. Even Bill and Fleur were on their feet, defending Ginny. Ron had actually tried to climb over the partition separating the gallery from the front of the courtroom; only Charlie's quick action held him back. Even in total fury, he wasn't a match for his brother's dragon-honed reflexes and strength. Only Mr. Weasley remained seated, his expression stunned.

"*Silencio Plurimus*!" Madam Bones yelled, blanketing the courtroom in a complicated Silencing spell, one of the spells embedded in the room to help the Chief Warlock maintain order.

Harry, Abramson and Giltrough were the only ones who did not suddenly clutch at their throats. Though he hadn't expected the slight tingling that accompanied the spell, Harry knew Madam Bones could invoke the courtroom's magical protections if need be. He sat, calm and relaxed, as Ginny and the rest of her family continued to flair about, screaming now-silent threats against Harry, his lawyer and assorted others.

"Guards, please clear the gallery. Mrs. Potter, you may stay, but you will remain under the Silencing spell," Madam Bones said, directing the guards toward the Weasley family and the assorted other spectators – including a near-ecstatic Rita Skeeter and other members of the wizarding press.

She looked down at the parchment in front of her, where names were appearing in black ink.

"Please escort Ronald and Molly Weasley to the Ministry holding cells to await sentencing for contempt of court," she continued, looking up. Ron sputtered silently, while Molly's furious face paled. "One count of threatening a witness has been levied against each of them, and two counts of threatening a Ministry official."

Everyone, including Harry, looked dumbstruck at the words. Harry had to suppress an urge to giggle, out of character, but no less strange than the turn the day had taken.

"Simply because your comments were silenced does not mean they were not recorded. The rest of you may wait in the lobby," Madam Bones said, dismissing the guards and the spectators.

"*Resipisco*," she said, returning everyone but Ginny's voice. She motioned Abramson forward. "Continue."

Clearing his throat to relieve the residual tingling, Abramson continued.

"So Harry Potter has no active Marriage Bond?"

Massaging his throat lightly with one hand, the Irish wizard shook his head.

"No Marriage Bond of any kind, active or inactive," he said, turning to look at Madam Bones. "Every magical bond we enter in to – even those we later nullify – leaves an imprint on our magical core. If Mr. Potter and Miss Weasley had completed the Marriage Bond, evidence would have remained on Mr. Potter's magical core even if he had severed it. No such residue exists. Mr. Potter's magical core is free from any bonds with Miss Weasley."

Madam Bones nodded, raising an eyebrow at Ginny's table. The fuming witch remained still, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She looked away from the Chief Warlock's inquisitive gaze.

Giltrough rose to ask Malven some token questions, but it was clear from the defeated look on his face that he was only going through the motions. The court had no reason not to trust Malven's expert opinion, and his own objection prevented him from pushing for re-questioning under Veritaserum.

"Does Mr. Potter have any magical connection to Miss Weasley?" asked Elphias Doge, his brow furrowed as he questioned Malven when Giltrough had ceded the floor.

"He does, but it is not a magical bond. I apologize, but I am not qualified to speak on the connection," Malven said, leaning closer to the Wizengamot, his voice lowering dramatically. "It's Dark Magic."

Doge and the other Inquisitors all scooted forward slightly, shooting questions at the uncomfortable wizard on the stand.

"Members of the Wizengamot," Abramson said, stepping forward and raising his hand, "if it pleases the court, I would like to present another witness who can speak to the Dark Magic Mr. Malven makes reference to."

Madam Bones nodded, and Abramson continued.

"I call Adelice Vioget, a preeminent French scholar who specializes in a subset of Dark Magic known as *magie noire du sang."*

Abramson turned to smile at the beautiful dark-haired woman who walked through the door, bowing to her respectfully.

"I do so hope I managed that correctly, Mademoiselle Vioget," he said, his tone respectful, but light.

"*Bien sur*," she said, winking at Abramson as she made her way up to the podium. A relieved Malven vacated the space, allowing the willowy witch to slide behind the witness stand.

"Mlle. Vioget is a librarian at one of France's most venerable magical institutions, *La Societé du Parrainage la Préservation de la Magie Ancienne.* The institution is dedicated to gathering and preserving the wizarding world's magical traditions, including ancient spells, charms and potions."

The woman inclined her head, smiling slightly as she waited for questions from the Wizengamot. None came, so she turned to Abramson.

"Are you familiar with the *Concateno Nescio* spell, Mlle. Vioget?"

"*Oui*, I am," she said, nodding.

"Can you explain the spell, please?"

"It links two people," she said. "*Concateno Nescio* and its variations are known to us because they appear in *les grimoires anciens*. They were used about 300 years ago."

Abramson nodded, his brow furrowed.

"Why did the spell fall out of favor? Certainly a spell that could link you to a friend or loved one would be popular."

Mlle. Vioget shook her head, her eyes widening.

"*Mais non*," she said, biting her lip. "This spell is – *comment ce dit*? – unlegal?"

Abramson smiled indulgently, moving toward the witness podium.

"Illegal, yes," he said, and Mlle. Vioget nodded in thanks.

"Illegal. *Oui*. It is a very bad spell, one that combines two very dark areas of ancient magic - blood magic and will magic."

"So someone who cast this spell would, what? Be able to monitor the object?"

The witch nodded again, her lips pursed as she tried to find the right words.

"Monitor. Yes. The caster would know where the other person is at all times. *Avec la faculté à maîtriser la volonté d'autre*," she said, closing her eyes in concentration. "Control the will."

Abramson's eyebrows rose, and he turned to face the Wizengamot.

"Control a person's will?"

"Yes," she said, relief in her eyes at being understood.

"You said you hadn't seen the spell used until recently. Where did you see it in action?"

Mlle. Vioget gave Harry a small smile.

"The spell is active in Monsieur Potter," she said, pointing at Harry's table.

Harry saw Ginny stand, her face red with rage. She opened her mouth to protest, remembering at the last second that she had been spelled silent.

"Last warning, Mrs. Potter. I will spell you in your seat if I have to," Madam Bones warned, frowning as Ginny sat heavily back in her chair, a scowl on her face.

"How were you able to successfully identify a spell that has not been seen in centuries, Mlle. Vioget?" Abramson asked, stepping closer to the witness stand.

The young woman smiled, turning to Madam Bones to ask permission to Conjure a board to illustrate the spellwork. An easel popped into the room, resting next to the witness stand. Mlle. Vioget used her wand to spell a graphic of an intricate web of shimmering bands of delicate gold.

"This is what an untouched magical core looks like," she said, motioning to the beautiful display on the board. A wave of her wand rearranged the bands, with an ominous purple band weaving through the gold. "*This* is what a magical core under the *Concateno Nescio* looks like."

She turned back to the Wizengamot, studying their faces as they looked at the board.

"The ancient spell books we have at *la Societé* include both incantations and illustrations of the darker magics," she continued, pulling a tattered *grimoire* out of her robes. "This is the entry for *Concateno Nescio."*

The Wizengamot passed the book around carefully, members glancing up from the text to the board next to Mlle. Vioget, comparing the spell signatures on the page to the one on the easel.

"It is the same, no?" she asked, getting nods from most of the members in return.

"Whose magical core is illustrated on the board next to you, Mlle. Vioget?" Abramson asked, his lips quirking as he anticipated the uproar at the answer.

"Why, from Monsieur Potter, *bien sur*," she said, a little surprised at the question. "It is for him that we are here, is it not?"

Outraged whispers echoed around the chamber as the Wizengamot discussed the latest revelation.

"Is there a way to track the magical signature on the spell, Mlle. Vioget?" Hestia Jones asked, her lips drawn tight.

"Oui," the witch answered, drawing her wand once more, waving it at the image to enlarge one of the bands of purple. Swirls of other colors, like a finger print, became visible. "Here, here and here," she said, pointing with her wand, "you can see the magical signature of the caster."

"And can you track a witch or wizard's magical signature?" Madam Bones asked, leaning in to get a better look.

"No," Mlle. Vioget said, not noticing as Ginny slumped in relief across the room. "But you can identify the wand that cast it."

Abramson came forward, a report from Ollivander's in his hand.

"Mr. Ollivander examined the magical signature, and he ascertained the spell was cast by a Maple wand, 7 ¾ inches, with a dragon heartstring core."

Madam Bones took the proffered parchment, casting a cursory glance over it.

"Could he identify the wand?"

Abramson nodded, and Harry held his breath. He knew the answer, of course, having been over all of this with Abramson countless times in preparation for the trial.

"Mr. Ollivander swore a Wizard's Oath that he sold the wand in question to Ginevra Weasley upon receipt of her Hogwarts' letter in 1992."

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Chapter: 13

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They belong to JKR.

"Can't you tell us *anything*, Harry?" Hermione pleaded, an earnest look on her face.

Harry shook his head, buttering the roll Tizzy had just passed to him. They were gathered around a hastily Conjured table in the Manor's kitchen, eating dinner. After a day of strict propriety, Harry had refused to sit through a formal dinner. Narcissa and Lucius were entertaining a Peruvian diplomat, and Harry wanted nothing to do with it. Draco and Hermione had chosen to join him in the kitchen.

"Yes or no questions?" Draco asked, narrowing his eyes as he tried to think about loopholes in the secrecy vow.

Harry shrugged, taking a bite of the roll. He'd missed lunch, too nervous to eat when the court had adjourned for half an hour for the noontime meal.

"Did the Magical Bond specialist testify?" Draco asked, his question designed to test the boundaries of the spell, since he knew Malven had in fact taken the stand, since he'd seen him enter the courtroom.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but found himself mute. He moved to nod his head, disturbed

to find that ability gone as well. Hermione saw the startled look in his eyes and took pity on him.

"Are you glad we're eating in here instead of with the Peruvian attaché?"

Harry paused before answering, finding, to his relief, that he now had full use of his motor functions and voice.

"Merlin, yes," he sighed, scooping up a bite of roast.

"Well, that answers that," Draco said glumly. "I'd love to get a look at that vow. The magic behind it must be very sophisticated."

Harry rolled his eyes, retreating into his thoughts as Draco and Hermione debated the theory behind institutional magic. Harry hadn't been able to tell them anything other than that he'd sworn the vow, and that the trial wasn't over but would continue the next day.

He excused himself when Hermione began sketching Arithmancy equations demonstrating the strength of collectively cast spells like the ones they had decided must be at work in the courtroom, blond and brunette heads bent together over the graphs. Neither noticed when Harry slipped away, quietly edging out of the kitchen.

Since he'd awakened from his "magical accident", Harry had noticed he craved the solitude of his own company more than he had before. He still enjoyed being with others, but he felt less inclination to join conversations or be near people just for the sake of not being alone. It was a change for him, since he'd spent the last few years surrounded by Ginny and her family. Most of his childhood had been spent yearning for companionship, and most of his adolescence spent in a throng of friends or classmates. He realized now that he was comfortable with silence, and that his own thoughts were plenty of company.

Harry flopped onto a comfortable chair in his and Draco's suite, Summoning a Quidditch magazine from the bedside table. He flipped through it absently, pausing to watch the small seekers in the photos dive and swoop through the air, covering every inch of the pitch in their quest for the Snitch. He tried to concentrate on an article about Viktor Krum – he'd recently accepted a job as head coach of the Montrose Magpies, Draco's favorite team – but the words swam on the page. Harry realized he'd read the same paragraph several times, not absorbing a word of it.

He threw the magazine aside in disgust, settling back in the over-stuffed chair and bringing an arm across his eyes, blocking out the light. He blamed the headache that had been threatening all afternoon for stealing his focus, unwilling to admit that he was brooding over the trial and Pansy's pregnancy. He didn't even look up when he heard Tizzy pop into the room.

"Master Harry," Tizzy said, gently grasping his arm and peeling it back from his eyes. He blinked at the light, shaking his head and looking down at the house-elf. "Tizzy has a Headache Potion for Master Harry."

He took the vial gratefully, not even asking how the diminutive elf knew he wasn't feeling well. He'd recently questioned Draco about Tizzy's near-prescient ability to appear with exactly what either Draco or Harry needed at any given moment, but Draco's explanation had been vague. Somehow it all related to her being Draco's house-elf nanny, which apparently involved a binding spell of some sort that Harry didn't fully understand. *Something to find out before we have our own kids, I suppose*, he thought, wondering when that would be. They still hadn't dealt with the Pansy issue, though Harry had insisted he wanted to be there when they cast the spell to determine the baby's paternity. Harry's determination to be the one to cast the spell was the only reason Lucius hadn't tracked Pansy down already.

Harry smiled at Tizzy, thanking her for the potion, which worked immediately. His mind felt clearer, and the throbbing pain was gone. The headaches had been yet another side-effect of his magical shock, much less welcome than the sudden talent with wandless magic or the ability to control his innate magic. *It was nearly worth it all just for the look on Ginny's face when she realized she couldn't bait me into losing control of my magic today,* he thought dryly, allowing himself a small smile at the thought. It had been a small victory, but after years of no victories at all where Ginny was concerned, it was enough to make him happy.

Tizzy retrieved Harry's magazine, bringing a cuddly quilt to wrap him in. She narrowed her bulging eyes and snapped her fingers. Seconds later, Posie Apparated into the room, bearing a tray with tea and trifle.

"Master Harry has not been eating enough," Tizzy scolded, casting a watchful eye on him as Posie sat the tray on a nearby table. "Master Harry will finish this. Yes he will."

Harry smiled fondly at the elf, whose scolding tone bore a striking resemblance to Hermione's. He dutifully took a bite of the trifle, washing it down with a sip of the tea. True to her word, Tizzy remained in the room, watching Harry eat, until the entire dessert was gone. She cocked her head as though appraising him, the empty plate held in her spindly fingers. Nodding to herself, she gave him a low curtsey and Disapparated.

Harry laughed and rubbed a hand over his face. *Barmy old house-elf*, he thought with a smile, settling back into the chair with renewed interest in the magazine. He read about Krum's new job, and how the adjustment to living in Montrose was going.

Hmm, Harry thought, looking at the picture of Krum closely. *I wonder if Hermione knows he's so close? Montrose is only a quick Apparition away.*

As soon as Harry left the kitchen, Hermione and Draco's talk turned to Pansy's pregnancy. Everyone was reluctant to discuss the topic in front of Harry, worried about the effect it might have on his mental state.

"He has a right to be there, Draco," Hermione said, a thoughtful look on her face.

"I know it, Hermione, but what happens if I *am* the father?" Draco asked, his face drawn. "What then? Will the news drive Harry back into shock?"

Hermione bit her lip, considering Draco's question. It was a fair one, and one she had posed to Mind-Healer Patil just a few days earlier.

"I think it's a risk you have to take, Draco," she said, frowning. "He's much more in control of his magic now, so it likely won't be an issue. Not taking him along, though, would *definitely* cause issues between you two."

Draco sighed. He knew Hermione was right. He and Harry had talked at length about not keeping secrets from each other when they'd returned from the Ministry today. Ginny's revelation about the Polyjuice had made both of them feel guilty for not coming clean sooner, though their reasons had been sound; Harry, because he'd been sure Draco would be angry, and Draco because he'd been sure Harry wouldn't have been able to understand why he did it.

"You're right," Draco said, his eyes clouding as he thought of all the ways a meeting with Pansy could go. *Not a single one ends well*, he thought grimly. "You're right."

Harry slept so deeply – thanks to the Sleeping Draught Tizzy had slipped into his trifle – that he didn't even notice Draco gently move him from the chair to their bed later that evening. Draco slid in next to his fiancé, gently removing Harry's glasses and placing them on the bedside table. He smoothed the hair away from Harry's face, pressing a gentle kiss to his brow.

"I promise everything will work out," Draco whispered, not sure if the words of assurance were meant for him or Harry.

"Mistress Parkinson!" Tizzy yelled, trailing after the irate witch. "You is not to go in there! You is not to go in Master Draco's private rooms!"

Pansy's stiletto heels clicked ominously against the hardwood floors as she marched toward Draco's private chambers, a copy of the *Daily Prophet* clutched in her fist. The witch was practically vibrating with anger, intent on seeing Draco right away. Tizzy ran alongside, trying to keep up with Pansy's purposeful steps. The house-elf couldn't use magic to subdue the witch; the house-elf bond wouldn't allow her to act against a member of the family, and the baby Pansy was carrying fulfilled that requirement.

"Mistress Parkinson, please!" Tizzy begged, tears forming in her protruding eyes. "Tizzy will fetch Master Draco, if Mistress Parkinson would just wait in the drawing room!"

Pansy snorted, waving the paper in her hand.

"And give him a chance to sneak out like he did last night? I don't think so," she said coldly, speeding up as she rounded the corner, Draco's door now visible.

Pansy jumped slightly when the distraught house-elf Disapparated suddenly, sighing and rolling her eyes when she realized it had gone ahead to warn Draco. Undeterred, she pushed open the double doors to his suite, her jaw dropping at the sight in front of her.

Tizzy had managed to awaken Draco, but he was still in bed, wrapped around Harry Potter. Draco's body stiffened when he saw Pansy, and he shifted, blocking Harry's sleeping body with his own.

"What the hell is *he* doing in your bed?" she shrieked, her eyes wild. "You told me *last night* you were ready to make a public statement about our relationship, and then I see *this* in the paper this morning!"

She narrowed her eyes, throwing the *Daily Prophet* on the bed. Draco watched her warily, grabbing the newspaper and turning it around so he could see it. Skeeter had published an article about Harry's divorce trial, though reporters were bound by a spell similar to the secrecy spell Harry was under not to divulge the specifics of the testimony. A photo of Harry and Draco entering the Floo in the Ministry Atrium ran alongside it, clearly showing Draco shielding Harry from the press and ushering him along. No one who saw the photo could have any doubt as to the nature of their relationship; Draco had a hand on Harry's lower back, guiding him, and Harry leaned into Draco's body as though seeking comfort and reassurance. They looked every bit the loving couple they were.

Harry stirred, fighting off the last remnants of the Sleeping Draught. He yawned and stretched sleepily, his eyes snapping open when he realized they weren't alone.

"What the hell?" Harry asked, sitting up quickly, drawing the blankets around his naked torso.

"I was about to ask the same thing," Draco said, glaring at Pansy. He handed the paper to Harry. "Pansy just burst in, demanding an explanation."

Harry looked down, shrugging.

"It looks pretty self-explanatory to me," he said, his gaze rising to inspect the furious witch at the foot of the bed. "So long as you're here, though, how about answering a question for me? Where the fuck do you get off telling the *Prophet* you're marrying Draco?"

Pansy's face turned purple, and she drew her wand, leveling it at Harry. There wasn't even a flicker of concern in the dark-haired man's eyes as he negligently waved his hand, Banishing it before she could cast anything.

"What – "

"That doesn't sound like the beginnings of an answer, Parkinson," Harry said coldly, crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm waiting."

"You're waiting? *You're* waiting? *I'm* waiting for *my* fiancé to explain why you are in his bed! Why he was photographed with you at the Ministry yesterday, since he spent last night promising me your relationship was over!"

Pansy rested a protective hand over her stomach, a gesture that had both Harry and Draco raising their eyebrows. They both tried to process her words, trying to make sense of what the hysterical witch was screaming.

"Pansy, I haven't seen you since September," Draco said gently, using a tone generally reserved for children or the mentally ill. "I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

Pansy's eyes narrowed to slits, and she stalked closer, stopping just a meter from Draco.

"You haven't seen me since *September*?" she shrieked, incredulous. "Oh, that's rich, Draco. You haven't seen me since September. I suppose you weren't in my bed last night, then? And several nights a week for the last two months?"

Draco looked bewildered, watching as Harry looked back and forth between him and Pansy.

"Draco, in your bed last night?" he asked, his eyebrow arched.

Harry steeled himself, fighting the urge to question Draco's actions. True, Draco hadn't been there when he fell asleep last night, but that didn't mean he'd been in Pansy's bed. *I trust Draco,* he reminded himself, firmly shutting the door on any further doubts.

"He most certainly was," Pansy said, her lips a grim line.

"He most certainly was *not*," Draco cut in, his expression outraged. "Pansy, I don't know what you're playing at, but it won't work."

Harry put a restraining hand on Draco's forearm, preventing him from moving toward the witch.

"Draco was here all night," Harry said softly, carefully studying Pansy's reaction to his words. "He's been with me every night since the middle of September."

Pansy shook her head, tears springing to her eyes.

"Why are you doing this, Draco?" she pleaded, her face full of hurt and betrayal. "You said you were ready for our family. You said this thing with Potter was over, that it was just a fling."

Draco shook his head, at a loss for words. *Sweet Merlin, what a mess,* he thought as he rubbed a hand briskly over his face, trying to focus his still sleep-soaked mind. *What the hell is going on?*

"I never said anything of the sort, Pansy," he said, his voice hard.

Pansy's face crumpled, and the dark-haired witch sank to the ground, settling in a heap at the side of the bed. Tears flowed freely down her face, and she made no attempt to brush them aside.

"I just don't understand," she whispered, looking down at her lap, her hands cupped against the not-yet-visible mound of her belly. "This morning I saw that photo, and then that owl arrived with a summons to appear before the Wizengamot as a witness in Potter's divorce trial – Draco, *what* is going *on*?"

Both Draco and Harry stiffened when Pansy mentioned the summons, their minds racing. *Abramson certainly had no reason to summon Pansy, so it must be some scheme of Ginny's*, Harry thought, frantically trying to piece everything together.

"What summons, Pansy?" Draco asked, his voice artificially calm. The woman was clearly not thinking clearly, and he knew he'd have to play along with her psychotic game to get any answers.

Pansy's answer was drowned out by her sobs, her face hidden by a veil of long, dark hair that had fallen forward as she curled her arms around herself. Draco looked over at Harry, his eyes silently questioning. Harry nodded, frowning slightly, motioning for Draco to go to the hysterical witch.

Draco slipped out of bed, drawing a dressing gown around himself as he moved cautiously toward Pansy. He glanced up as his chamber door opened, admitting Narcissa and Lucius. Tizzy had gone to them after Pansy forced her way into Draco's room. Lucius stood in the doorway, taking in the scene in front of him. He mouthed the word "auror" to Draco, and the younger man shook his head, letting his father know everything was under control. Narcissa perched on the edge of the bed, wrapping her arms around Harry.

"What does she want?" she whispered when her lips reached his ear.

Harry's body tensed under her attention, but he shifted slightly so he could answer quietly.

"I'm not sure. I think she may be delusional. Draco's trying to get more information out of her," Harry whispered, his voice quavering slightly. "She said she's been summoned to testify in my hearing. Can you think of any reason why?"

Narcissa released Harry from the hug, a puzzled expression on her face. She shook her head slightly, turning to watch her son gather the sobbing woman in his arms, his voice pitched low as he murmured words of comfort. Tension radiated from Harry, but he stayed on the bed, an impassive expression on his face as he watched Draco stroke Pansy's hair and whisper in her ear. Narcissa rested a comforting hand on Harry's leg, her palm warm even through the heavy blanket. She squeezed his thigh reassuringly, her small smile sincere.

Lucius moved aside as Hermione entered the room, still in her pajamas. She looked from Draco to Harry, both of whom simply shrugged in response. Pansy was no longer hysterical, instead

simply weeping quietly on Draco's shoulder.

"I have to get to the Ministry," Harry whispered, nudging Narcissa aside so he could stand.

"The court reconvenes in an hour, and I need to talk to Abramson about this –" he motioned vaguely in Draco's direction, which the rest of them took to mean the Pansy situation, "—before he gets blindsided by it, too."

Hermione offered to accompany him, leaving Narcissa and Lucius to deal with helping Draco get some answers out of Pansy.

"I received a notice that Giltrough intends to call Miss Parkinson to the stand earlier this morning," Abramson said, stirring sugar into the cup of take-away coffee in front of him. "According to his filing, the nature of her testimony is Mr. Potter's 'moral fiber'."

Hermione shook her head, puzzling out the words. *Pansy doesn't even know Harry,* she thought, a sense of dread blooming in her stomach. *What is Ginny doing?*

"I don't actually know Pansy," Harry said, voicing Hermione's concern. "We were at Hogwarts together, but aside from having a few classes together, we've never really spoken."

Abramson nodded, sipping the coffee as he thought. Both Harry and Hermione had similar cups in front of them, but they sat untouched, both of them too preoccupied to bother.

"The law gives a lot of leeway for character exploration in divorce cases," Abramson said, his eyes distant as he tried to work this latest twist out himself. "It could be that Mrs. Potter wants to use her to establish a pattern of behavior from Mr. Potter, or it could be the opposite; perhaps Mrs. Potter has befriended Miss Parkinson and wants her to testify on behalf of her own character."

Harry exchanged a skeptical look with Hermione, neither of them convinced Ginny wasn't orchestrating some grand scheme to make Harry out as a villain.

"Anything is possible, I suppose," Harry conceded, shaking his head slowly, "but neither of those scenarios really matches up with the act Ginny's been using during the trial. Yesterday when she –"

Harry broke off, suddenly unable to speak. His eyes widened in alarm, his thoughts panicked for a moment until he remembered the secrecy oath they'd sworn the day before. He looked over at Hermione apologetically, gratified to see she was already standing to leave.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, but with the oath –" Harry trailed off, shrugging helplessly.

"I understand, Harry," Hermione said, gathering her things with a smile. "I'll let you two discuss the case. It was nice to see you, Mr. Abramson."

Abramson nodded at Hermione as she left, already scribbling notes to himself on the parchment in front of him. Harry toyed with the lid of his coffee, trying to figure out what role Pansy played in this. He cleared his throat, catching Abramson's attention.

"Er – I assume you know about the rumors Pansy started?" he asked, uncomfortable. "That she's carrying Draco's child, that is."

Abramson colored slightly, but nodded.

"We stay abreast of all the publicity you receive, Mr. Potter. It's standard procedure in a high-profile case like this one."

Harry nodded, the tight sensation in his chest making it difficult for him to breathe normally.

"We aren't – well, that is to say – we don't know if it's true or not," he blurted, his eyes averted. *Merlin this is embarrassing,* he thought, his face pinking. "It could be true. Or it could not be true."

He looked up, meeting Abramson's sympathetic gaze. Harry felt his blush deepening. He didn't want his lawyer's sympathy; there was no need for sympathy!

"Not that it matters," he said in a rush, nearly kicking himself for how idiotic he sounded. "I mean, it wouldn't matter – it doesn't matter, to me, at least. But that could somehow be related to why she's here today."

Abramson shook his head, absently jotting something down in the margin of a court document.

"Mrs. Potter may be using Miss Parkinson to testify about the nature of your relationship with Mr. Malfoy, but the testimony would be limited to her knowledge of when and how your affair with Mr. Malfoy began," Abramson said, looking up at Harry. "Any, er, *assignations* on his part would be dismissed as irrelevant."

The stain on Harry cheeks spread even more, uncomfortably hot under the collar of his robes.

"There were no *assignations*," he said, lifting his glasses out of the way and pinching the bridge of his nose with his hand, a spectacular headache building. "Look, it doesn't matter. I haven't done any of the things Ginny has accused me of, save have an affair with Draco. I just want this to be over with."

The lawyer nodded again, his eyes softening. Contentious divorces were always hard, and this one was even worse. He could understand Harry's frustration.

"It will be nearly impossible for Giltrough to refute our expert witnesses," he said, gathering up his papers and books to head into the courtroom. "Unless Miss Parkinson reveals something truly

remarkable, you'll have your divorce by the end of the day today."

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Chapter: 14

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. Not mine.

"Please take your seats. Mr. Giltrough, the floor is yours, should you choose to question Mlle. Vioget," Madam Bones said, settling into her chair and bringing the second day of the trial to order.

Giltrough stood, looking much more confident than he had the day before.

"I have no questions for Mlle. Vioget herself," he said, gesturing to the witch on the stand, "unless she is qualified to testify on behalf of Mr. Ollivander?"

The woman blanched, shaking her head no. Madam Bones nodded, dismissing her from the stand.

"I call Mr. Septimus Ollivander to the stand," Giltrough said, a small smile on his face.

"Objection!" Abramson said, shooting out of his chair. "Mr. Ollivander is of frail health and therefore unable to testify in person."

Madam Bones read over a scroll in her hands, presumably Ollivander's written testimony, which had been entered into the record the day before.

"I'll allow it. Mr. Ollivander's testimony links Mrs. Potter to the malignant spell on Mr. Potter. Her attorney must have the right to question him."

Abramson grimaced, running a hand through his hair in an uncharacteristic show of nerves.

"Mr. Ollivander has made it clear that it is not possible for him to travel to the Ministry," he said carefully, looking over at Giltrough. The smug smile on the man's face was proof enough that he already knew everything Abramson was saying. "Any testimony would have to be collected in writing, which could take days."

Madam Bones looked over the witness list, scanning for other new names.

"Mr. Giltrough, do you have an alternative witness to propose?"

Giltrough smiled and bowed slightly, approaching the bench.

"I'd like to call Hammish Tremaine, a wand-maker from Cornwall," he said, offering the Chief Warlock an apologetic smile.

"He isn't on the witness list, since I had hoped to call Mr. Ollivander. But if that isn't a possibility…," he trailed off with a small, apathetic shrug, "… Mr. Tremaine will do in his stead."

Madam Bones was not convinced by Giltrough's innocent act. She pursed her lips, considering the substitution.

"I'll need to see Mr. Tremaine's qualifications before I allow it," she said, sending a severe look at Giltrough. "This had better not be posturing, Mr. Giltrough. My courtroom is a place of decorum and strict adherence to the letter of the law."

Giltrough just smiled and shook his head, returning to Ginny's table to retrieve a parchment with the wand-maker's professional credentials for the Chief Warlock.

"We will have a 15-minute recess while I verify this information," she said, rising abruptly and leaving the room, most of the Wizengamot trailing after her.

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter," Abramson said, grabbing a stack of parchment and a quill. "I need to Floo the office and see what they know about Mr. Tremaine."

Harry briefly considered staying in the courtroom, apprehensive about what waited for him outside the doors. Was Draco there? Did he know what Pansy wanted? Harry sighed, casting a quick glance around the room. Molly and Ron were still in the Ministry holding cells awaiting sentencing for their contempt of court charges, but the rest of the Weasleys were out in force again today. He frowned as he noticed George and his wife Angela in the gallery; they hadn't been there the day before. George glanced up, noticing Harry's gaze, and both looked away quickly.

Harry jumped up, deciding whatever awaited him in the corridor was better than sitting in here with most of the Weasley family. He gave them a wide berth as he crossed the courtroom, sliding through the doors as fast as he could.

"I wasn't sure you were coming out," Draco said, drawing Harry in for a quick kiss.

Harry smiled, reassured by Draco's presence. He brushed his lips against Draco's cheek, squeezing him in a brief but tight hug.

"How did things go?" Harry asked, looking around for any sign that Pansy was around.

"She's waiting in the witness holding room," Draco said, linking his fingers lightly with Harry's. "She really has no idea why she's here."

Draco's voice took on a more serious tone, and he caught and held Harry's eye.

"I think she believes she's been with me these last few months," he said, his voice low. "I know you wanted to do the spell yourself, so I held off, but I'm starting to think she might really be pregnant with my child. Ginny's vindictive enough, and it's possible, you know."

Harry's brow creased in confusion, and he shook his head slightly.

"To impregnate someone while Polyjuiced," Draco said, slightly annoyed Harry hadn't made the jump himself. "We know Ginny has my hair, and she used the potion before, so what would stop her from doing it again?"

"But what would she gain by that?" Hermione asked, joining their little huddle. Harry slung an arm around her waist, Draco one around her shoulders. "While she certainly might do it to break the two of you up, why bring Pansy before the court? Draco's personal life has no bearing, just Harry's."

Harry smiled, marveling at how quickly Hermione's brain worked. Abramson had essentially said the same thing earlier that morning, and Harry briefly wondered if perhaps Hermione should consider a career in law. She'd been an internal auditor in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures until a few months ago, when Ron's persistent and irrational jealousy had gotten so bad she'd been forced to quit. That was around the same time they'd moved into the Burrow, which Harry now thought had more to do with Ron wanting Molly to keep an eye on Hermione than the need to renovate their flat.

"Who knows," Harry said, shrugging. "I'm not sure what she thinks she'll gain by half of the things she's accused me of in there."

Hammish Tremaine was an average-looking wizard with striking blue eyes and a shock of curly brown hair. Harry felt slightly apprehensive as the man glided toward the witness box, moving through the room with poise and confidence that bespoke much courtroom experience.

Abramson's quick research had turned up little usable ammunition against Tremaine. The man was indeed a wand-making expert from Cornwall, though he made a substantial portion of his living testifying in cases like these, not actually crafting wands. His career as a professional witness made Harry worry; the man would likely be a persuasive and unflappable asset for Ginny's case.

He forced his face to remain impassive as he watched the wizard shake hands with Madam Bones before taking his seat, swearing the oaths to tell the truth and uphold the rules of courtroom decorum.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Mr. Tremaine," Giltrough said, walking across the room to face him. "And thank you for allowing the substitution, Madam Bones."

The witch acknowledged Giltrough's stiff bow with a nod, her attention focused on the witness. She made a vague gesture with her hand, indicating Giltrough should cut to the chase.

"Mr. Tremaine, can you give us a summary of your qualifications, please?"

The blue-eyed wizard smiled graciously at the lawyer in front of him before turning slightly in his seat so he could direct his answer to the Wizengamot. *A real charmer*, Harry thought sourly, mentally comparing the wand-maker to Gilderoy Lockhart.

"I began my career as an apprentice wand-maker under Mr. Ollivander, so I am intimately familiar with his thought processes, which should help me shed some light on his earlier testimony," the man said, his rich baritone voice full of just the right amount of warmth and respect. "I have a small shop in Cornwall, but lately I have spent most of my time traveling the world, offering my expertise to those in need of it in a judicial setting."

Offering his expertise to the tune of 75 Galleons an hour, Harry thought uncharitably, his eyes flickering with distaste. Abramson shifted slightly next to him, and Harry knew without looking that the man was furiously writing on the scroll in front of him, likely jotting down ways to discredit the wand-maker on the stand.

"Have you ever met Mrs. Potter, Mr. Tremaine?" Giltrough asked, apparently satisfied that the man's qualifications had been adequately presented.

"No, I have not," the wizard answered, smiling softly at Ginny, who sat with disturbingly placid expression on her face.

"Have you had a chance to examine her wand?"

"I have not," Tremaine answered, his gaze meeting the lawyer's. "I have no need to. If Mr. Ollivander deduced hers was the wand that cast the *Concateno Nescio* spell, then I have no reason to doubt his findings. Mr. Ollivander is a very capable and well-respected wand expert."

Harry's eyes narrowed, and Abramson tensed next to him. It sounded to Harry like Ginny's expert witness had just confirmed her wand cast the Dark spell against him. *There's got to be more,* he thought, leaning forward in his chair. Hushed conversations rolled through the Wizengamot, and Giltrough waited until silence had returned before questioning his witness again.

"Are you saying Ginevra Potter cast that spell against Mr. Potter?" he asked, his tone level.

Tremaine's eyes widened dramatically, his mouth opening in shock. Harry resisted the urge to

roll his eyes. *This guy is over the top*, he thought, watching the overly dramatic reaction.

"Not at all, Mr. Giltrough!" the man cried, shifting to face Madam Bones again. "Nothing could be further from my mind!"

Madam Bones narrowed her eyes, clearly seeing through the theatrics. She cleared her throat, leaning in toward the witness box.

"Explain, Mr. Tremaine."

"Spells can be traced to a wand, certainly," the man answered, his voice pitched at a normal level again. "But no tracking method exists that would tie a person to a specific spell cast from a wand. Simply put, although Mr. Ollivander proved Ginevra Potter's wand cast the spell, he had no way of proving *she* was actually the caster."

And there we go, Harry thought, sighing. The room was silent; even Abramson's ceaseless writing had stopped, the absence of the decisive scratching making Harry feel slightly uncomfortable. He hadn't realized how much that sound had grounded and reassured him until it stopped.

"Are you saying Mrs. Potter did *not* cast the spell, Mr. Tremaine?" Madam Bones asked, a thoughtful look on her face.

The brunet wizard shrugged elegantly, a small smile on his lips.

"I am saying there is no way to prove Mrs. Potter cast that spell," he clarified.

"Mr. Giltrough, you are dangerously close to the boundaries here," the Chief Warlock warned, giving him a severe look. "Will you be calling Mrs. Potter to the stand to verify your claims that she did not in fact cast *Concateno Nescio* against Mr. Potter?"

Ginny gave the Wizengamot a crooked smile, the tilt of her head and posture of her body implying fragility. Her lawyer moved to stand behind her chair, grasping her thin shoulders in his hands.

"I will not, Madam Bones," he said quietly, "Mrs. Potter has been through enough. I will not force her to confront the man who has abused and belittled her for years."

"Objection!" Abramson yelled, his face thunderous.

"Mr. Abramson," Madam Bones warned, watching him until he sat back down. She flicked her gaze to Giltrough, who was still hovering behind Ginny. "Mr. Giltrough, this is most unusual. Your client will not take the stand in her own defense?"

Ginny raised a tentative hand, clearly having learned her lesson about speaking out of turn the

day before. The Chief Warlock nodded, and she stood shakily, supporting herself by resting her hands on the table in front of her. Harry bit his tongue in fury; Ginny was a Beater for the Holyhead Harpies, for Merlin's sake! *Like she'd be too weak to stand. She's a professional athlete!* His eyes hardened at the thought, narrowing as he watched the ridiculous ploy.

"I chose not to put myself on the stand because I, too, want this divorce hearing to conclude quickly," she said, her voice faint, but clear. "I'd like to ask Harry one last time to settle this out of court."

She trembled slightly as she turned to face him, and only Harry's ironclad control kept the disgust off his face. She smiled slightly, a pathetic, vulnerable curve of her lips designed to elicit sympathy. *One last time? When was the first time?* he wondered, his thoughts turning to the confrontation they'd had more than two months ago at Malfoy Manor.

"I still love Harry, although I know our relationship cannot be salvaged," she continued, her unwavering gaze locked on Harry. The Wizengamot couldn't see the challenge in those brown eyes, but Harry could. "I'd like to end this as amicably as possible. I'm asking for a chance at mediation."

Madam Bones sighed, unable to do anything once the magics of the courtroom registered Ginny's request for mediation. More of the institutional magic took hold, and she had no choice but to grant Ginny's wish.

"As per wizarding divorce law, I am obligated to allow Mrs. Potter her request to enter into mediation with Mr. Potter," she said, her displeasure clear in her voice. "Mrs. Potter, I must warn you that the mediation will address only matters pertaining to the divorce settlement; the criminal charges that have been levied against you will be resolved in this court."

Ginny nodded, her red hair rippling down her back. *Another ploy*, Harry thought bitterly, knowing that Ginny preferred to keep her long hair bundled in a pony tail so it didn't fall into her face. Even he had to admit she looked fetching with her hair loose, appearing young and vulnerable with her demurely cut dress robes and clean-scrubbed face, none of her usual make-up apparent.

Harry looked over at Abramson, but the man just nodded grimly. The law was clear; if one member of the divorcing couple asked for mediation after the trial began, there was no choice but to do it. The mediation process was much less formal; Harry and Ginny would meet, together with their lawyers, in a simple conference room to haggle over their demands. A Ministry-appointed mediation facilitator would help them through the process.

"In light of Mrs. Potter's request, this court is hereby recessed," Madam Bones said, shuffling scrolls on the desk. "A mediator will be assigned as soon as possible."

"Wait!" Ginny cried, and the members of the Wizengamot paused, re-seating themselves. "I'd like to try this without the mediator, at least at first. I really want to give it an honest go."

Harry's eyebrows rose, his shock apparent. *What is she up to? No mediator?* he wondered, a tight feeling of dread building in his chest.

"That is highly unusual in cases of this nature, Mrs. Potter," Madam Bones said, a skeptical look on her face.

"We are aware, Madam Chief Warlock," Giltrough said, nodding solemnly. "Mrs. Potter merely wants the chance to try it this way. If the initial meeting does not go well, she will agree to any mediator you choose."

Madam Bones looked from Ginny to Harry, considering the proposal in silence. Finally, she nodded, rising once more.

"Fine," she said, her tone final. "Mr. Potter and Mr. Abramson, please arrange to meet with Mrs. Potter and Mr. Giltrough here at the Ministry this afternoon. The court will arrange a secure conference room for you, and you may convene after lunch."

Harry picked at his lunch disinterestedly, his mind far away as he considered what Ginny might have in store for him that afternoon.

"Eat *something* at least," Draco said, ignoring his own full plate.

Harry shook his head numbly, pushing away from the table. He and Draco were alone for once, sitting at a small table in the corner of the Ministry's café.

"There's no point worrying about it," Draco said, sounding unconvinced himself. "Whatever she's up to, it's already set in motion. Just eat."

"I can't eat, Draco," Harry snapped, his eyes flashing. "I can't do anything but rack my brain to try to find something – anything – that gives me a clue about what she's doing."

Draco stood as well, snagging his untouched cup of lukewarm tea and Harry's still-full soda, leaving the rest of the food for the Ministry's elves to dispose of. The two walked back to the main corridor in silence, their collective worries heavy between them.

"Draco, there you are!" Narcissa said, sighing in relief as she saw the two men turn the corner. "I should have known you'd be with Harry."

"Mother?" Draco asked, handing his cup of tea to Harry as he grabbed her hand, pulling her down into the chair next to his as he sat. Narcissa was trembling.

Tears filled Narcissa's eyes, and she shook her head, unable to speak around the knot in her throat.

"It's your father, Draco," Hermione said, laying a hand on Narcissa's shoulder. "The Aurors just came for him. Ginny's pressing charges over the Chamber of Secrets incident. She's alleging your father knew what Riddle's diary was, and that giving it to her amounted to attempted homicide."

Harry's mouth dropped open in shock. That had been more than a decade ago! *What is she doing*? he wondered once again, the sinking feeling in his stomach spreading. *Is this serious, or just a diversion? The Weasleys all agreed years ago that Lucius hadn't known what the diary was; he'd never have given it to her if he had!*

"That's ridiculous," Harry said flatly, abruptly sitting next to Draco and running a comforting hand up the blond's thigh. "The charges will never stick. There's no way to prove Lucius knew what it was, even if they *could* prove he was the one who gave the diary to Ginny, which they can't."

Draco nodded woodenly, his mother's hands clasped in his own.

"Harry's right," Hermione said, a look of concern on her face as she watched the mother and son. "She's just trying to catch Harry off-guard."

Hermione blanched, realizing how cold that sounded.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered, her face coloring. "I didn't mean it like that. It's horrible for Lucius, but I'm sure he'll be out by the end of the day."

Draco smiled up at her, his eyes understanding. Narcissa straightened a bit at her words, her spine stiffening as she considered the image they must be presenting in the very public corridor.

"Of course," she said, sniffing delicately. Draco produced a handkerchief from his robes, and she took it gratefully. "You are right, both of you. Luc has been in much worse situations than this one."

Narcissa managed an only slightly watery smile, resolve steeling her eyes.

"That man has the agility of a cat. He always lands on his feet," she said, her voice strong again.

She wrapped an arm around Draco, snagging Harry's collar as well so she could pull them both in for a hug, pressing a fierce kiss to both of their foreheads.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," she said to them, her eyes sparkling with tears of a different sort as she looked over their heads to smile at Hermione. Releasing them, she stood, brushing the wrinkles out of her robes. "Either of you."

"What? Why?" Harry asked, bewildered.

"To be honest, I have no idea," Abramson answered, shrugging. "She can ask anyone she wants

to be there, and she has chosen to ask Mr. Malfoy and Miss Parkinson to be present."

Harry sighed, looking away. His foot tapped against the marble floor, beating out a tattoo of frustration and barely controlled rage.

"Does Draco have to agree?" he asked, his voice tight.

Abramson considered the question for a moment, his brow furrowed.

"I suppose not," he conceded, a small frown on his lips. "But it would look best on the court records if you cooperated with any of her more reasonable demands."

Harry nodded tersely, shaking his head slightly. *What is she up to?* His mind screamed the words for what seemed like the millionth time that day.

"I'll get him, then," Harry said, and Abramson smiled in relief. "We'll meet you in there."

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Chapter: 15

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. I love them dearly, but they don't belong to me.

Lucius nodded slightly as his lawyer droned on and on about the baseless charges, absently wondering if the old wind-bag was really this verbose or if he had somehow managed to find a way to charge him by the word.

"Yes, I rather thought as much," Lucius said, interrupting the grey-haired wizard before he could launch into an account of a similar case he'd represented some years ago – again.

"No need to worry," the man said, his bushy eyebrows gathering as he read through the motion to dismiss he'd brought with him.

"I do appreciate your –" Lucius paused, searching for a word that he could utter without outright lying, "— personal attention, Martins, but I'm sure one of your less tenured partners could have handled this inconvenience perfectly well."

The old wizard nodded, his hands trembling as he held the parchment.

"Yes, yes," he muttered dismissively. "I like to stay involved, you know. Stay relevant. Especially

on a case like yours, Mr. Malfoy. Your family's patronage is very important to Martins, Ledbetter and Gilroy."

Lucius suppressed an eye roll, settling instead for a heavy sigh. Merlin only knew why Harry's wife had chosen to press charges now, after all this time, though it probably had something to do with distracting them from whatever nonsense her lawyer was concocting. The charges against him were absolutely ridiculous. Though there was no statute of limitations on attempted murder, the case against him was certainly weak; he had no reason to fear. *Of course, I'm sure doddering old Martins could find a way to muck it up*, he thought, cringing when the man started talking about some old case or another again. *He'll probably keel over dead before he can hand the motion to the judge.*

An Auror poked her head around the conference room door, checking on how the two wizards were doing. Lucius gave her a curt nod, beckoning her into the small space.

"I think Mr. Martins is ready to leave," he said, gesturing with a shackled hand toward the old man, who was currently muttering to himself.

Draco settled into the hard wooden chair, his face expressionless as he watched Ginny and her attorney converse in low tones across the table. Harry and Abramson were just outside, arguing about something. The sparsely furnished room held little more than the table and chairs, and Draco let his gaze wander aimlessly around the smallish space, wondering why, when magic made it so easy, the drab paint hadn't been replaced with a more modern color sometime in the last 50 years.

I wonder if father is in a room like this one? He let the grim thought hang in his mind for a moment before deciding it wouldn't do to dwell on something he couldn't change. He was here to support Harry, and to finally find out what Ginny had in store for them. Right on cue, the door opened, admitting Harry and his lawyer. They both took their seats, and Harry gripped Draco's hand under the table, squeezing his fingers in greeting.

"I've called this meeting so Harry and I can work out some issues that I'd rather remain private," Ginny said, smirking as she looked at her soon-to-be ex-husband. "To that end, I think it would be best if Mr. Abramson and Mr. Giltrough stepped out of the room."

Abramson was instantly defensive, voicing his strenuous objections. Harry looked at Draco for a moment, his eyebrows arched. Draco gave a practically unnoticeable shrug; he knew he and Harry could easily handle themselves if Ginny tried anything. That, coupled with the Monitoring spells both he and Harry knew were active in the room, was enough to convince him things would be alright without the lawyers present.

"Fine," Harry said, his voice just as cold as Ginny's. He held a hand up, stopping Abramson's arguments before he could speak them. *Ah*, thought Draco, *this must be what they were arguing about in the corridor.* "Just go."

Shaking his head, Abramson rose, holding the door open for Ginny's lawyer so they could both pass through. He shot Harry a measured look, silently warning him to keep his temper. Harry nodded, swiveling to face Ginny as soon as the door swung shut.

"What did you need to tell us alone?" he asked, wasting no time with a preamble. He'd known the mediation business was simply a ploy of some sort, and he was tired of the pretense.

A smile spread across Ginny's face, her eyes glinting with satisfaction for some yet unseen reason. The sight made Harry's heart clench, and he tightened his hold on Draco's fingers.

"You're going to give me half of both the Potter and the Black vaults," she said, her tone easy, as though she were talking about Quidditch scores or what she'd like for dinner. "And Grimmauld Place."

Harry sneered, wrinkles forming at the corners of his eyes as he narrowed them in a vicious glare.

"And why would I do that? I'm quite happy with the way the trial is going. I fully expect to walk away with everything I want."

Ginny's smile grew, as did Harry's sense of foreboding and dread. Draco sat motionless, watching the scene play out between the spouses.

"Oh, just a hunch," she said, letting her eyes rake over Draco, sneering. "I knew about *him* before even *you* did, Harry. Haven't you wondered why my mother was in such a rush to see us married?"

Ginny laughed, the cold sound devoid of any humor.

"We had to do something to get control over you before you realized you were in love with him, that it wasn't just school boy curiosity." She smiled, shaking her head ruefully. "Oh, Harry. After all the effort I put into getting you in the first place, did you really think I wouldn't take out some sort of insurance? That I'd rely on some incompetent attorney to win me what I deserve should we ever divorce? That I'd waste *years* of my life with the chance of getting left with nothing?"

Harry's blood turned to ice as he watched Ginny's face, which remained mirthful even while delivering the ominous threats. She traced a pattern on the table with her finger absently, and for the first time, Harry wondered if Ginny had gone mad.

"I think you know me better than that, Harry," she chastised, her innocent smile contrasting with the hard look in her brown eyes.

"Well, you didn't before, but I'm guessing you do *now,*" she said with a disturbingly girlish giggle. "You know all about me now, don't you, Harry? Your lawyer was ever so good at digging up the things we thought we'd buried deep enough."

Harry's jaw tightened, but he didn't respond to her baiting, the silence buzzing as he waited for her to continue. Her expression darkened when she realized Harry wasn't going to lose control of his temper.

"No? I suppose I don't know you so well anymore, either," she said with an indifferent shrug. "No matter."

"I have a deal for you. I'll let you have the baby Pansy is carrying, and you give me the money and the house. I'm being very generous, actually. I could ask for everything; I'm sure you'd agree to it when you find out what's going on."

Harry actually laughed out loud. She was using Pansy's baby as a bargaining chip?

"I'm sure that would be news to Pansy. As of this morning, she was certain she'd be raising her baby with Draco," Harry said, his face a mask of pity and disdain. "Though you probably know that, since I assume you've been the one posing as Draco all along."

Ginny giggled, and both Harry and Draco had to fight to stop themselves from shuddering at the sound. *Definitely mad*, Harry thought with a shiver, wondering how he'd ever found anything in Ginny to love.

"Pansy," she called, her sing-song voice loud enough to carry through the door. "Be a dear and come in, please."

A bewildered Pansy entered the room, taking a chair next to Draco instead of the one nearest Ginny. This seemed to amuse Ginny even more.

"I'll repeat my offer," Ginny said, leaning in toward the three of them. "I get the money, and you get custody of *that* in roughly – oh, I'd say a little less than five months."

Pansy recoiled, her hands immediately shielding her stomach. Draco shifted slightly, using his body to block her body from Ginny's view.

"What is she talking about, Draco?" Pansy said, her voice barely audible. "Why are we even here?"

"You're here because the child you carry is vitally important to my happiness," Ginny said matter-of-factly, vaguely gesturing in Pansy's direction.

Pansy's eyes narrowed, and she leaned into Draco's protective cover.

"Draco's child," she hissed, a look of revulsion on her face as she tried to contemplate why Ginny wanted anything to do with her baby. "*Our* baby, which is due in six months."

Ginny smiled coldly, shaking her head sadly.

"Harry's child," she said, grinning as all hell broke loose.

"Miss Parkinson is resting well under sedation," the mediwitch told Draco, who found himself pacing the corridors at St. Mungo's again.

"She's well? And the baby?" Draco asked, terrified Pansy had hurt herself or the child when she fainted.

"Both fine," the mediwitch confirmed, consulting the notes on Pansy's chart. "It says here you've requested a paternity test. Would you like to wait until Miss Parkinson is awake, or do it now?"

Draco looked over at Harry, who was staring listlessly out the window, watching the Charmed scene play through it loop over and over again.

"Now," Harry said, not looking away from the window. "Let's do it now."

The mediwitch gave them both a sympathetic smile before pushing the door to Pansy's room open, the two men following her inside.

"I can fetch a Healer to do the spell if you are unfamiliar with the incantation," she offered, unsure about what role she should play in the drama unfolding before her.

"That won't be necessary," Hermione said, slipping into the room behind them. "I can perform the spell."

The mediwitch nodded, checking on Pansy one last time before shuffling out of the room, shutting the door behind her. Hermione turned and cast strong Locking and Silencing spells on the door, determined to give the men as much privacy as she could. It was only a matter of time before reporters descended on the hospital, since they hadn't been able to shield Harry's identity. They had left Ginny at the Ministry in their rush to tend to Pansy, and Hermione figured the manipulative witch would spread the news even faster than the gossipy woman at the front desk downstairs.

"Are you ready?" she asked them, her face grim as she directed the two men to stand on opposite sides of Pansy's bed.

Hermione took a steadying breath, raising her wand. "*Pater Ostendo*," she said, watching as a thin beam of lavender light shot from her wand tip, encircling Pansy's abdomen.

The light became brighter, changing from lavender to a bright, clear green. The tendrils of light grew again, this time wrapping around Harry like fast-growing vines. Harry's eyes widened, a tingling sensation building wherever the rays touched his skin.

"*Finite Incantatum*," Hermione whispered, ending the spell.

The room was absolutely silent, its three conscious occupants speechless. After a few moments, a hysterical laugh burbled out of Harry's throat. He quickly covered his mouth with his hand, surprised the sound had come from him.

"Well, this changes things," Draco said dryly, his lips puckered in a thoughtful frown.

"But how –"

Draco shrugged. "Probably the same way we originally thought," he said, gently sweeping a stray hair from Pansy's forehead. "Poor Pans."

"But wouldn't she have noticed it was me, not you?"

Draco bit his lip, shaking his head after a moment.

"I really don't know. Who knows what Ginny's done to her."

"It's the only offer on the table, Ginny," Harry spat, his eyes narrowed. "I've already set up the account in your name at Gringotts. You tell me *under Veritaserum* how Pansy can possibly be carrying my child, and I'll deposit 50,000 Galleons into the account."

Ginny grinned, sitting forward slightly in her chair and crossing her legs. She and Harry were meeting – alone – in a coffee shop in Diagon Alley. Harry knew Draco would have a fit if he knew he was here with Ginny, but he needed answers. Desperately.

"*My* offer is the only one on the table, darling," Ginny said sweetly, stirring milk into the mug of coffee in front of her. "Though the longer you hold out, the more the temptation to raise the stakes grows."

Harry clenched his teeth, his fingers tightening painfully on the ceramic mug in his hands. He had no interest in the weak coffee, but the act of holding it helped him curb the urge to wrap his hands around Ginny's slender throat.

"No deal," he said flatly, pushing his chair back. "It doesn't matter how you did it. That's a matter for the Aurors anyway, if Pansy chooses to press charges. The baby is mine; I don't care how."

Ginny's laugh – warm, rich and full of amusement – stopped Harry in his tracks. A tingle of unease ran down his spine. He continued toward the door, conscious she was following closely. They stopped in an alley outside the shop, Ginny pulling Harry around the corner. Anyone watching would have thought they were two lovers having an intimate moment. Ginny rose onto her toes, her lips nearly touching Harry's ear.

"That baby is as much mine as it is yours," she hissed, her hand grabbing Harry's upper arm hard

enough to bruise. "If you don't give me what I want, I'll make sure you never even see it."

Harry's muscles, already rigid, went hard as stone at the words.

"That baby is *mine*," he said, enunciating the words to make sure they sank in to Ginny's addled mind. "Pansy is its mother, and I am its father. If you think Draco or I will let you anywhere *near* that child, you're more insane than I thought."

Ginny smiled, angling their bodies so both of their faces were visible to anyone who passed the darkened alley. She fisted her hands in the front of Harry's robes, her face a mask of anguish and horror. Her voice, still low enough to be audible to only Harry, remained cold.

"No, you listen to *me.* That baby is *ours.* My insurance policy, remember? My mother helped me with the spell," she said, scorn coloring her whispered words. "You were so *oblivious* you never even noticed I was pregnant. When I did the spell and found out it was yours, not Dean's, we decided to keep it."

Ginny's smile could be taken for a grimace from a distance, and Harry's shudder of disgust for one of anger to a casual observer.

"*Enitus Insidiatus.* Healers use it when a woman's body can't handle the pregnancy; it puts the fetus in a protective magical state of stasis, so it can survive outside the womb indefinitely," she said, her words making Harry feel sick. "It's also used for surrogacy, when a couple wants a child but can't carry one to term. Half of the vaults, and Grimmauld Place, or you'll never see your child after it's born."

Harry's face was white from shock, his body unmoving. Ginny's small fists still gripped his robes, her face still mere centimeters from his.

"They'd never let you have the child after everything you've done," he whispered, the effort of moving his lips feeling monumental as his mind reeled at Ginny's revelation.

"The wizarding world isn't like the Muggle one, Harry," she said, her voice almost patient. "Children are almost never accidental here. The magical world values children above all else. Mothers *always* get custody of children in wizarding divorces. *Always."*

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Chapter: 16

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. You know what they say: If wishes were horses, beggars would ride, and Harry Potter would be mine.

"*The wizarding world isn't like the Muggle one, Harry," she said, her voice almost patient. "Children are almost never accidental here. The magical world values children above all else. Mothers always get custody of children in wizarding divorces. Always."*

Harry froze, too stunned to respond. He had no way of knowing whether or not Ginny was telling the truth, but he knew he had to leave before he lost control. A bright flash of light made him jump, and both Harry and Ginny whirled around to see Rita Skeeter and a photographer from the *Daily Prophet* across the street.

"Fuck," Harry swore, squeezing his eyes shut.

"Bad for you, good for me," Ginny whispered, a sly smile stealing across her face as she turned back to Harry.

Suddenly it all fell into place, and Harry had to clench his fists to stop himself from drawing his wand. *Not that I'd need to,* he thought wryly, focusing on the bite of his nails digging into the flesh of his palm to ground himself. Ginny had set this all up. *Of course she did,* he berated himself, angry that he'd let himself be manipulated like this again. *Meeting me in a public place, following me out of the coffee shop, having this discussion in an alley, in full view of anyone walking by.* He shook his head, his lips compressed into a grim, bloodless line. *Ginny leaning in when she talked to me, the concerned and hurt expressions on her face.* He suppressed a growl, furious at how she had played the situation so perfectly.

Tomorrow, the headline will be that she'd found a way to have our baby after all, and we were arguing in this godforsaken alley about it, he thought, disgusted he hadn't realized what was going on sooner. *How could I be so fucking stupid?*

He watched as Ginny scurried away, holding her arm over her face as though trying to shield herself from more photos, her face the perfect picture of fear and righteous indignation. His hard green eyes narrowed as he saw Skeeter approach the slender red-head, her infamous Quick-Quotes Quill hovering in the air nearby. Ginny hesitated, shooting an apparently frightened glance Harry's way, before reluctantly answering a few of the reporter's questions.

Perfect, Harry thought bitterly, turning and Disapparating on the spot, not caring that he wasn't in an approved location.

Narcissa and Hermione raced down the corridor, headed toward the screaming in the breakfast room. Tizzy trailed behind them, her wizened face terrified.

" – just stop and *think* for *one minute –"*

"We went over all of this last night! Do you think I didn't regret it the moment it happened?"

The two witches hesitated outside the thick wooden doors, the voices inside clearly audible despite the soundproofing spells that blanketed most of the Manor.

"I don't know, Harry, did you? It's almost willful, the way you let that bitch manipulate you!"

Hermione clamped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with shock at Draco's hateful words. She'd never heard them fight like this. Narcissa's eyes were squeezed shut, her hand resting on the door, unsure of whether or not to intervene.

"What?" Harry roared, slamming his teacup down on the sideboard with enough force to shatter the porcelain. "So suddenly *I'm* to blame? Do you think *I* asked for *any* of this?"

Draco's face paled at Harry's hurt words, flinching as the yelling stopped abruptly when Harry sent the rest of the sideboard's contents crashing to the floor with a sweep of his arm. *Fuck*, Draco thought, wishing he'd been able to take the words back as soon as they'd left his mouth.

Deciding something had to be done, Hermione's hand joined Narcissa's on the door, pushing it open. The two women stumbled into the room, but neither wizard took any notice of their newly acquired audience.

"I didn't ask for any of this," Harry whispered, all traces of anger gone from his trembling voice.

"I'm sorry, Draco. I'm so sorry. I should just – I'll just –" Harry swallowed thickly, looking up at the patterned tin ceiling to try to stop the tears gathering there from spilling over onto his cheeks. " – I should go. I'll go. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry. Your family – I never expected – it was all my – *fuck."*

Draco swore his heart stopped. Harry's words were like physical blows, each one stealing the breath from his lungs. He opened his mouth, desperate to stop the words tumbling out of the other man's mouth, helpless to do anything as he felt his world shatter into a million tiny pieces.

"Harry," he whispered, his throat aching with unshed tears.

"No, I can't keep doing this to you," Harry said, shaking his head. "Your family wouldn't be involved in any of this if I wasn't here. Merlin, Draco, your father could go to *Azkaban* because of me!"

"No!" Narcissa said forcefully from the doorway, her eyes flashing. "We all know what really happened, and if Lucius goes to prison for it, it's *his* fault, not yours."

Hermione rested a comforting hand against Narcissa's arm, and even Tizzy tried to console the witch, wiping her own teary eyes on her tea towel before raising a tentative hand to pat Narcissa's hip.

"You don't know what's going on," Harry said, his voice bitter. "Ginny doesn't give a flying fuck whether or not Lucius goes to Azkaban; she's using him to hurt me."

Hermione frowned, narrowing her eyes.

"If we don't know what's going on, it's because *you* haven't told us what's going on, Harry James Potter!" she spat, her voice heavy with reproach. "You go into everything thinking you have to do everything on your own, and you *don't.*"

She moved closer, releasing her hold on Narcissa's arm.

"You would walk away from this?" Hermione asked, gesturing toward Draco, her gaze sweeping around to include Narcissa. "From a family that loves you? Why? To protect them?"

Hermione laughed, her lip curving into a rare sneer.

"Do you think Draco's life is worth anything to him if you're not in it?" she continued, her eyes hard as she chastised her oldest and best friend. "You almost died, and I'm not sure it wouldn't have killed him, too. Can't you *see* that? He risked everything to bring you back, and you thank him by abandoning him when things get tough?"

"That's not – I would *never* – it's not about –"

"*Harry*. That's exactly what it is. For once in your life, let the people you love make their own decisions about whether or not to stand by you. You don't always have to face things alone."

Harry blinked against the hot burn of tears, shocked speechless by Hermione's words. He'd fallen back into old patterns, he realized. *Letting Ginny get to me like this, it's just what she wanted*, he thought, the revelation sweeping through him, dousing the flames of his guilt and anger. He turned to Draco, his brows gathered in silent question.

"You're worth it," Draco whispered, his voice raw. "I can't believe you don't know it. You're worth it a thousand times over."

Narcissa laughed through her tears, which had been falling unhindered for a few minutes, the fact that she hadn't noticed a testament to how fixated she'd been on Harry.

"We're a family, Harry," she said, a weight lifting from her chest as she realized what she said applied to Lucius, too. "Families stick together, and they fight for each other."

Harry nodded in sudden understanding, a laugh burbling out despite his tears. He crossed the room in several long strides, collecting Draco on the way, to envelope Narcissa in a hug. He pressed a kiss to her wet cheek, turning so he could do the same to Draco.

"You're wrong, you know," he said, a warm feeling spreading through his chest. "Families don't

just fight *for* each other, they fight *with* each other, too."

Narcissa sniffed, pushing the men away. She'd had enough emotional displays in the last month to tide her over for the rest of her life. "I'd suggest you start the fight with that odious newspaper," she said, disdainfully nodding at the *Daily Prophet* lying open on the table. "The libelous things that woman writes!"

Harry and Draco both grimaced, their gazes locking as they shook their heads at Narcissa's words. The photo from yesterday had been front-page news this morning, accompanied by an article about Ginny and Harry's baby, which Ginny claimed she'd put in stasis because she was afraid Harry would force her into another abortion. Her tearful outrage at finding that Harry had arranged a surrogate to carry the baby to term – Pansy, apparently – nearly jumped off the page.

"It's not libel if it's true, Mother," Draco said quietly, his lips pursed. "Most of it is bollocks, of course, but the fact that it's Ginny and Harry's baby appears to be true."

"What? Have you run your own tests? Because you can't believe anything out of that woman's mouth," Hermione said, her dark expression making it clear she'd love a chance to question Ginny herself.

"We did, and it is," Harry said, sighing. "The Healer performed the test last night, after I met with Gin."

"I don't see how it matters," Hermione said, her face thoughtful. "We knew it was Harry's baby; why does it matter that Pansy's not the mother?"

Narcissa's horrified face was enough to confirm Ginny's words for Harry. He felt his heart sink, a cold fist gripping his chest at the thought of his child in Ginny's custody.

"In the wizarding world, children always go to the mother in the event of a divorce," Narcissa said slowly. "I don't believe I've ever heard of an exception."

Harry's green eyes flashed, and he chuckled darkly.

"That won't happen this time. She's willing to sell me the baby; she wants Grimmauld and half of my money," he said, shrugging. "I've got plenty. She can have it. As long as we can guarantee she'll never be able to get near the child, she can have anything she wants."

" – with the criminal charges she's facing, we'd have a strong case against Mrs. Potter getting sole custody of the child," Abramson said, his face grim.

"But partial custody – that's still possible?" Draco asked, gripping Harry's hand at the thought of their child spending any time at all with Ginny Weasley.

"It's hard to say," Abramson said, hedging. "She could serve a life term in Azkaban if we can

prove she cast those spells against Mr. Potter, and if Miss Parkinson would testify. The fact that she has no memory of the transfer alone speaks volumes against Mrs. Potter."

Draco looked at Harry, who shook his head.

"No. Pansy's – Pansy's not taking any of this well," he said, his mind flicking to the tearful conversation they'd had earlier that day at St. Mungo's.

Pansy wanted to end the pregnancy, which Harry flatly refused to consider. The Healers said the pregnancy was too far along to attempt another surrogacy transfer, which meant Pansy would have to carry Harry's child to term.

"I don't think she'd be willing to testify," Draco said softly, the anguish of that morning's confrontation evident on his face. The Healers had ended up sedating Pansy again; she'd become hysterical at the thought of carrying Ginny and Harry's baby for four more months, the soonest the Healers could induce the birth without harming the baby.

"Surely, if it meant seeing Mrs. Potter serve real time in Azkaban –"

"I've advised Pansy to retain a lawyer of her own, and I'm sure her family will take care of it," Draco said, his voice hard. "The decision to pursue this is Pansy's; I won't allow anyone to force anything else on her."

Harry nodded in agreement, squeezing their joined hands in silent support.

"I've decided to give Ginny everything she's asking for," Harry said suddenly, drawing an incredulous look from the lawyer.

"Mr. Potter, I strongly advise against –"

"Ginny said she can sue for custody of the baby and win. I can't let that happen. The money is nothing – we'd be comfortable without it, even if Draco wasn't wealthy."

"Due respect, Mr. Potter, but giving in to Mrs. Potter's wishes simply validates everything she's put you through," Abramson said, his teeth clenched.

"None of that matters," Harry said, shaking his head.

"Mr. Potter, it is *very* unlikely that Mrs. Potter will gain custody of your child," Abramson continued, his tone abrupt. "She will be serving several years in Azkaban at the very least for the crimes she committed against you. I assure you the charges we've levied against her are sound, and the Wizengamot is sure to find against her."

Draco spoke up, his calm voice clashing with his stormy grey eyes, which were flashing with anger.

"Wizarding divorce law allows any member of the mother's family equal claim to the child if they have concerns about the father," he said with a sneer. "Given that Harry's in a relationship with a suspected Death Eater, and that the baby's prospective grandfather is currently awaiting trial for allegedly trying to kill the child's mother, I'd say the chances of a Weasley suing for custody are pretty damn high."

Abramson nodded, pulling a piece of parchment out of the pile.

"I am familiar with the law, Mr. Malfoy," he said, sighing as he read over the scroll in front of him.

"I'm afraid settling with Mrs. Potter out of court won't solve that problem. Someone has already disputed both Mrs. Potter and Mr. Potter's custody."

"What? Who?" Harry questioned, his voice sharp.

Abramson paused, studying the paper in front of him.

"A member of Mrs. Potter's family," he said slowly, squinting as he scanned for the name. "George. George and Angelina Weasley."

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Chapter: 17

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. Not mine.

"You heard what the Healers said. They won't risk it," Harry whispered. He and Draco had been by Pansy's bedside at St. Mungo's all night.

"Goddamn it, Ginny!" he cursed, pressing the heels of his hands against his gritty eyes. "What the fuck is *wrong* with you?"

Draco rubbed Harry's back, his palm moving in calming circles, easing the tension between Harry's shoulder blades. Dark circles gave his grey eyes a haunted look, made worse by the pallor of his skin. *What a picture we must make,* he thought dryly, allowing his eyelids to drift shut, a small concession to his exhaustion. Both wizards were wearing yesterday's rumpled robes, and Harry's hair was disheveled beyond repair, the result of running anxious hands through it for hours. Draco absently brought his other hand up to smooth against his own chin,

grimacing as he felt a day's worth of stubble. *It's just as well they've sedated her, really*, he thought grimly, dropping his hand back to the bed to caress Pansy's exposed arm. *She'd know how bad things are immediately if she saw me looking like this.*

He squeezed Harry's shoulder, releasing him. Harry shot Draco a weak smile in thanks, resting his hand on the blond's thigh.

"What will we tell her?" Harry asked, his gaze falling on the woman on the bed.

Even in sleep, her face was pinched, her body moving restlessly despite the Sleeping Draught. Dreamless Sleep hadn't been an option, since it was harmful to the baby. Seeing the dark-haired woman thrash, Harry wondered if they should have fought with the Healer on that one, since they'd conceded on so many other things.

Draco shook his head, his heart heavy.

"I think it's best to let the Mind-Healers decide that," he said, his face grave. "It's ironic, isn't it? She wants to be rid of the baby so badly she'd try to kill herself, but the Healers won't transfer the surrogacy or end the pregnancy because she might die in the process."

Harry gave a mirthless laugh, so bitter it may as well have been a sob. *All my fault,* he thought, his jaw hardening. *It's my baby that's killing her; my wife that made this happen.*

Harry and Draco had just finished dinner when Tizzy had practically flown into the room the night before, hysterically pulling them toward the nearest Floo. They'd been unable to understand much of what Tizzy was saying, but Hermione had calmed her enough to determine that something was wrong with Pansy. Neither man thought to question why Tizzy knew something had happened, though Lucius and Narcissa had exchanged a significant glance. The mediwitch who had taken Draco's Fire-call at St. Mungo's had initially resisted his insistence that someone check on Pansy, but when she finally did she found the witch unconscious on the floor of her room. Pansy had broken into the hospital's potions storeroom, downing the contents of ten bottles of Pain Relieving Draught before the mediwitch had discovered her. Five was considered a lethal dose, but Pansy hadn't wanted to leave anything to chance.

"When we got here, I thought –" Draco's voice broke, and he looked down at his hand, which was curled around Pansy's.

"I know," Harry whispered, standing so he could wrap his arms around his fiancé, who was sitting on Pansy's bed. He drew Draco's head into the comfort of his chest, tucking his own head so his lips rested against soft blond hair. "I thought so, too."

The Healers had stopped the spread of the potion in time, saving Pansy's life, and the baby's too. They'd had to sedate her a few hours ago, when she woke up and realized she hadn't succeeded in killing herself.

"I'd let them, you know," Harry said quietly, his lips brushing Draco's ear. "I asked the Healer about it, but he said it they wouldn't do it even if Ginny and I agreed."

Draco nodded slightly, his hair tickling Harry's chin.

"I heard you talking to him in the hall. It's not – she wouldn't – this isn't Pansy," he said, his voice thickening. "I keep trying to see this from her perspective, you know?"

Draco was silent for a moment, his voice soft when he finally continued.

"She's always wanted children, which somehow makes it worse, yeah?"

Harry nodded, unable to speak. He'd always wanted kids, too. *But not like this,* he thought, rage boiling in his chest at the thought of Ginny tainting this experience, using fatherhood as a way to punish and control him. He watched the steady rise and fall of Pansy's chest, his eyes slipping lower to the barely defined bump under the thick blankets. *My child,* he thought, torn between grief and elation.

"I know what you're thinking, Potter, and none of this is your fault," Draco said bitterly. "Pansy knew they wouldn't terminate the pregnancy, even if you'd agreed. You didn't cause this."

"But I didn't help. Maybe if I'd been willing to talk about it, the Healers would have tried harder to find a way to do it," Harry said, his voice rough.

The pregnancy was high risk to begin with, since it was a magical surrogacy that had been implanted after the pregnancy was already so far along. The Healers said Pansy's only option was to carry the baby to term, since terminating the pregnancy could cause her to bleed to death.

Draco swallowed, squeezing Pansy's unresponsive hand. *Would this have happened at all if we hadn't seen each other at the bookstore and decided to have lunch?* he wondered, incredulous at the consequences of the brief chance meeting. *Was Ginny having me followed? Would she have targeted Pansy if she hadn't been out with me?*

"I know," Draco said softly, belatedly answering Harry. "Theo came in while you were Fire-calling Hermione last night. He's a Healer now; did you know that?"

Harry shook his head, a faint smile curving his lips. Theodore Nott, a Healer? The image was incongruous with the boy he'd known from Hogwarts, but he didn't doubt for a second that it was possible. They'd all been changed by the war. He briefly wondered if Ginny had always been as vindictive and cold as she was now, or if something in her snapped because of all the atrocities she'd seen in the war, including her brother's death.

"He said it's because her body didn't grow naturally with the pregnancy, since the baby was already two months along when Ginny made Pansy a surrogate," Draco continued, turning to look at Harry, who nodded.

"Yeah."

"Listen, there's nothing you can do for Pansy right now," Draco said, gently releasing Pansy's hand and standing. "You have another meeting with Ginny at the Ministry in a couple hours. Go home and get some sleep. I'll stay here with Pans."

"Will you meet with her alone again?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowed with worry.

"No," Harry said, buttoning the last clasp on his dress robes. Hermione smoothed a piece of lint off his shoulder, her eyes meeting his in the mirror. "Abramson's meeting me there."

Harry gave himself a quick once-over, satisfied with his appearance. He hadn't been able to sleep, but he'd managed a shower and a few discreet Glamour spells to hide how tired he looked. Hermione had come in just after dawn, carrying a bottle of Pepper-Up and the latest newspaper. News of Pansy's attempted suicide hadn't hit yet, and Harry was thankful for that small mercy. He didn't want to give Ginny any more ammunition, and he was sure she'd find a way to blame Pansy's suicide attempt on him. *She wouldn't be wrong,* he thought caustically, still mentally thrashing himself for the harsh words he and Pansy had exchanged the day before.

"Any news about what George is up to?" Hermione asked as they left the room, headed toward the entryway Floo.

"No clue," Harry said, snagging his heavy cloak from Tizzy's outstretched hands. He was Flooing straight to the Ministry, but he intended to walk over to St. Mungo's after he finished there.

"Has Ginny filed for custody yet?"

Harry shrugged noncommittally, reaching into the inner pocket of his robes to make sure he had his wallet and wand.

"Do you think Draco would mind if I demolished the west wing to make room for an ice skating rink?"

"Whatever you think is best, Hermione," Harry said, grabbing a pinch of Floo powder.

"You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?" she asked her distracted friend, grabbing his hand before he could climb into the fireplace.

Harry had the good grace to look chagrined, a moue of regret turning down the corners of his mouth.

"I'm sorry, Mione," he said, pulling her closer to kiss her cheek. "George and Angelina have a few days before they have to submit their final motion, so we'll know more then. Abramson said

last time he checked Ginny hadn't filed any custody papers yet. And yes, I think Draco would be more than a little upset to lose the west wing. His potions lab is there."

Hermione giggled, squeezing Harry tightly before letting him step into the fire.

"You were easier to mess with before the photographic memory," she pouted, and Harry smiled as he called out his destination and disappeared.

"We're meeting with the mediator today. Mrs. Potter and her lawyer have an appointment with her this afternoon. She'll evaluate each of your requests separately, then bring you and Mrs. Potter together to negotiate when she knows what each of you wants out of the divorce," Abramson said, guiding Harry toward a small conference room in the Ministry.

"You don't think she'll still try to negotiate over the baby, do you?" Harry asked, tilting his head toward the man. "I mean, not with this going on the official court record?"

Abramson shook his head, adjusting his grip on the file folder he held under his arm so he could pull open a large glass door emblazoned with the words *Marriage Mediation Rooms 1A to 7C.* He motioned Harry inside, closing the door behind them when he stepped through. Harry's eyes were slow to adjust to the dim room, which appeared to be a small outer office. A portly witch with a bored expression nodded as Abramson signed them in, waving them toward a tidy sitting area in the corner to wait for their appointment.

Harry eyed the stuffy furniture warily, as though the pale pink and green cabbage rose design might injure him. He stood to the side of the lumpy sofa, preferring to stand than to sit on the uncomfortably familiar piece of furniture. Abramson remained standing, too, shuffling through the scrolls in the satchel he carried. He dropped one, and Harry immediately bent to retrieve it. A pair of stodgy, sturdy shoes walked into view, and he had a moment's trepidation as his memory tried to place them. The shoes. The sofa. *Oh shite,* he thought, swallowing audibly as he rose, the scroll forgotten in his hand, his gaze slowly traveling up the witch's body.

"Thank you for meeting with us," Abramson said, offering his hand to the witch. "I'm Harlan Abramson, and this is my client, Harry Potter."

The witch smiled, grasping Abramson's hand firmly with stubby fingers.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Abramson. Mr. Potter and I are already acquainted," she said with a girlish giggle. "Oh, but where are my manners? I didn't introduce myself."

She looked at Harry, smiling sweetly.

"Dolores Umbridge, Ministry-appointed marriage mediator."

" – and it just got worse from there," Harry moaned, his hands shielding his eyes. He heard Hermione snicker and peeked through his fingers, bristling when he saw both Hermione and

Draco fighting to hold back laughter. "Be serious! This is terrible."

Draco couldn't stem his hilarity any longer, and the room rang with his delighted laughter. Hermione joined him, her wholehearted giggle breaking through Harry's defenses, bringing a smile to his face as well.

"Really, though," he said, trying to school his face into a serious expression. "It was bad."

His attempt to appear stern set Draco and Hermione off into fresh gales of laughter, both of their faces flushed.

"I'm sorry," Hermione breathed, trying to stop laughing. "I'm sorry. You're right. It *is* terrible. But really, Harry, from Undersecretary to marriage mediator? That has to be the biggest demotion in Ministry history!"

Harry just shook his head as Hermione's words made Draco laugh harder, tears escaping from his sparkling grey eyes. He puckered his lips, making an attempt at being serious, but his lips refused to keep the position. Draco's cheeks ached, his side cramping in protest as he collapsed into a fit of giggles.

Harry gave in, his green eyes softening as his rich chuckle joined the others. He rolled his eyes, shrugging.

"OK, yes," he admitted. "It's funny. And never in a million years would it have happened to anyone but *me."*

"Oh Harry," Hermione laughed, sending him a sympathetic glance, still smiling. "You have to give us a Pensieve memory of that. You just *have* to. I can't imagine coming face to face with those shoes and not falling over."

Draco sat up, breathing deeply. Once he was back in control, he wiped his eyes, sighing.

"She wasn't that bad, you know," he said, shrugging.

"Oh, wasn't so bad, was she, Mr. Inquisitorial Squad?" Harry mocked, narrowing his eyes.

"Hem, hem," Hermione said, her voice breathy and high. "Ministry of Magic Decree Number 73, Draco Malfoy is hereby banned from Harry Potter's bed for making offensive comments!"

Harry laughed, and Draco threw a pillow at Hermione. She caught it and shot him a mock-offended look before launching it at Harry's unsuspecting head.

"Your decrees have no jurisdiction in my bedroom, Granger," Draco growled, winking.

"I think it has some merit, Dray," Harry gasped, clutching his side from the effort of laughing so

hard. He grinned, enjoying the first purely happy moment he'd had in awhile. "Then again, I suppose that punishes *me,* too."

"And then she said she was going to recommend that the case be returned to the court, because Ginny and I were at an impasse," Harry said, still stunned from his last meeting with Umbridge and Abramson.

"She *did*?" Draco asked, leaning in to hand Pansy a glass of water with a straw.

"I couldn't believe it myself," Harry said, his eyes wide. "She was totally fair."

Pansy snorted, handing the glass back to Draco.

"She was always fair to *us*," she said, smiling at Draco. "I personally had no problem with your lifetime ban from Quidditch."

Harry laughed, shaking his head good-naturedly at the witch. She was still in St. Mungo's, but the past week had been a good one; she was having regular therapy sessions with one of the hospital's Mind-Healers, and she was on a few mood-regulating potions that seemed to help keep her darker thoughts at bay. She was still angry about her position, but she'd promised Harry and Draco that she was no longer having thoughts about suicide.

"Well, I'm glad," Pansy said, smoothing the blankets over her legs. "Go back to court and put that bitch in Azkaban."

"I'll do my best," Harry said seriously, watching Pansy carefully. "Are you sure you d –"

"I am," she said quickly, cutting him off. "I don't want this –" she swept a hand over her growing belly "– out there anymore than it already is. I'd rather everyone believe that drivel in the *Prophet* that I'm plotting against her with you than the truth."

Draco's eyes narrowed, but he made a vague sound of agreement. Harry nodded, vowing to himself he'd see Ginny punished for what she did to Pansy, too, even if it wasn't Ministry-sanctioned.

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Chapter: 18

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. I don't claim they're mine, and you don't sue. Deal?

"As you can see, Madam Bones, the mediator's report was clear," Abramson said, waving Umbridge's thick report in the air as he approached the dais. "She believes there is no hope for negotiation between my client and Miss Weasley, especially since she agrees the marriage was never valid because the Marriage Bond never solidified."

"Objection!" Giltrough said, his eyes narrowing as he rose. "The mediator has no jurisdiction over the matter of the Marriage Bond. Her comments are irrelevant."

Madam Bones studied the parchment in front of her, frowning slightly as she nodded. Ginny's lawyer sat back down, his face stony.

"Sustained." She waved her wand, deleting Abramson's last statement from the official court record. "Please stick to the report as it was filed, Mr. Abramson."

Abramson nodded, looking contrite, and Harry turned his head to hide his grin. The lawyer had warned Harry he would be making a lot of these "missteps" today, bringing as much circumstantial evidence to light as he could get away with, like Umbridge's confession that she agreed with them about Harry's allegedly invalid marriage.

Apparently the time she spent in St. Mungo's after the centaurs attacked her did some good, he thought, still marveling at how the Umbridge he and Ginny had met with last week differed from the toady, simpering, evil woman he knew at Hogwarts. *She was worlds away from the woman who made me write lines with a Blood Quill,* he mused, resolving to send her a new doily for her office couch or something to show his appreciation after the trial ended.

His attention drifted back to the trial, and he was surprised to see that Abramson had finished his remarks and was ceding the floor to Ginny's lawyer. The full Wizengamot was not present; this was a hearing to determine if the case had been adequately resolved in mediation.

"Mr. Potter approached the mediation process much like he approached his marriage to Mrs. Potter," Giltrough said, throwing a disdainful look over his shoulder at Harry. "He forced his own agenda, often steamrolling over Mrs. Potter's objections, using his dominant personality and his fame to sway opinion in his own favor."

Oh yes, Harry thought, biting the inside of his lip to prevent a smile. *Let's talk about how much Umbridge appreciates my fame.* He unconsciously smoothed the back of his hand with a finger, remembering the scars that used to mar the skin there.

"Mr. Potter has shown a blatant disregard for the court's wish, which was to seriously pursue mediation to negotiate a settlement with Mrs. Potter," the lawyer continued, his voice becoming more indignant as he built up steam. "The court should consider awarding –"

"Motion to proceed to trial granted," Madam Bones said sharply, cutting Giltrough off quite effectively.

"Madam Chief Warlock, I must object –"

"Your objection has been noted, Mr. Giltrough, and my decision has been made. You may remember *this court* expressed concerns about entering the mediation process in the first place in such a contentious and, frankly, disturbing case," she said sternly, leaving Giltrough gaping.

"The trial will resume in a week's time," she continued, glaring at both sides of the room. "There will be no more interruptions. Come prepared to present your final remarks."

"Final remarks!" Giltrough cried, forgetting propriety. He paled when the Chief Warlock narrowed her eyes at him. "Please forgive my outburst, Madam Bones, but I find myself shocked by your instructions. We've barely begun presenting evidence in this case!"

Harry's green eyes were practically dancing, his pulse quickening. It sounded like Madam Bones thought the Wizengamot had heard enough evidence to rule; he was confident it would be in his favor.

"There is a separate matter of custody –"

Madam Bones stood, her robes swirling around her feet as she turned toward the door at the back of the dais. Harry knew the door led to her chambers; he and Abramson had been there the day before when they filed their motion to continue the trial.

"Which is neither here nor there," she said dismissively, nodding at the guard who opened the door to let her pass through. "That is a separate matter for a different court. We reconvene after Yule. If you aren't prepared to begin closing remarks, you'll be held in contempt."

"And then she told him she'd hold him in contempt if he didn't present his closing remarks when the court is back in session after Yule!" Harry recounted, grinning as he lifted a forkful of pasta to his mouth.

Hermione tore off a piece of bread, munching on it thoughtfully as she mulled everything over.

"Why are you able to talk about this, Harry?" she asked, her expression quizzical.

Harry shrugged, twirling a piece of pasta on his fork. Tizzy had made one of his favorites: fettuccini with roasted garlic sauce.

"I could talk about the mediation too, remember?" he said, washing down another bite with a sip of Pinot Grigio from Draco's California winery. "I think the secrecy spells must apply only to the actual trial."

They finished the meal in companionable silence, simply enjoying the food and the outstanding wine. One of Draco's executives had made the trip to California a few weeks ago to investigate

the failing winery. He'd come back with several cases of wine and a report as thick as Hagrid's arm about why the small winery was losing money. Harry had quickly lost interest when Draco explained the problems the American winery was having, zoning out as soon as his fiancé began talking animatedly about absorption costing, gap analysis and working capital.

All that matters to me is the wine is excellent, he thought, his mind a bit muddled from the bottle he and Hermione had already finished. *Alright, mostly me. The bottle* I *finished.* He laughed, drawing a perplexed look from Hermione.

Harry grabbed their empty wineglasses in one hand, snagging a fresh bottle in the other. He bent his arm to get a closer look at the label; this one was a Rosé. He winked suggestively at Hermione, leading her to the drawing room. They had the house to themselves; Draco was working late, and Narcissa was dining with a few of her contacts in the Ministry, trying to find a way to get the charges against Lucius dismissed. They'd been able to keep him out of Azkaban so far, filing an enormous pile of motions that left the Ministry no choice but to keep Lucius in a holding cell there instead. His trial would likely be over by the time they sorted through all the technical objections his legal team had managed to draft. *That's the hope, at any rate,* Harry thought glumly, his worry for Draco's father seeping into his slightly buzzed consciousness.

He uncorked the wine, pouring a glass for each of them before plopping down on the sofa. He sampled his drink, allowing the slightly dry wine to roll over his tongue.

"How's Pansy doing?" Hermione asked, tucking her legs up underneath her in a comfortable chair near the fire.

Harry took another sip of wine, pausing to think before answering.

"She's doing as well as can be expected, I suppose," he said slowly, shrugging lightly. "She's made a lot of progress with the Mind-Healers, and the baby is healthy. They said she might be able to come home in a day or two."

He met Hermione's gaze, smiling a little.

"She seemed excited about that, actually. I guess the Manor house-elves used to really get into decorating for Yule. She and Draco were talking about putting all the old decorations out so we'd all get into a festive mood."

"She's going to stay here?"

Harry took another drink of his wine, nodding as he swallowed.

"That's the plan. Narcissa says Tizzy has some kind of bond with Pansy. That's how she knew about – well, it's how she knew something was wrong with Pansy a few weeks ago," Harry said, gesturing vaguely with his wine glass. Hermione wondered how much he'd actually had to drink. "Draco thinks it would be good for Pansy to be here, and I like the idea of having her close so

Ginny can't fuck with her anymore."

"Who's fucking with whom?" Draco asked, walking into the room and snagging the glass of wine out of Harry's hand, taking a deep swallow. Harry's mouth watered as he watched Draco's throat work as he took another drink.

Hermione smirked, easily following Harry's train of thought. *There's no denying it,* she admitted, her eyes drawn to the blond in front of her. *Draco's gorgeous. Lucky Harry. Hell, lucky Draco. Harry's gorgeous, too.* She smiled at the thought, pleased with the slight tingle watching the two of them sent down her spine. She hadn't been sure she'd ever feel the heady rush of desire again, but the papers an owl from her lawyer had delivered earlier that afternoon had broken the dam she'd inadvertently pushed all those feelings behind.

"I, for one, am free to fuck whomever I'd like," she said, toasting Draco and Harry with her glass, a radiant smile lighting her face.

Harry jumped up, bounding across the room to pull her out of the chair for a hug. He squeezed her tightly, lifting her off the ground.

"You never said! Hermione, this is wonderful news!" he said, swinging her around. Draco laughed as droplets of the pale wine spattered on the ancient Aubusson covering the floor, shaking his head at Harry's complete disregard for propriety and antique furnishings. "When did you hear? Why didn't you say something right away?"

Hermione beat against Harry's chest ineffectually with a fisted hand in an attempt to win her release, surrendering when Draco walked up to kiss her cheek, sliding the half-full glass of wine out of her other hand. She relaxed against Harry, enjoying his exuberant reaction.

"Just this afternoon," she said, laughing as Harry dipped her, her long brown hair grazing the carpet. "I wanted to wait for Draco to get home first."

"I'm glad you did. It's wonderful news. We'll have the house-elves prepare a celebratory feast for us tomorrow; your divorce and Pansy's homecoming," Draco said, taking a drink out of Hermione's glass.

Harry let Hermione go, grabbing her hand and twirling her around the carpet, dancing to some imaginary tune in his head.

"The Healers are releasing her?" He took Draco's hand, drawing the reluctant blond into their impromptu dance.

"For a probationary period, yes," Draco said, leaning in to steal a quick kiss. "How much have you had to drink?"

Harry tried to look innocent, but Hermione quirked a brow at him.

"He's had nearly two bottles," she said, her tone slightly critical.

"Market research," Harry said with a laugh, waggling his eyebrows at Draco. "You *did* say you wanted me to be more involved in Malfoy Industries."

Draco pulled Harry in closer, slowly lowering his head until their lips were almost touching. Draco smiled as he saw Harry's green eyes darken with desire, hearing the dark-haired man's breath hitch when his lips hesitated above Harry's. When their lips finally met, Harry moaned softly, pressing closer to Draco so their bodies were flush. Hermione squeaked slightly, looking away. Blood rushed to her face, and she quickly backed away from the couple and headed for the door.

"Dinner tomorrow, Hermione," Draco said softly, still watching Harry.

Hermione made an indecipherable noise, fleeing the room. She raised a hand to her hot face as she neared her own suite, breathing deeply to try to calm her racing pulse. *Yes,* she thought ruefully, returning to her earlier inner commentary. *Harry and Draco are* both *very lucky.* She slid her door closed, pausing briefly before grabbing a book from her bedside table and settling down in a chair near the window. She opened the book, trying to concentrate on the words on the page. Images of Harry and Draco's intimate kiss kept pushing to the front of her mind, and Hermione sighed. She *definitely* needed to get out more.

"Mmm, love you," Harry whispered, burying his face in Draco's warm neck. The pair had resumed their dance, gently swaying together around the room, their arms locked around each other.

"I love you, too," Draco said, pressing a kiss to Harry's head.

They continued to move around the room, and Harry snuggled closer to Draco, breathing in his comforting, spicy scent. After another turn in front of the fireplace, Harry's head rose, his brows drawn together in confusion. The room was filled with soft, haunting strains of music.

Feeling Harry tense, Draco drew the man back into his embrace, tightening his arms around him as they continued to dance.

"It's Debussy," he said, unconcerned by the sudden addition of music from an unseen source. "'Clair de Lune'. Beautiful, isn't it?"

Harry relaxed into Draco's embrace, the wine providing a pleasant haze that prevented his mind from worrying about the intrusion overmuch. He nodded, letting his eyes drift closed as the gentle swell of the music surrounded them.

"It's one of my favorites. So sad, but so peaceful," he said, stopping in front of a large gilt-framed mirror across from the fireplace. He spun Harry around, pulling him back so they could both

stare at their reflection.

Draco lowered his head, his eyes still locked on Harry's in the mirror, and tasted the salty skin at Harry's neck. Harry shifted, giving the blond freer access to the sensitive skin, his lips parting in a soft sigh as he moved.

"Beautiful," Draco whispered, tasting Harry again.

"Mmm," Harry agreed, his green eyes mesmerized by the sight in front of him. "It's a nice piece."

Harry felt the rumble of Draco's chuckle against his back, watching as Draco's grey eyes warmed.

"It is," Draco conceded, kissing his way up Harry's neck. "But I was talking about us."

The music grew louder, and Draco released Harry, laughing. He grabbed the dark-haired man's hand, Apparating them to their suite.

"I think Tizzy disapproves of our more public lovemaking," Draco said, kicking off his shoes and unfastening his robes, letting them slip to the floor as he made his way to the bed.

"Tizzy?" Harry asked, still disoriented from the kisses and the sudden Apparition.

"The music," Draco said, holding out a hand to help pull Harry into the bed. "I listened to that song over and over again when I was waiting for you to make up your mind. I think she played it to remind me that everything worked out in the end. She always told me it would."

He met Harry's lust-darkened eyes, moving so their faces were just centimeters apart. He shifted at the last moment, his lips ghosting over Harry's closed eyelids.

"What does that have to do with where we make love?" Harry asked, sighing at the tender kisses, angling his face so Draco's lips would move lower.

"Didn't you notice it get louder?"

Harry just shook his head, his eyes still clouded, his mind in a daze. Draco laughed again, rolling so Harry was underneath him.

"I think you'd better let me drive this time," he teased, parting Harry's robes with deft fingers, tugging him up so he could slide them off. Draco ran his tongue over Harry's straining erection, pulling back when Harry whimpered and thrust up, seeking more contact. "You're a bit muddled, I think, from all that market research."

"It's not the wine," Harry muttered, shuddering under Draco's gentle ministrations.

"Not the wine, eh?" Draco repeated, amused. Harry watched as Draco's lips parted, his mouth opening to engulf Harry's cock, swallowing it down to the root.

"No, definitely not," Harry gasped, arching at the sensation.

Draco's soft tongue swirled around his length, and Harry moaned as he began to suck gently. Long fingers gently cupped Harry's balls, kneading them with exquisite care. Harry was too far gone to protest too much when Draco's tempo increased, his fingers tightening their hold on Harry's sac slightly as the dark-haired man's body went rigid.

"Oh, fuck, Draco," Harry gasped, desperately trying to stave off his release. "No – Dray –"

Colors burst behind Harry's eyelids as his orgasm overtook him, his body spasming as he pumped his hot release into Draco's waiting mouth. Draco didn't move, his tongue still working over the softening cock until Harry made a noise of protest, pushing him away from his now over-sensitive member.

Draco pressed a final kiss to Harry's cock, climbing back up the bed to snuggle against him. Draco grabbed Harry's hands, which were trailing down his body.

"Let me," he whispered, his breath tickling Harry's ear. Harry shot him a questioning look, but Draco merely smiled, cuddling closer to his fiancé. "Have I ever told you how absolutely fetching you look when you come?"

Harry blinked sleepily, shaking his head. He reached out for Draco again, only to have his hand batted away. He sat up slightly, his eyes widening when he saw Draco stroking himself.

"Fuck, that's hot," Harry whispered, his protest at Draco taking matters into his own hands – literally – forgotten.

"Mmm," Draco groaned, his eyes shut. He bit his lip as he fisted himself harder, his breathing becoming more erratic.

"Draco, let me –"

"No," Draco gasped, angling his body away from Harry. His strokes became more frenzied, and moments later his hand was covered in pulses of hot come, his teeth gritted as he came. "Oh Merlin, fuck."

His hand dropped to the bed, and he didn't open his eyes, even after Harry cast a quick Scourgify on both of them, Draco's nose wrinkling slightly at the unpleasant tingling feeling.

"What the hell, Dray?" Harry asked, turning over on his side so he could face Draco, the blond's pale skin glowing slightly in the dark room.

"Mmm?" Draco responded, stretching sleepily.

"Dray?"

"Tired," Draco mumbled, burrowing deeper into the blankets. "Just faster that way."

Harry laughed, relief rushing through him. For a moment, he'd wondered if Draco didn't want him to touch him.

"Night, Draco," Harry said, the tension sliding from his muscles, suddenly sleepy himself.

"Mmm," Draco answered, already mostly asleep.

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Chapter: 19

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They belong to JKR.

The sound of house-elves arguing filled the drawing room with shrill shrieks, drawing Narcissa out of her study down the hall. She passed two more in the entryway, hanging garland, before poking her head into the large room, the levitating Christmas tree that swooped past missing her by mere centimeters.

"Mistress Narcissa!" Tizzy squeaked, horrified. "Oh, Mistress Narcissa, we is sorry!"

Narcissa ran a hand across her pale hair, making sure it hadn't been knocked out of place. The tight chignon was still intact. Three terrified house-elves quivered before her, their squabble over where to place the tree forgotten. She stepped fully into the room, her gaze sweeping across the festive decorations that adorned nearly every surface.

"By the window," she said, motioning with an outstretched hand.

The elf levitating the tree quickly complied, settling the tree down in front of the large frosty window at the opposite end of the room. Tizzy's lips pursed together in approval; it was exactly where she'd been fighting to place the tree for the last ten minutes.

"A word, Tizzy?" Narcissa said coolly, and the house-elf's ears lowered, her large eyes widening. She nodded meekly, following Narcissa out into the entryway.

Narcissa bent slightly, so her words would carry only to the diminutive house-elf in front of her. Tizzy straightened her back, ready to accept whatever punishment her mistress meted out.

"I'd like another tree in my suite, please," Narcissa whispered, her eyes dancing. "A smaller one, of course. I want the room decorated completely, and dinner for two served there tonight."

Surprised, Tizzy nodded, her wizened face confused. It was not her place to question, however, so she readied herself to Disapparate and see to the arrangements.

"Tizzy," Narcissa said, reaching out to grasp the elf's thin arm. Startled, Tizzy stopped, looking up at Narcissa. "Master Lucius is coming home tonight, but I don't want the others to know. I want it to be a surprise for Christmas morning. Alright?"

A smile broke across Tizzy's small face, and she nodded enthusiastically. Master Lucius, home at last! She hurried off to the kitchens to instruct the elves to prepare his favorite foods. They were already busy with preparations for the feast Master Draco had ordered for the arrival of Mistress Pansy and Mistress Hermione's divorce from that vile Weasley man – Tizzy's nose wrinkled in distaste – but she was sure they would manage the extra work. She was so excited she could dance – the Manor filled with people, festive decorations going up all around her; it was just like Yule used to be.

"The trial is still scheduled to proceed next month, Mr. Malfoy," the stern-looking Auror warned as he opened Lucius' cell, stepping back so the older man could pass. "You're only being released because Ministry cells are over-crowded, and your wife was able to post a considerable bail for you."

Lucius inclined his head at the guard, keeping a tight rein on his emotions, his face a mask of calm derision. The Auror sighed, mentally acknowledging that they were likely letting Lucius Malfoy slip through their fingers again. Even he knew the charges had no merit; letting Malfoy leave the Ministry at this point was tantamount to releasing him for good.

"We'll be watching you, Malfoy," he said, his voice hard. "One step out of line, and not even your overpaid lawyers will be able to keep you out of Azkaban."

"Of course," Lucius drawled, his voice velvety smooth. He focused on that thought – seeing his family once a month, spending the rest of his days locked in a cold, filthy cell on that godforsaken rock – to help him keep his tone even. It wouldn't do to hex the Auror seconds after the return of his wand, or worse, grin like a fool at the prospect of spending Christmas with the people he loved. "My toes will remain firmly inside the lines."

The Auror rolled his eyes, sighing heavily. He'd put up with Lucius Malfoy's condescension and sarcasm for several weeks now. At least the man's release meant a reprieve from that.

"See that they do," he retorted, glaring at Malfoy's retreating form.

"Harry, have you heard whether or not George –"

"I don't want to talk about it until after Yule," Harry said, shoving a glass of eggnog into Hermione's hand. "Taste this. Is it too strong?"

She took a careful swallow, nearly spitting it back into the glass.

"Yes, then," he muttered absently, narrowing his eyes at the large punch bowl on the table.

It was the first time he'd tried to make the holiday drink on his own; usually Ginny or Molly was in charge of the eggnog, a Weasley family favorite. He refused to give up the tradition just because it stemmed from them, and he'd spent the last twenty minutes trying to get the perfect ratio of eggs and rum. He waved his hand, Vanishing the liquid, before calling Tizzy to bring more ingredients from the kitchen to start over – again.

"Too much rum," Hermione rasped, her throat burning from the small sip she'd taken. She grimaced, remembering the slimy texture of Harry's last batch, when he hadn't separated the eggs. "Better, though."

Harry made a small sound of agreement, studying the now-empty punch bowl thoughtfully. He could have sworn Molly's recipe called for an entire bottle of bourbon – though now that he thought about it, she usually made much larger quantities.

Tizzy appeared bearing a tray of eggs, milk, cream, sugar and several kinds of alcohol. She lowered the tray to the table, holding up a spindly hand when Harry came near.

"No, Master Harry," Tizzy said, shaking her head forcefully. "I is letting you try, but you is not doing it right."

The house-elf levitated a dozen eggs above the bowl, flicking her hands out to crack and separate them, making sure only the yolks fell. She Vanished the egg shells, directing the whites to a separate bowl, concentrating on using her magic to whip the egg yolks while adding sugar to the thickening mixture. Hermione watched, fascinated, as Tizzy worked, the egg whites beat themselves to stiff peaks without a second glance from the house-elf. A few measures of bourbon and another golden liquor – *Brandy! That's what I forgot,* Harry thought, grinning – went in next, then the milk and cream. Tizzy waved a hand, directing the egg whites to levitate into the mixture, folding them together with a flick of her finger. The house-elf finished with a flourish, sprinkling ground nutmeg on top.

Tizzy filled two glasses, levitating them to Harry and Hermione. Harry took a sip of his, his smile growing, and Hermione reluctantly lifted hers to her lips, a small sigh of relief escaping when she tasted the concoction. Harry raised an eyebrow at the sound, but Hermione merely shrugged, taking another drink.

Draco chose that moment to stroll into the room, his arm around Pansy. He held her large valise

in his other hand, stooping slightly to place it on the floor so he could take her cloak. Tizzy retrieved both items, taking Draco's heavy wool cloak as well, disappearing to prepare Pansy's rooms.

"Drinking again, I see?" he teased, drawing Pansy closer to the roaring fire. She looked hesitant, as though she were reluctant to break up the homey scene. "Tizzy's eggnog?"

Hermione giggled at that, and Harry blushed slightly. Draco didn't waste time wondering what the exchange was about; those two had so many private jokes and little histories together that he'd never catch up, even if he asked.

"Welcome, Pansy," Harry said, enveloping the witch in a warm hug. He let his arm drop to her burgeoning waist, leading her toward a comfortable chair near the Christmas tree. Hundreds of tiny fairy lights burned, the reflections dancing off Harry's glasses as he faced her. His easy smile turned to a horrified grimace when he realized Pansy was crying, her wet eyes traveling around the festive room.

"I'm sorry," Harry said quickly, gently trying to guide her away from the tree, his arm still around her waist. "Draco said – well, we thought you'd like to celebrate Yule with us – sorry – I guess we weren't thinking –"

"No, no, it's perfect," Pansy said, smiling through her tears. "I love it. It's just the way I remember it. We used to come here for Yule when I was a child. I love it. Thank you," she said, holding a hand out to bring Draco to their sides, "both of you."

"Don't thank us," Draco said quickly, shooting a smile at Hermione, who was standing nearby, looking uncomfortable. "Hermione made most of the arrangements. I'm not even sure what I bought anyone; Hermione took care of everything."

Pansy nodded, her eyes warm as they sought the other witch out. They had never been friends, and Hermione's visits to the hospital had been mostly to deliver quick updates to Pansy when Harry or Draco couldn't make it. From the look they exchanged, however, it was clear they at least had a chance at becoming closer.

"Thank you, then, Hermione," Pansy said, her voice clear. "Everything looks lovely."

"It was my pleasure," Hermione said, returning Pansy's smile. "I'm so happy you could be here with us."

Pansy ran a hand down her belly absently, unconsciously rubbing small circles to ease some faint pain or twinge. Draco hurried to fetch a chair, and Harry grabbed her by the elbow, lowering her into it.

"Oh honestly, I won't break," she chided, settling into the chair nonetheless. She waited until everyone else had found a seat, leaning forward slightly to whisper to Hermione. "So, living with

Harry and Draco. What has *that* been like? I rather imagine you've seen things that would make even a *Playwitch* subscriber blush, unless Draco's learned to be more discreet than he was when we lived in Slytherin …"

Draco had been a bit put out when his mother declined to join them for dinner, claiming she wasn't in the mood to entertain. It was Christmas Eve, and he hated the thought of his mother wallowing alone in her rooms almost as much as the thought of his father, alone and bored, whiling away mindless hours in a Ministry holding cell.

He looked around the brightly lit dining room, pushing away the slight guilty feeling gnawing at him. He'd done everything he could to get his father freed, but nothing had worked. He forced a smile, squeezing Harry's hand tightly under the table. Harry returned the gesture, steeling Draco's resolve to put things he couldn't change aside for the moment and enjoy spending the holiday with the man he loved and their friends.

Pansy's musical laugh – a sound Draco was pleased to hear – was joined by Blaise Zabini's rich bass, the two of them entertaining Luna and Neville Longbottom with stories of Draco's childhood antics. Theo was spending a rare night off with them, too, looking pleased with himself as he chatted with Lavender Brown, a close friend of Hermione's.

Hermione was picking at her food, glancing around the room as though looking for someone. Oliver Wood kept trying to engage her in conversation, but she clearly wasn't interested in whatever it was he was saying. After watching Hermione's glance stray to the empty doorway for the fourth time in as many minutes, Draco took pity on her, standing and tapping his fork against his wineglass lightly, gaining everyone's attention.

"We have a surprise waiting on the lawn," he said, sharing a significant look with Harry, who quickly excused himself and darted out the door. "If you'd all gather your cloaks and follow me, we can continue our celebration outside."

Draco just smiled innocently at everyone's puzzled looks, nodding approvingly as Blaise bent to help Pansy out of her chair. He waited until everyone was bundled up before leading them outside. They walked in relative silence for several minutes, the only sound their footsteps crunching on the frozen grass.

"Just one thing," he said, pausing before they rounded the corner. He beckoned Hermione to the front, pulling a silk blindfold from his pocket. "Your Christmas present awaits. If you would?"

With a slightly uncomfortable smile, Hermione leaned forward, allowing Draco to tie the blindfold around her head. He was careful to keep her hair out of the knot, smoothing it down after he was finished. He bent, his lips warm against her ear in contrast to the cold night air. "I know I could have used a spell, but this is so much more dramatic, don't you think?"

She laughed, taking Draco's hand so he could guide her across the lawn. The rest of the group followed closely behind, chattering in excitement while they speculated what Hermione's present

could be. The talk lessened as they neared the Quidditch pitch, everyone goggling at what they saw before them.

"This is from both me and Harry," Draco said, gripping Hermione's upper arms so he could position her just so. A whispered spell had her wobbling on her feet slightly, suddenly off-balance. He held her until she recovered, whipping off the blindfold as soon as she was steady again.

Hermione blinked as her eyes adjusted to the unexpected light, looking down to find her boots had been Transfigured into ice skates. When she raised her head, she saw Harry and Viktor standing on an ice rink in the middle of the Manor's Quidditch pitch. Harry skated to the side, wand out to provide everyone with skates. Only Pansy stayed off the ice, settling herself into a comfortable chair that had been put there for just that reason.

Hermione remained motionless, her eyes wide as she watched Viktor hold his hand out for her to join him. She turned to Draco, her voice pitched low enough to ensure he was the only one who would hear.

"You got me *Viktor Krum* for Yule?" she asked, incredulous.

Draco's laugh rang out, rich and deep and full of warmth and amusement. He gave Hermione a slight push to move her toward the rink, rolling his eyes. "No, we got you a *skating rink* for Yule, Hermione," he said, his tone slightly exasperated. "Harry said you'd mentioned wanting one."

Understanding lit Hermione's face, and Draco realized the woman hadn't even noticed what Viktor had been standing on – she'd seen only him, not his surroundings. She blushed deeply, her gaze flicking to the Transfigured skates on her feet again.

"Oh," she said, embarrassed.

Draco laughed again, pulling her close for a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Of course we got you Viktor Krum for Yule, Hermione," he whispered, pushing her in that direction again. "Go, have fun."

It felt as though they'd only been outside for minutes, but Hermione's cold, stiff fingers told a different story. She flexed them inside her wool gloves, cold despite the Warming charms that blanketed the ice rink. Most of the others had stopped skating long ago, preferring instead to curl up on the comfortable chairs and benches that lined the rink, wrapped up in heavy blankets and clutching mugs of spiced cider and hot cocoa.

"Should we go in?" Viktor asked, looking at her in concern. "You look cold, Hermione."

She still marveled at how much his English had improved, his accent barely noticeable anymore. She almost missed the endearing way he used to say her name, but hearing it– even pronounced

correctly – in that smooth baritone still sent shivers down her spine.

She looked up, watching the stars twinkle brightly against the inky sky. The night had been absolutely perfect, and she hated to see it end. She sighed, feeling the wintry air burn slightly in her lungs as she did.

"I suppose we should," she said, her voice full of regret. "Are you staying here at the Manor?"

She couldn't disguise the slightly hopeful tone of her voice, and she looked away quickly, worried Viktor might see something in her eyes she wasn't ready to admit yet.

"No, I don't live far," he answered, rubbing her cold fingers between his palms.

"Oh," she said, disappointed.

"I'll be back for Christmas dinner tomorrow," he said quickly, sensing her changing mood. "You won't even have the chance to miss me."

Hermione smiled, her face lighting up. She let him take her gloved hand again, leading her over toward the group.

"I'm sure I'll miss you," she said, flashing her teeth as her smile widened, "but now at least I have something to look forward to."

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Chapter: 20

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They don't belong to me, but I'd like to think they enjoy my company.

Author's note: I just posted "Harry's wedding day", which is an extra scene that gives some history for The Next Best Thing as a thanks to everyone who has reviewed – we hit 100 earlier this week, and that's just unspeakably awesome! You guys rock. Enjoy your present! *grins*

Harry and Draco sat amid a disaster zone of wrapping paper and boxes, cuddled up together on the sofa. Tizzy had tried to clean up the mess, but the men had waved her away; they wanted to be alone, savoring the first Yule they'd been able to openly spend together.

"Have I told you how much I loved your present?" Draco asked, his lips against Harry's neck,

nuzzling against him.

"Mmm," Harry sighed, giggling slightly when Draco's words tickled against his skin. "You might have done."

He could feel Draco smile against his neck, soft lips curving up in the irresistible grin Harry was a little sad he couldn't see.

"Maybe I should *show* you," Draco purred, his tongue licking an enticing pattern across the warm, salty skin.

"His name wasn't the only one on that present, you know," Pansy piped up, laughing in delight as her sudden appearance made Draco growl.

"She's right, you know," Harry said, playfully pushing Draco away. "You should be lavishing all this attention on *her*, not me."

Draco's eyes narrowed in mock annoyance as his gaze swept over to Pansy, who had taken a seat nearby. He quirked an eyebrow at Harry, whose own eyes widened at the innuendo.

"Oops! No, not *that* kind of attention," he said quickly, sending an apologetic grimace to Pansy. She grinned and shrugged. "But you should definitely be catering to any other whim she has."

Pansy laughed again, and both men smiled at the sound. It had been weeks since her suicide attempt, and they were still so worried that she might fall back into the deep depression, especially since she was now living a life perilously close to the one she'd thought she would back then: pregnant and living in Malfoy Manor. The only hitch, of course, was that she wasn't pregnant with Draco's baby, and that Draco was madly in love with Harry, not her.

"I'm fine," she said, letting Harry off the hook. "Actually, I'm a little better than fine. Theo said he'd stop by after his shift at St. Mungo's today."

Harry's brow furrowed, and he wondered why having the Healer come by had boosted her mood so much. "Are you feeling alright?"

Draco answered before Pansy could, lightly swatting Harry across the top of his head.

"She's perfectly fine, you dolt," he said, the censure in his voice tempered with good-natured exasperation. "Theo's coming by to see her."

Draco waited for understanding to hit Harry, disappointed when no flash of recognition lit his green eyes.

"*Theo* is coming by to see Pansy. *Theo*, who just saw her last night. Coming here, today, to see her. *Again.*"

"Oh!" Harry said, his cheeks flushing as he finally cottoned on.

Pansy's delighted laugh more than made up for the embarrassment, and Harry made a show of rolling his eyes at both of them. It seemed as though their little Christmas Eve matchmaking attempt had been wildly successful; not only had they brought Hermione and Viktor together, apparently they'd also made an unintentional match between Pans and Theo, too.

Well good for her, Harry thought, grinning as Pansy launched into an in-depth recitation of the letter Theo had sent her earlier that morning.

"I still can't believe Pansy did this," Draco said, staring at the scroll in his hand.

He and Harry had arrived at the Ministry before it had opened, waiting impatiently for the Department of Magical Contracts and Documents to open so they could file the paperwork Pansy and Harry had presented to Draco for Yule.

"I know. It was her idea. So was the other," he said, grimacing slightly as he remembered his own Yule gift, a deposition that implicated Ginny in Pansy's surrogacy and several months of Polyjuiced impersonations. Both were highly illegal. "I'm glad she went to Abramson for help."

Pansy had spent several tearful hours arguing with her family a few days before Yule – her parents were pushing her to come home, where she could wait out the rest of the pregnancy away from the public eye. They'd been against Pansy pressing charges from the beginning, worried about the toll such a disgraceful trial might take on their family's reputation. She'd been in agreement with them until just a few days ago, when she'd realized that not testifying against Ginny and her family put Harry's custody claim at risk.

"I wish there was some other way," Harry said, his grip on Draco's hand tightening as they walked through the nearly empty building.

Most of the nonessential offices were closed the week between Yule and New Year's, and Harry found the empty corridors uncomfortably reminiscent of his disastrous trip to the Department of Mysteries all those years ago. Draco returned the squeeze, a reassuring smile on his face.

"She's doing fine, and she'll be monitored closely by her Mind-Healer if she ever has to testify in a trial," he said, pushing open the door to the Ministry's records repository. "You know what Abramson said. In cases like these, they rarely make the victim testify if they can avoid it."

The tall witch behind the counter had her head buried in the newspaper, nodding her head along to the music coming from her wireless set behind the counter. She clearly wasn't expecting many patrons to come through the day after Yule.

"Excuse me, madam?" Draco said, clearing his throat. Harry suppressed an eye roll as the witch's glance darted from them to the paper, her jaw dropping. He craned his neck to see what idiocy

was in the *Prophet* today; they had been so eager to file the paperwork they'd neglected to check. "We'd like to file a petition."

Her eyes widened comically, and Draco tightened his fingers around Harry's in a silent warning to behave. Draco slid the scroll he carried across the desk, smiling politely as he waited for the witch to take it.

"It's a petition to adopt a child," he said, his voice even.

"Those go to the Department of Young Witch and Wizard Welfare, sir," the witch said quickly, drawn out of her apparent stupor.

"Generally, yes," Draco said, inclining his head. "This instance is different, since the child in question has not yet been born."

Pansy and Harry had both signed the petition, a way to both help Draco stake a claim to the unborn baby and to undermine Ginny's case for custody. Though she wasn't the child's biological mother, Pansy had some rights as its surrogate, and she was officially making her objections to Ginny's custody claim known.

The witch's gaze flicked to Harry, then back to the paper. She gasped slightly as she worked it out – Draco Malfoy was petitioning to adopt Harry Potter's unborn child! *Trying to steal the baby out from under that poor woman, the one Harry Potter is divorcing*, she thought, her eyes hardening as she glared at the two men in front of her. Her lips tightened into an angry line, and she picked up the scroll, putting it in a drawer in her desk.

"Petitions are heard the first of every month," she informed them in a cool professional voice. "No petitions will be heard January 1, due to the holiday. Your lawyer will be informed of the new court date."

Harry opened his mouth to argue, but Draco tugged their joined hands, pulling him away from the desk.

"Thank you, madam," Draco said over his shoulder as they left the room. "Your help is appreciated."

They walked in silence, headed toward the courtroom for what Harry fervently hoped would be the last time – at least, for this case.

"Don't let it get to you," Draco whispered, dropping Harry's hand in favor of swinging an arm around his tense shoulders. "She doesn't know the truth, only what she's read in the *Prophet*. What does it matter what anyone else thinks but us, love?"

Harry relaxed slightly, trying to let go of his anger. The woman's disapproval had been clear on her face, but Draco was right – they didn't know her. Why should her opinion matter? *The only*

opinions that matter today are inside that courtroom, he thought, glancing nervously at the heavy doors that remained shut.

Harry didn't have to wait long – Abramson appeared shortly after he and Draco arrived at the courtroom, a rare smile on his face. He nodded to Draco, placing a reassuring hand on Harry's shoulder.

"Since Madam Bones called for final remarks, there's no way for Mrs. Potter's lawyer to draw this out any longer," he said, excited energy pouring off him in waves. "We may not have the final decision today – the Wizengamot can take as long as it wants in deliberation – but our part will be finished."

Harry nodded, trying to smile confidently. In truth, he didn't feel the slightest bit confident about the outcome. Suddenly he felt foolish for wishing the trial was over so often these last few weeks. *What if they find for Ginny? What if she goes free? What does that mean for our baby?* He didn't even pause to consider that he'd applied the label *ours* to the baby in his mind – he saw the child so clearly as his and Draco's that Ginny's claim to it never registered in anything other than a legal sense. His lips twitched a little at the thought, calm pouring through him as he envisioned sharing the duties of parenthood with Draco. Things would turn out in their favor, because they had to. Harry wouldn't let anything stand in the way of he and Draco protecting their child. *Our baby.*

"The custody claims –"

Abramson held up a hand, cutting Harry off before he could finish.

"Mrs. Potter's claim was filed a few days ago, and there was nothing surprising in it. I'm still confident it won't stand – especially with the deposition we received from Miss Parkinson," he said, his smile thawing the cold dread in Harry's chest a bit. "As to the other claim – I am certain there is nothing to worry about."

Draco's eyebrows rose at Abramson's words, inviting further explanation.

"Mrs. Potter's brother and his wife are concerned for the welfare of the child," he said, his lips quirking even more. "They have agreed to meet with both of you to talk about their concerns."

Harry's eyes widened – what had changed? A week ago, George and Angelina were convinced Harry would be a horrible parent. His only consolation there had been that they'd thought the same of Ginny.

"The office is so chaotic around the holidays," Abramson said with a negligent shrug. "Papers get misfiled all the time. It seems copies of Miss Parkinson's deposition and Mr. Malfoy's adoption petition were, erm, inadvertently sent to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Purely accidental, since those are highly confidential materials."

Draco grinned at Abramson, more certain than ever that the man had been a Slytherin. He'd have to ask some time.

"We followed up immediately after the mistake was discovered, of course," he said, winking at Harry. "We even notified the Ministry of the mix-up. I visited the Weasleys myself just this morning to apologize for the error."

"And?" Harry asked, his heart in his throat, his chest bursting with joy at the anticipated answer.

Abramson shrugged again, digging in his satchel for a scroll, which he handed to Harry.

"Provisionally, of course, since nothing official has been negotiated, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley agreed to drop their custody claim if Mr. Malfoy's adoption paperwork is approved and you agree to pursue sole – not primary – custody of the child," he said, nodding at Harry.

Harry opened his mouth, but found he had no words to express how shocked and happy he was at the news. *George isn't on Ginny's side?* He thought he'd gotten past feeling anything for the Weasley family, but he was inundated with relief that at least part of the family he'd adopted as his own nearly two decades earlier hadn't turned against him.

Abramson dropped his voice, leaning in so only Harry and Draco could hear him.

"Unofficially, they are very sorry for everything their family has put you through, and they hope you will allow them to visit with you and the child occasionally in the future. Mr. Weasley was especially contrite. He asked me to give you that –" Abramson said, nodding to the scroll now clutched in Harry's hand, "—as part of his apology."

Draco reached out to grasp Abramson's hand, pumping it enthusiastically. He knew he was grinning like an idiot, but he couldn't help himself. In his eyes, the biggest obstacle between them and their child had just been lifted. Now all they had to do was decimate Ginny in court today and sit back to watch the fall-out.

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Chapter: 21

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. Not mine.

Draco and Hermione sat together on an uncomfortable bench, warily eying the various members of the Weasley family assembled down the corridor. Molly and Ron had been released from

Auror custody a few weeks earlier after spending several days in a Ministry holding cell awaiting sentencing for contempt of court. Hermione wasn't sure what punishment they'd received, but it obviously worked; they sat in stony silence, both of them keeping their eyes averted.

Bill and Fleur were missing today, as were George and Angelina. Draco's pulse quickened as he thought about Abramson's words earlier that morning – he could barely believe they had dropped their custody claim so easily. He'd come to expect the worst from the Weasley family, but Draco grudgingly admitted perhaps he'd been wrong in judging the family as a whole.

He saw Ron glance up quickly, his eyes passing over Hermione briefly as he scanned the corridor. He hadn't contested their divorce, simply signing the paperwork without comment when Hermione's lawyer delivered it. Draco's eyes narrowed slightly as he thought about it – as much as he wanted to believe it was that easy, his more Slytherin side worried it was all part of some heinous plan Ginny had hatched.

Draco tightened his hold on Hermione's hand, hoping she hadn't noticed her ex-husband's glare. He knew their position would spark gossip among the various reporters and other spectators who had gathered in anticipation of the long-awaited divorce verdict, but he couldn't bring himself to care. *Maybe it will help keep Harry's divorce off the front page tomorrow*, he thought wryly, squeezing Hermione's fingers again. *Suspected Death Eater involved in torrid affair with Muggle-born witch. That should get us above the fold for sure.*

Hermione shifted slightly beside him, their bodies touching from shoulder to knee as they sat huddled together. She, too, knew exactly what that parasite Skeeter would make of their closeness, but, like Draco, she didn't care. Her lips curved into a satisfied smirk as she thought of what Viktor would say about the photos that would inevitably make it into tomorrow's *Prophet.* He knew she and Draco were just good friends, so his reaction would be one of anger toward the reporters, not her. It felt nice to know she could count on him not to be unnecessarily jealous or possessive – it was quite a change to be with someone who could be trusted to always take her side.

Not that I'm with *Viktor,* she reminded herself, biting her lip. *Not yet, at least.* They'd been nearly inseparable for the last week, spending every day and most evenings together. His team was playing against Puddlemere United this afternoon, and Hermione felt a slight twinge of loss at not having him by her side.

Neither Draco nor Hermione had said a word since Harry disappeared into the courtroom nearly half an hour earlier. They had no idea how long closing statements would take, and Draco was prepared to sit there all day if need be. *I wish the trial wasn't closed,* he thought for the hundredth time, fidgeting nervously. Hermione reached over to place a calming hand on his knee, stopping its restless movement.

Narcissa had stayed at the Manor with Lucius, both of them reluctant to appear out in public so early in Lucius' probationary release. Harry had agreed, assuring them he'd Fire-call or send a Patronus as soon as they had any news. Pansy was home with them – no one wanted her

anywhere near Ginny or the rest of the Weasleys.

No one was prepared for the door to bang open suddenly, two grim-faced Aurors striding through. Hermione and Draco both jumped at the sound. The Aurors held the heavy wooden doors open, silently monitoring the growing crowd as another Auror led a slim red-head with her hands bound behind her back through the doorway. *Ginny.* Draco's eyes widened and his heart lurched almost painfully at the sight of Harry's wife being led away by the Aurors, no sign of emotion on her beautiful, pale face. *Does this mean – could they have possibly – did they find her* – Draco's thoughts were a jumble of chaotic images and words, unable to process the unexpected turn of events.

Just before she turned the corner, Ginny paused, looking over her shoulder. The Aurors hesitated, one of them grabbing her elbow to guide her forward. In those brief seconds, Draco saw her eyes find Ron's. She nodded once, and Ron straightened slightly at the signal. No one else seemed to notice the exchange, since everyone else's attention was on Molly Weasley, who was currently sobbing hysterically in Charlie's restraining arms, fighting to follow after her daughter's retreating form.

The courtroom doors opened again, this time to allow Harry and his lawyer to pass through. Abramson's tight expression told Draco volumes, though he was still utterly confused about what was happening. The wizard put his arm around Harry's tense shoulders, drawing him close so he could whisper something in his ear. Harry nodded, looking up to meet Abramson's gaze before the lawyer turned and walked briskly down the corridor.

The reporters descended on Harry, bombarding him with questions about Ginny and the outcome of the trial.

"Is Ginny going to Azkaban, Harry?" a sandy-haired wizard screamed, his Quick-Quotes Quill hovering by Harry's head.

"Are you officially divorced, Harry?" another yelled, her raven ringlets bouncing as she was jostled by the converging crowd, her quill bumping against the pad of parchment she held as she tried to fight for her spot. "Will you be marrying Pansy?"

"Did Ginny really use Dark Magic against you, or was that just a bid for sympathy on your part?" Skeeter's grating voice rose above the others, her face set in a smug sneer. Draco saw Hermione mouth a word that looked like "beetle" at the witch, but Skeeter just shrugged, winking at her. "Did the Wizengamot take your side, Harry? Was your fame enough to condemn an innocent witch to Azkaban to clear the way for you to start a new family?"

Harry bristled at Skeeter's questions, brushing everyone else aside as he struggled to reach Draco and Hermione. Hermione clamped a hand over Draco's wrist, stopping him from grabbing his wand.

"Harry has no comment," Hermione said, using a *Sonorus* to be heard over the tumult. "I'm sure

the Wizengamot will release a statement about its decision."

Her voice radiated authority, and most of the reporters took a step back, allowing Harry to pass. Only Skeeter persisted in her questioning, following them down the corridor until Ministry guards stepped in, blocking her path. Harry gave the guards a grateful nod, grabbing both Draco and Hermione by the hand and hurrying toward a bank of elevators.

Hermione blinked in surprise when Harry hit the up button, assuming they would be heading downstairs to the Atrium to Floo home. She cast a sideways glance at Harry, whose lips were twisted into a grim line. He shook his head once, flicking his eyes toward the crowd behind them and back to her face.

No one said a word as they entered the elevator. Harry shook his head slightly once again when they were inside, so they rode up to the 14th floor in silence. He led them down the empty corridor after the doors opened, stopping in front of a door marked only as *Conference Room 23B*. Harry rapped once on the door, opening it before receiving a response.

Draco stopped short at the sight of Fleur Weasley, her beautiful face blotchy with tears, seated at the conference room table. Bill stood behind her chair, talking angrily with Abramson. Harry pushed Draco into the room, pulling Hermione in behind him so he could close the door.

"What's happening?" Hermione asked, her voice trembling. "What are *they* doing here? Where were the Aurors taking Ginny? What did the Wizengamot decide?"

Abramson's hand rose, stopping Hermione's torrent of questions. He motioned toward the table, waiting until everyone had found a seat before beginning.

"The Wizengamot did not release its findings, because it never had a chance to deliberate," he said slowly, studying each of their faces as he spoke.

"If they didn't deliberate, then why –"

"Mrs. Potter withdrew her demands, Mr. Malfoy," Abramson said, cutting Draco's question off. "She agreed to an uncontested divorce, forfeiting any claims to Mr. Potter's property or money."

Harry put his arm around Draco, pulling him a little closer, his other hand finding Draco's under the table to grip it.

"Surely that's good news –"

"By itself, it is, Miss Granger," Abramson answered, ignoring Fleur's angry hiss. "But it has far-reaching implications for Mr. Potter's custody claim. She agreed to stop fighting the divorce because she said it was in the best interest of their child."

"She said she didn't want our child's birth to be marred by an ongoing dispute between us," Harry

said, his voice bitter. His fingers tightened around Draco's hand. "She said the welfare of our child was much more important than her own life. She surrendered, agreeing to accept the standard Ministry sentence for using Dark Magic. She'll be in Azkaban for three years, unless she files a request for leniency. But our child – our child will be –"

Harry broke off, his voice thick with unshed tears.

"The Ministry has stringent policies in place to deal with custody if the mother is incapacitated or unable to provide care," Abramson said, picking up when it was clear Harry couldn't continue. "In these cases, custody of the child is automatically awarded to the mother's family."

"That's insane!" Draco growled, not noticing when Fleur flinched at his outburst.

Abramson inclined his head, grimacing slightly.

"That's the law, Mr. Malfoy. Mrs. Potter – who I suppose we should call Miss Weasley now, since the divorce is final – started an ancient and binding process rolling when she pled no contest to the charges against her."

"What about the father's rights?" Hermione broke in, tears glistening in her eyes. "Why can't Harry have custody of the baby?"

"It's for the best," Bill said, his voice faint but determined. "We didn't know what she intended to do, but I can't argue with the results."

"What do you mean, it's for the best? What are you talking about? Why are you even *here*?" Draco asked, his voice rising as he became more frustrated with the nearly incomprehensible conversation.

Abramson cleared his throat, bringing everyone's attention back to him.

"The laws were written centuries ago, Mr. Malfoy," he said, his voice apologetic. "Hundreds of years ago, the Ministry felt a child needed both a mother and a father. If the mother died – or was incapacitated by an illness or prison sentence – custody of the child reverted to the mother's oldest married sibling."

"*You*?" Hermione asked, incredulous. Her eyes widened as she saw Bill nod, his arm tightening around his still-crying wife.

"It's what Ginny wants," Bill said, shaking his head. "And you have to admit, a child deserves to have two parents. I don't want Harry raising my niece or nephew."

"She was willing to confess to those lies to save the baby," Fleur said, her tear-stained face rigid with anger. "I will be the best mother I can be to Ginny's baby. I will make sure the child knows what Ginny sacrificed to keep it safe."

Draco paled even more, swallowing hard to find his voice.

"The child *will* have two parents," he spat, his eyes narrowed at the couple in front of him. "I filed an adoption petition this morning."

Bill laughed, shaking his head.

"A child deserves a mother and a father," he said, his voice dripping with venom. "Not to be raised by an abomination like you two."

Abramson cut in before Draco could answer, standing quickly in case he needed to draw his wand to keep the peace.

"Mr. Weasley," he said, his voice full of censure. "This is not the time or place for such a discussion. The sanctity of Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy's relationship is a debate for the courts, not for you. We will be filing a motion to challenge the custody law. Until then, Mr. Potter has nothing further to discuss with you."

"The hell he doesn't!" Bill yelled, pushing his chair back and springing to his feet. Fleur jumped up as well, and Bill stepped in front of her instinctively, shielding her from angry glares in the room. "I don't want either of them anywhere near the baby! There's no telling what they might do. I want Pansy Parkinson to spend the duration of her pregnancy at Shell Cottage."

"Impossible!" Draco yelled, struggling against Harry's restraining arm in an attempt to stand.

"I'm afraid I have to agree with Mr. Malfoy," Abramson said, taking a step closer to Bill. He handed him a piece of parchment from a pile on the table. "This is an Order of Protection taken out by Miss Parkinson against all members of the Weasley family."

Bill's mouth fell open in outrage and shock as he took the parchment, his eyes hardening as he read the words that confirmed Abramson's statement. He grabbed Fleur's hand, hauling her toward the doorway.

"We'll see about that," he hissed, yanking the door open. "You'll be hearing from our attorney. We'll have it nullified by this evening."

Everyone flinched when the door slammed, silence settling over the room like a heavy blanket. Abramson was the first to break the ominous quiet, his words low but confident.

"The Order of Protection is solid," he said. "This course of events was not completely unforeseen, and Miss Parkinson's lawyers took measures to guard against it when she filed her complaint against Miss Weasley."

"Is it – can they – is there nothing we can do?" Hermione whispered, her expression bleak. Just

an hour ago, she'd been planning her evening with Viktor, sure they'd be celebrating. "You said Harry could challenge it –"

"He can, and we will, Miss Granger," Abramson said, gathering up the parchment scattered across the conference room table. "There are provisions to return custody to the father if he remarries, which Mr. Potter and Mr. Malfoy intend to do. It's not the traditional marriage the custody law outlines, but we can challenge it as antiquated. The Ministry recognizes same-sex Marriage Bonds, so my hope is this can be rectified with a few procedural motions."

" – not to be borne," Lucius said, his grey eyes hard as flint.

Harry nodded woodenly, his hands motionless at his sides. The sight angered Lucius even more, and he grabbed the unresponsive man by the shoulders, forcing Harry to meet his gaze.

"You are a Malfoy now," the older man said, shaking Harry slightly. "You will act like one. Malfoys do not sit back and wait for matters to be resolved; they act decisively on their own."

Harry's glassy green eyes showed no spark of life at the words, and Lucius growled in frustration.

"Tizzy!" he yelled, his eyes not wavering from Harry's as the diminutive house-elf popped into the room, bearing a tray of potions.

Without waiting for instruction, Tizzy tugged on the hem of Harry's robes, turning him slightly. His gaze slowly traveled down to the elf at his side. She held up a vial of murky potion, levitating it until she could tip it to his lips and murmured encouragingly as he swallowed. Tizzy waited several seconds, muttering to herself as she waited for the Pepper-up Potion to take effect.

Harry blinked suddenly as the potion swept through his body, jolting him like a live wire. The house-elf nodded, satisfied, grabbing her tray and vanishing as soon as Harry looked aware again.

"Malfoys pursue justice and vengeance any way they can," Lucius continued, picking up as though there had been no lag in their conversation. "While Abramson investigates your legal options, we will investigate those avenues open to you that may be less sanctioned."

Harry snapped to attention at Lucius' words, his eyes narrowing as though he had just realized the man was standing there.

"We will take no illegal action against the Weasleys," he said, his voice slightly hoarse, "but I won't allow them to take custody of the baby. If I have to, I'll take the baby and run."

Harry turned at a low growl behind him, his gaze wary as Draco strode across the room angrily.

"*We'll* take the baby and run, Potter," he said, his voice hard. "*We* will do whatever necessary to

safeguard our child, even if it means disappearing."

Draco wrapped his arms around Harry, pulling the dark-haired man into his chest and cradling him there. They were nearly the same height; Draco rested his chin on Harry's shoulder as he carefully watched his father.

"I certainly hope it does not come to that," Lucius drawled, his voice resigned. "Your mother so dislikes living on the run."

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Chapter: 22

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. Neither one of these delicious boys belongs to me.

"You can't let yourself get worked up over this," Viktor said, stroking Hermione's long brown hair as she cuddled closer into his warm chest.

"I just don't know what I'd do if they left," she said, hiccupping softly. She grimaced slightly at the feeling of the wet fabric under her face – she hadn't meant to literally cry on Viktor's shoulder. "Either of them. I've gotten so close to Draco, and Harry – Harry's all I have left."

"*Njama strashno*, Hermione," he whispered, his lips grazing her hair. "*Tova e dobre*."

"Don't brush aside her fears, Krum," Draco said from his seat near the window, not bothering to look up from the book he was reading.

Viktor sighed, seeming unsurprised Draco had understood him. Hermione's brow furrowed as she wondered what else she didn't know about Draco – she'd had no idea he spoke Bulgarian.

"I just don't want her to lose sight of the fact that things might still work out," he said easily, shifting Hermione so she sat more fully on his lap. "Besides, we both know she'd go with you if you left."

Hermione sat up, startled by Viktor's words.

"I wouldn't – you don't know that," she said, clearly flustered.

Viktor laughed, capturing Hermione's hand and kissing it gently.

"I do know, Hermione," he said, his tone light. "Whatever this is between us, it's just in the beginning stages. Your devotion to Harry, though, that is solid. I would never stand in the way of you following them."

Draco shut his book with a snap, frowning at the couple on the sofa.

"Don't be so melodramatic, Krum," he said, rolling his eyes. "We aren't going anywhere."

Draco's bravado was ruined by his quick glance down the corridor, where Harry was busy gathering essentials in case he needed to take Pansy and run on short notice. The pregnant witch was missing as well, likely holed up in Harry and Draco's room directing the packing effort.

"I would prefer it if she *did* go with you in the event you leave," Viktor said, ignoring Draco's denial. "*Dva zaeka s edin korshum*."

Draco laughed, shaking his head at Krum's reasoning. He could see Hermione getting frustrated at her inability to follow their hybrid conversation, so he took pity on her, translating roughly.

"Krum thinks it would kill two birds with one stone if you came with us," he explained, smirking. "The actual phrase is something like 'two rabbits with one bullet', but the meaning is the same. He's worried the Weasleys would try to get at you if Harry and the baby disappear. He wants you to be safe."

Hermione's scowl disappeared at Draco's words, a warm feeling building in her chest as she realized that Viktor cared for her. She raised her hand, stroking his jaw lightly. The stubble she found there was rough against her palm. Viktor's hand came up, closing over hers and trapping it against his face.

"*Ni plaschi*," Viktor whispered, his other hand wiping away the tears that threatened to spill down Hermione's face.

Draco shook his head again, rising from his chair to go check on Harry. Hermione and Viktor took no notice of his movement, completely wrapped up in each other for the moment. Their heads were bent together, whispering to each other.

Draco smiled, a small thrill running through him at Hermione's obvious happiness with Krum. *I suppose that's worth the 400,000 Galleons I had to pay to break his contract with the Vratsa Vultures,* he thought, remembering the particularly fierce negotiations his lawyer had gone through to end Krum's contract with the Bulgarian Quidditch team. *Not that I'd ever tell her I had anything to do with that. It was a sound business decision. Krum's proven himself to be an excellent coach for the Magpies.*

" – over my cold, dead body!" Pansy said, nodding for emphasis.

Harry grimaced at the mental image, disturbingly close to the scene he and Draco had stumbled

on after her suicide attempt last month.

"Sorry," she said in a rush, realizing the reason for Harry's silence. "That wasn't the best choice of words, I suppose."

Harry managed a smile, his warm green eyes finding hers over the large trunk between them.

"I'm just glad you can joke about it," Harry said, shrugging. "But no, it's not an image I'd care to see again."

"It won't come to that, anyway," the witch said confidently, tossing Harry's stash of Chocolate Frogs into the rapidly filling trunk. He quirked an eyebrow at her choice, but she merely shrugged, absently running a hand across her growing belly. "I'm thinking somewhere warm. Ooh, I know, Costa Rica!"

Harry's tight smile grew into a real one, his eyes lighting at Pansy's apparent enthusiasm for life on the lam. He turned to look at Draco, who had slipped into the room in time to hear the tail end of the conversation.

"It's not a vacation!" Harry chided, chuckling despite himself.

Draco peered into the trunk, wrinkling his nose at some of Harry's clothing choices. He plucked a frayed T-shirt out of the mix, tossing it into the corner.

"Costa Rica's lovely this time of year," Draco said, grinning at Pansy. "Or maybe New Zealand. How do you feel about sheep, Harry?"

Harry threw a pillow at Draco, who caught it easily before it could smack into Pansy. Draco's apparent good mood was contagious, and Harry felt his own spirits lift just being near him. He loved it when Draco was playful; it happened so rarely.

"Sheep, eh?" he asked, pretending to think it over.

"Yes. We can buy a crumbling cottage and raise sheep for a living. We'll barely get by, but our love will be enough to keep us going," he said, pretending to swoon across Pansy's lap, his lashes fluttering.

Pansy pushed him away, swatting at his chest.

"You will *not*!" she gasped in mock horror. "I require servants and only the finest accommodations, and this baby will expect the same! We will definitely *not* raise this child to be a sheep farmer!"

Their laughing paused when Pansy's words sank in, the witch blushing crimson in humiliation when she realized what she'd said. She tried to slide off the bed, but Draco's arms tightened

around her, holding her in place.

"You're going to be in the baby's life, Pans," he said, his voice soft. His eyes met Harry's, who had moved closer to rest his arm around the trembling witch. "You're going to be a very important part of the baby's life, if you want to be."

A single tear trickled down Pansy's face at Draco's words, her struggles to free herself ceasing.

"Of course I want to be part of the baby's life," she whispered, ducking her head to rest it on Harry's shoulder. "I didn't, at first. I won't lie. But now –" she broke off, trying to gain control of her tears "- now I can't imagine not knowing this child, not helping you two raise him."

"Him?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow at Pansy's pronouncement.

She shrugged lightly, a small smile curving her lips. "Just a feeling I have," she said, lowering her head to his shoulder again. "I can picture it, you know. You two, with this perfect little person. It's beautiful. You'll be a beautiful family."

Draco shifted, sitting up so Pansy was cradled between him and Harry, his arms around both of them.

"We're already a beautiful family, Pans," he said, his lips against her ear, his words so low Harry had to strain to hear. "And you're part of it. You'll always be part of it. You're giving us the most incredible gift I could imagine."

Harry woke with a start, tingling with the feeling that someone was staring at him. He blinked owlishly, sitting up a bit and fumbling for his glasses on the bedside table. The room was still pitch black, so it was obviously the middle of the night. *What's going on? Someone couldn't be in here, could they?* His mind raced, endorphins slamming through his body just like they had when he'd been awakened suddenly during the war. *I guess some instincts never die,* he thought ruefully. He slipped his glasses on, hoping to figure out what had roused him from a sound sleep.

"Gah!" he screamed, scrambling back across the bed when the angry house-elf swam into view, her wrinkled face very close to his own. Draco stirred beside him, burrowing deeper into the blankets and turning away from the noise. "Tizzy! What are you *doing* in here?"

The house-elf hopped down from her position on the bed, landing lightly on the floor. She rested her tiny hands on her hips, her face a mask of rage.

"Master Harry is not leaving without his Tizzy!" she whispered angrily, her gaze focused on Harry.

"What?"

"Master Harry is leaving with Miss Pansy and Master Draco, but they is not leaving Tizzy! No,

they is not. Master Harry is being a bad wizard, thinking he can leave his Tizzy behind."

Harry shook his head, his mind still clouded with sleep despite the adrenaline pouring through his body.

"Tizzy, we're not going anywhere."

The house-elf shook a small fist at him, her bulbous eyes narrowing at his words.

"Master Harry is lying to Tizzy! Tizzy is knowing Master Harry, and he is not telling the truth!"

Harry shook his head, trying to stop Tizzy's words before they woke Draco. *I'm arguing with a house-elf,* he thought, closing his eyes to try to find some patience.

"Tizzy, we are not leaving. At least, not yet," he said, holding up a hand to cut off her indignant hiss. "We *might* have to leave sometime in the future, but I promise we have every intention of taking you with us if we do."

Tizzy paused, her small body relaxing a bit at the news.

"You is not leaving Tizzy?"

Harry sighed in relief at the house-elf's apparent acceptance of his words, glancing over at Draco's sleeping form.

"No, Tizzy. We is not. Er, we *are* not," he corrected himself, running a hand over his face to help him focus. *Idiotic house-elf even has me* talking *like her now,* he thought uncharitably. "Tizzy, go back to wherever it is you sleep at night. If you have any more questions, I will answer them as best I can in the morning. It's the middle of the night, Tizzy. Go to bed."

The small elf nodded, disappearing with a sudden crack. Harry looked around the darkened bedroom, bewildered. *All hell is breaking loose,* he thought grimly, stretching slightly before taking his glasses off and scooting back down in the bed.

He heard a quiet snicker emanating from the pile of bedclothes beside him. *Great*, Harry thought, wincing.

"You could have helped, you know," he said, rolling his eyes when the pile of blankets shifted and Draco sat up, a huge grin on his face.

"I know," he said, laughing.

Harry's eyes narrowed, and he crawled closer to Draco, their faces just centimeters apart.

"How much did you hear?"

"'Master Harry is being a bad wizard'," Draco mimicked, shielding himself with his arms when Harry tackled him, pinning him to the bed.

"You could have *helped*," he repeated, his lips hovering just above Draco's.

"*I* don't mind if you're a bad wizard, Harry," Draco whispered, his tone no longer full of amusement.

Harry dropped down for a kiss, his lips feathering across Draco's as he teased the blond.

"And what kind of bad things do you think I should do, Draco?" he purred, moving down to nip at Draco's throat.

"Mmm, that's a good start," Draco whispered, running his hands down Harry's naked torso.

He gasped when Harry's insistent mouth moved lower, his tongue sweeping out to lave Draco's nipples. "Is this bad?" Harry asked, his voice low.

Draco shuddered as Harry blew across his now-wet nipples, the cold sensation sending shivers of desire down his spine. Harry continued his exploration of Draco's body, kissing his way down his stomach and pausing right above his pelvis. His green eyes sparkled slightly in the moonlight, the desire in them clear.

"Yes," Draco answered, his hard cock twitching slightly at Harry's nearness. He moved slightly, his lips turning down in disappointment as Harry countered, shifting just enough to avoid contact with Draco's erection. "Bad."

Harry chuckled, ducking his head to engulf the blond's cock in his mouth, his lips curled around his teeth as he stroked up and down, his tongue pressing hard against the underside of Draco's member. Draco cried out, his hands fisting in the rumpled blankets to keep from grabbing Harry's head.

"Bad?" Harry asked, his mouth briefly leaving Draco's erection before swooping back down, swirling his tongue around the sensitive head and dragging another moan from the blond.

"So very bad," Draco agreed reverently, his eyes closed at the sensation of Harry devouring his aching cock.

"Mmm," Harry hummed, his lips curving into a smile at Draco's audible reaction. He pulled back again, letting Draco's rock-hard member slip out of his mouth and slap wetly against his belly. "I like being bad."

"You're so good at it," Draco gasped, moaning as Harry's lubricated fingers found his hole, rubbing teasing circles around it before sliding inside to stretch him.

"I know," Harry agreed, leaning down so he could claim Draco's mouth in a scorching kiss.

Draco groaned, thrusting his tongue into Harry's mouth as Harry slid his long, slender fingers into Draco's arse, crooking them to make sure he caught Draco's prostate often. The blond squirmed underneath him, grinding himself against Harry's hand to try to force the fingers deeper.

"*I'm* the bad one?" Harry teased, peppering gentle kisses over Draco's closed eyelids.

"We're both bad wizards," Draco said, gasping as Harry's fingers found the sensitive bundle of nerves again. "Very bad."

"Mmm," Harry agreed, pulling his fingers out and coating his erection with lubricant. He sighed at the feeling of the cool liquid covering his hard length, shuddering slightly as he stroked himself.

"Are you ready?" he asked Draco, kneeling between the blond's parted thighs.

Draco grunted his approval, hooking his legs around Harry's waist to pull him closer. "Impatient?" Harry asked, laughing lightly as he rubbed the head of his sensitive cock against Draco's entrance, enjoying the frustrated groans the delay elicited from his lover.

They both gasped as Harry pushed inside gently, the thick head of his cock breaching Draco's loosened ring of muscle. Harry paused, waiting for Draco's unspoken signal to continue. He pushed further inside as soon as Draco relaxed, groaning at the sensation of being squeezed by Draco's tight channel. He stopped when he was fully seated, waiting again for Draco to signal his readiness to continue. They'd done this so many times that Harry needed no actual words or motions from Draco to know when he had adjusted to Harry's hard length; he was attuned to the feel of Draco's body, and Harry could tell instantly when Draco's discomfort turned to unfettered pleasure.

"Merlin, Dray," Harry whispered, pumping into Draco at a frantic pace, overcome with desire for the man beneath him. Draco's steady monologue of groans and gasps was always enough to push Harry over the edge.

"Harder, Harry," Draco gasped, tightening his legs around Harry's waist to pull him in even deeper.

Harry needed no further encouragement. He pistoned his hips, driving into Draco as hard as he could, his hand coming up to fist around Draco's neglected erection, squeezing and stroking it in time with his thrusts.

Moments later they were both coming hard, shouting each other's names. Harry collapsed on top of Draco, panting, his sweaty skin tingling with the force of his release. He pressed a quick kiss

to Draco's neck, pulling out of him gently and rolling to the side so he didn't crush the blond.

"Tizzy has my permission to wake you up any time," Draco said, settling himself onto the pillows after muttering a quick cleaning spell.

They drifted in silence for a few minutes, sated. Dawn was coming – Harry could see a faint lightening of the sky through the window. If they were lucky, they'd be able to get in a few more hours of sleep before the house-elf woke them for breakfast.

"Hey, Hermione told me you speak Bulgarian," Harry whispered suddenly, raising himself up on an elbow so he could look at Draco.

"Yes," Draco said, not opening his eyes.

"Say something," Harry said, his eyes dancing with excitement. Draco groaned.

"*Po kasno*," Draco said, his eyes still closed.

"What did you say?"

"I said 'later'," Draco said, nestling deeper into his pillow.

"Draco!" Harry whined, snuggling closer to his fiancé.

Draco sighed heavily, moving his arm so Harry could rest his head on his chest comfortably.

"*Tiho*, Harry," Draco said, opening his eyes a little to glare at the dark-haired man. "*Vreme e da si liagash*."

"What was that?"

"I said 'good night, Harry. It's time to go to bed'."

"Say something romantic."

Draco sighed heavily, burrowing deeper into the covers, his arm tightening around Harry, pulling him more securely against his chest.

"*Harry, ti si moeto slunce. Ti si moyat jivot*," Draco whispered, pressing a kiss to Harry's temple. "*Shte te obicham zavinagi. Sega tiho."*

"Well?"

"Don't you think it loses something if I translate it? Can't you just trust it was romantic?"

Harry quirked an eyebrow at Draco, clearly not willing to trust him.

"I said 'Harry, you are my sun. You are my life. I will love you forever'."

"What about the bit at the end? You said the one word before."

Draco laughed, wrapping his other arm around Harry as well, hugging him tightly to his chest.

"You're right. I said 'now be quiet'."

"I'm swooning," Harry said sarcastically, tipping his head up to kiss Draco on the jaw. "I'll love you forever, too."

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Chapter: 23

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They aren't mine, I just borrow them sometimes.

"I still say –"

Conversation abruptly cut off as soon as Harry entered the room, leading him to believe Lucius and Narcissa had been plotting something he'd be against. He sent them a challenging look, shaking his head at the innocence on both of their faces.

"You still say what, Lucius?" Harry asked, his hands on his hips. "That we should cast some Dark spell on the Weasleys that will land us all in Azkaban? Don't forget you're watched very closely. You already have a few strikes against you – the Ministry won't hesitate to lock you away for good if you do anything stupid."

" – that you made a mistake trading away that second-string Keeper, Draco," Lucius finished, winking at his wife and son. "Vladmir Kretosky was an excellent player, and you know your starter's contract expires at the end of the season. Now you'll have no leverage in your negotiations with her."

Harry rolled his eyes, sliding into his seat at the breakfast table. He didn't believe Lucius had been talking about Draco's management of the Montrose Magpies for one second, but he decided to let it go. He'd get it out of Draco later, anyway.

"True, but what you don't know is that Kretosky took the spot with the Falmouth Falcons that the Magpies' current Keeper wanted – it's the only other team she's ever considered. So I think we're safe," Harry said, reaching for a scone.

Draco turned to press a quick kiss to Harry's scowling cheek. "Well said. Good morning, sunshine!"

Harry blushed, Draco's words calling up memories of earlier that morning. Draco had called him his sun, and Harry wondered if sunshine would be his new cutesy nickname.

"Did you sort everything out with Tizzy, Harry?" Narcissa asked, taking a careful sip from her teacup.

"You know about that, then?" Harry asked, coloring even more. There was no way Narcissa and Lucius could have overheard his conversation with the house-elf, but if they *had* – Harry shuddered to think of what else they might have heard. "I spoke with her this morning. Posie, too. They're the house-elves we'd talked about taking with us if we need to leave."

Narcissa's mouth quirked in a small smile when she realized something other than Tizzy's unscheduled visit must have happened the night before. She moved her teacup to cover her lips, certain Harry would be even more embarrassed if he saw her smile at his discomfort.

"I overheard her talking with Pansy this morning," Narcissa offered, watching as Harry's shoulders slumped a little in relief. "Something about not leaving without her."

"Where *is* Pansy?" Harry asked, noticing for the first time that both Pansy and Hermione were missing.

"She and Hermione are having breakfast in Pansy's rooms," Narcissa said, continuing quickly when she saw Harry's alarm. "She's fine. Hermione wanted to talk to her about her date last night with Viktor."

Lucius grimaced at her words, a faint blush spreading across his normally pale cheeks. The unprecedented show of embarrassment from the elder Malfoy drew everyone's attention.

"Father?" Draco asked, wondering what could possibly cause his father to blush.

"Your father was in his study when Viktor escorted Hermione home last night," Narcissa said, her beautiful features alight with amusement. "He happened upon them in a rather compromising position on his way up to bed."

"Let's just say their relationship is progressing, and leave it at that," Lucius said, his cheeks darkening more.

"So Hermione is hiding out this morning?" Harry asked, a grin of pure delight on his face, his own embarrassment fading quickly.

"Apparently," Lucius said, ducking behind the cover of the morning newspaper.

"And Krum?" Draco asked, smirking at his father's discomfort.

"Left early this morning, or so Tizzy tells me. I was surprised to find you'd keyed him into the wards already, Draco," his mother said, winking at Harry, who was watching Lucius pretend to be absorbed by the *Prophet*.

"I don't know why that would surprise you, Narcissa," Lucius said, lowering the paper to glower at his son. "He brought the man over here with the express purpose of helping him court the girl."

"I did *not*, Father," Draco said, his smile growing when he saw Harry's eyes narrow as he ran through dates in his mind. "I needed a competent coach for the Magpies, and Krum was sidelined with an injury. He would have had to sit out the rest of the season with the Vultures, and it was questionable whether or not he'd ever be able to play again. He was a good match for the job. It was a business decision, pure and simple."

"Krum took the job in October, didn't he?" Harry asked, squinting as he put together his mental timeline.

"Yes, a few weeks after Hermione filed for divorce," Draco said, shrugging.

Harry shook his head, staring at his fiancé in wonder. Draco's capacity for kindness never ceased to amaze him. The man worked tirelessly to project the perfect Slytherin image, but Harry knew most of it was a façade. *Well, not most of it,* he amended. *He really is a complete bastard to most people. But he'd do anything for his friends and his family.* Harry shivered slightly as he re-thought those words, realizing he fell into the family category. He jumped up, launching himself at Draco, catching the blond completely by surprise.

Harry peppered Draco's face with soft kisses, ending with a long, sweet kiss on his half-opened mouth. When he pulled back, he noticed that Narcissa was staring out the window with disinterest, and Lucius' newspaper was raised higher than ever. He grabbed Draco's hand, pulling him up out of the chair.

"Let's go see Hermione," Harry said, practically bouncing with energy. "I want to know what was so bad it could make the iniquitous Lucius Malfoy *blush*."

Draco allowed himself to be pulled along, exchanging a grin with his mother. He was just close enough to hear his father's barely audible mumblings as they passed.

" – like he would even *know* what iniquitous meant if not for her. Gryffindors and their *complete* lack of propriety –"

Draco's laugh echoed through the corridor as they left, leaving Narcissa to calm her irritated husband.

"You used to be fun, Hermione," Harry whined, jutting his lower lip out in a pout that usually made Hermione cave.

"Yes," she said agreeably, setting a vase of crisp white anemones interspersed with a few sunny yellow dandelions and a burst of bright color – a single stalk of fuchsia gladiolus – on her bedside table. "And you used to be straight. Things change."

"Hermione!" Harry gasped, working hard to school his features into a look of outrage, though his lips trembled with the urge to laugh.

Draco and Pansy were laughing so hard they could barely breathe, curled around each other on a comfortable divan in the corner. Draco sat with his back propped up against the wall, his hands wrapped around Pansy's expanding belly, her back resting against his chest.

"I, for one, think change is a good thing," Draco said, gasping as he tried to regain his composure. "Besides, I don't have to ask how things went last night. Krum's choice of flowers makes it clear."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, inspecting the flowers closely, looking for a card or note of some sort. "They're pretty ordinary. And aren't those weeds?"

Hermione gently stroked the dandelions, nodding. Pansy and Draco both sighed heavily, shaking their heads.

"Really, Potter, it's like you're *trying* to be obtuse sometimes," he chastised, his arms still around Pansy, who decided it was time for a lesson in pure-blood etiquette.

"Flowers have a language all their own, Harry," she said, raising an eyebrow at Hermione. "It's something every pure-blood child learns as a matter of course. Those white flowers are anemone. They symbolize everlasting love. The dandelions – which, yes, are generally known as weeds – represent wishes come true, and that tall, bright flower is a gladiolus. It signifies love at first sight."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the vase of flowers, tilting his head as though trying to see whatever Pansy and Draco saw.

"He's loved her since he first saw her, and being with her now is a wish come true," Draco said, rolling his eyes at his fiancé. "He's telling her he loves her, and he's promising he always will."

"And you knew all that?" Harry asked, looking incredulously at Hermione, who colored slightly under his gaze.

"I did," she said, raising her chin. "Viktor sent me flowers almost every week the summer after the Triwizard Tournament," she said, her eyes losing their focus as she thought back. "Neville

would come over after every delivery to help me sort out what it meant."

"It's a pure-blood thing," Pansy said, shrugging. "It's traditional to send flowers when courting someone. They're like love letters."

"Hasn't Draco ever sent you flowers?" Hermione teased, moving the flowers again.

"No," Harry said, still pouting that Hermione wouldn't tell him what Lucius walked in on the night before.

"Harry would rather have chocolates," Draco said, winking at his fiancé. "But if I did send him flowers, I'd send honeysuckle and ivy, and probably something sappy like primrose. Hmm. Blue salvia, too."

Pansy and Hermione made cooing noises, annoying Harry. He rolled his eyes at Draco, who shrugged.

"If I didn't tell you now you'd just ambush me right before I fell asleep," he said, grinning when Harry's eyes narrowed. "I'll translate, too, since you apparently don't trust me to be romantic. Honeysuckle is a symbol of devotion and generosity – I think you're both generous and devoted. Ivy signifies fidelity and friendship. I'd never cheat on you, and our relationship is solid because it was built on a foundation of friendship. Primrose means I can't live without you, and blue salvia shows that you're always on my mind."

Harry blushed, embarrassed. "What was it you said last night? Tee-ko?"

Draco laughed, breaking into a huge grin.

"I pledge my undying love to you, tell you you're the center of my universe, and all you take away from it is *tiho*?" He shook his head ruefully, feigning offense. "My tender sensibilities are lost on you Potter. Utterly lost."

"Was that Bulgarian?" Hermione asked, curious.

"Yes. I just poured my heart out, and Harry essentially told me to shut up," Draco said with a put-upon sigh.

Harry and Draco were seated side-by-side on the sofa, waiting for Abramson's Fire-call. It felt strangely similar to yesterday morning for Draco, since he had assumed a similar position with Hermione waiting for the verdict in Harry's divorce trial at the Ministry.

They both moved forward when the green flames burst to life in the fireplace, kneeling at the hearth so they could see Abramson's face through the fire.

"Bill and Fleur Weasley filed their challenge to Miss Parkinson's Order of Protection after they

left us yesterday afternoon," the lawyer said without preamble. "I've just heard from the judge, and it looks like the Ministry is upholding Miss Parkinson's order."

Harry and Draco both released a relieved breath.

"She can continue staying with us at the Manor?" Harry asked, leaning closer into the fire so Abramson could hear his question.

"Yes," Abramson said, his disembodied head nodding.

"Has the Ministry set a date to hear our motion to overrule the custody law?" Draco asked, reaching down to grab Harry's hand.

"No, but I'm working on it," Abramson said, hesitating. "The judge is refusing to hear the motion until the child is born. He says it isn't relevant until the child is actually placed in the Weasleys' custody."

"What?" Harry erupted, yanking his hand from Draco's.

"Mr. Potter, I'll do my best to force the issue, but we may have to wait until Miss Parkinson delivers the baby to actually be heard by the court."

"I won't let those people anywhere near my baby!" Harry yelled, his cheeks flushing with anger.

"No one said you had to, Harry," Draco said, wrapping a restraining arm around his fiancé.

"But –"

"Mr. Malfoy is right, Mr. Potter," Abramson said, cutting off Harry's protest. "Miss Parkinson and the child could have all manner of complications after the birth, necessitating a longer-than-usual stay in St. Mungo's. I'm confident we'll be able to keep the child from the Weasleys while we file our motions for custody."

"And if those don't work?"

"Harry," Draco said quietly, drawing the dark-haired man's attention. "What we'd do if the motions don't work is not something to discuss with Mr. Abramson."

Harry quieted, closing his eyes while Draco finished up the Fire-call with the lawyer. He didn't catch most of the conversation, which seemed to focus on some arcane law Draco and Hermione had discovered in their research. From the sound of things, Abramson was already investigating whatever avenue Draco had unearthed, and Draco sounded satisfied with the wizard's answers.

Harry still didn't speak when Draco pulled him up off the floor, dragging him back to the sofa. Harry's lips were drawn together in a thin, bloodless line, his hard green eyes showing none of

the warmth they usually did.

"It won't come to that," Draco said, squeezing Harry's knee. "You know I wouldn't let our child spend a second in their custody."

Harry nodded, his face still stony. Draco sighed, fishing in his pocket for a small, velvet box.

"My father had these made for us," he said, flipping the box open to show Harry the gold pendant nestled inside. The thin chain held an exquisitely crafted gold dragon. "Mine's a lion, if you're curious. They're spell-activated Portkeys."

Interest sparked in Harry's eyes, and he reached out to take the box from Draco. He ran a finger over the tiny dragon, smiling when it blinked and opened smoky obsidian eyes. He leaned over, watching Draco pull a similar chain from beneath his own shirt, a perfectly sculpted golden lion hanging from it. The lion stretched and yawned, flashing startling emerald eyes for a moment before going back to sleep.

"Portkeys?"

"They're charmed to take us directly to the safe house Father and I selected," Draco said, tucking his pendant back into his shirt. Harry ducked his head when Draco held the necklace out to him, letting the blond fasten the clasp around his neck. "We have several homes that wouldn't appear in our assets if the Ministry confiscated the lists to try to find us in the event we need to take the baby into hiding. It was a simple enough matter to choose one and secure it under Fidelius."

"I thought you were confident we had nothing to worry about."

"I am," Draco said, petting Harry's dragon fondly before slipping it underneath the dark-haired man's jumper. "But I'm also a Malfoy. Malfoys –"

" – 'do not sit back and wait for matters to be resolved; they act decisively on their own'," Harry said, parroting the words he'd heard Lucius say several times over the last two days. He smiled for the first time all evening, and Draco relaxed a little at the sight. "Yeah, I've heard that somewhere before."

" – listening to anything I'm saying?"

Harry looked up from the magazine he'd been reading, catching the end of Draco's question.

"No," he admitted, turning back to the article in front of him. Draco growled in indignation, slamming the door behind him as he stormed out.

"That was rude, you know," Hermione said, frowning at Harry.

They were sitting in the Manor's greenhouse, enjoying the moist, warm atmosphere. Harry

looked through the frosty glass wall, watching as Draco stomped his way through the snow toward the Manor. He sighed, setting the magazine aside to go after the angry blond.

"I know, but I really don't care what kind of champagne we serve at midnight or what kind of hors d'oeuvres the house-elves prepare for the party," Harry said, his eyes drawn to the magazine once more.

They were hosting a New Year's Eve party that evening, since Draco insisted everyone needed something to take their minds off the horrors of the last few months. Pansy wholeheartedly agreed, which was the only reason Harry had acquiesced. He wanted to spend a quiet night with Draco, just the two of them. He didn't feel ready to answer the questions he knew everyone would have about his divorce, Ginny's confession or the baby Pansy carried.

"Which is why Draco stopped talking about the party twenty minutes ago," Hermione said slowly, her frown deepening. "Weren't you listening at *all*?"

Harry grimaced, chagrined. "No," he said, reluctantly closing the magazine and stuffing it in his pocket.

"He was asking you about preparing the nursery," Hermione said, shaking her head.

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

"I'd better – "

"Just go, Harry," Hermione said, sighing as she shifted the basket of flowers she and Draco had been cutting for the centerpieces. "You'd better try to catch him before he locks himself in his study again."

He found Draco leaning against the doorway of the nursery, staring off into space. The room was connected to theirs by a private corridor. Harry had known exactly where to find Draco the instant he entered their suite and noticed the door ajar.

He padded up behind Draco, stopping before he was close enough to touch the angry blond.

"I don't know what more I can do to get you to realize that *I'm* in this too," Draco said heatedly, crossing his arms across his chest without turning to look at Harry. "Why did we bother filing the adoption petition if you aren't going to acknowledge me as a father?"

Harry was staggered by Draco's words. He could feel the hurt radiating off the blond, and he was at a loss for how to fix things.

"Of course I want you to be the baby's father!"

"You could have fooled me," Draco muttered bitterly, shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, Draco. I wasn't listening. I didn't even realize we weren't talking about the party anymore," Harry said, flinching slightly when he saw Draco's shoulders tighten at the mention of the party Harry had been so opposed to. "I'm sorry. I'd love to talk about the nursery."

Draco's posture didn't soften, as Harry had hoped it would. *He's really upset about this,* Harry thought, berating himself for not noticing how insecure Draco had been feeling about his part in the baby's life. *I never said anything about it because it seemed so obvious.*

"Please tell me what you're thinking, love," Harry said, stepping closer to Draco. "I'm sorry if I haven't made my wishes clear, Draco. I love you, and I'm going to spend the rest of my life loving you. I've always thought of the baby as ours. *Of course* I want you to adopt the baby."

Draco's shoulders loosened slightly, but he still held his defensive stance. Harry sighed, pulling an unwilling Draco into the empty nursery.

"I was thinking we could put the crib against that wall –" Harry said, motioning to a long expanse of empty wall at the far end of the room "— which would leave room for two rocking chairs over here, where we should have a bookshelf with all your old wizarding storybooks."

Draco's lips remained firmly pressed together, his arms still crossed.

"Your mother said we could use the crib you slept in as a child," Harry continued. "I think I'd like that. Carrying on the tradition, you know?"

Draco remained stubbornly silent, his mouth still downturned into a frown.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about your bond with Tizzy, too," Harry pressed on, pretending Draco was actually participating in the conversation. "I don't see any reason she shouldn't be the baby's house-elf nanny, just like she was yours. I'm not sure about what responsibilities go into that, so I probably need to sit down with Narcissa and figure all that out. She'd know, I suppose. I just think it's strange that Tizzy seems to have bonded to the baby already, which strikes me as odd since you aren't the biological father."

Harry could have kicked himself for his slip, closing his eyes in frustration.

"Not that it matters, because it doesn't. The baby is yours, even though I'm technically its biological father," he said, watching Draco carefully. "Did you hear me, Draco? The baby is yours. Even if the adoption paperwork never goes through, *you are the baby's father*, every bit as much as I am."

Draco didn't answer. Arms still tightly crossed, he moved toward the window, which had a view of the Manor's gardens.

"I ordered some curtains that are charmed to keep out light so the baby can nap comfortably during the day," he said, his voice strained.

Harry's knees buckled slightly in relief at Draco's words. *So I haven't completely ruined this, then*, he thought.

"What color?" he asked, keeping up the pretense that they were having a normal discussion, not a potentially life-altering one.

Harry was still certain Draco would be better off without him and all the complications he'd brought to his life. He marveled that Draco continued to want him, no matter how badly he botched things between them. This argument was just the latest in a series of fights they'd been having recently. Harry kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for Draco to suddenly change his mind and decide Harry wasn't worth all this trouble.

"Yellow," Draco said, still looking out the window at the snowy scene below.

"That's perfect," Harry said, walking up behind the blond. "It will suit the baby, whether we have a Corvus or a Cassie."

Draco whirled at Harry's statement, his arms falling to his sides.

"A what?"

"A Corvus or a Cassie," Harry repeated, cocking his head as he looked at Draco. "Corvus for a boy, or Cassie – Cassiopeia – for a girl."

Draco was silent, and Harry kicked himself for making yet another blunder.

"They're just ideas," he said quickly, catching Draco's hands in his own. "I was just tossing around some names with Lucius the other day. The baby's name is something we'll decide together –"

"Corvus or Cassiopeia?" Draco asked, a small smile playing on his lips.

"Too strange?" Harry asked, confused at Draco's sudden mood shift. "Lucius is pulling for Auriga or Orion, and I think your mother liked Lyra but didn't have a preference for a boy's name."

"All constellations," Draco said, his voice soft.

"Well, yes," Harry said, even more confused. "I assumed you'd want to carry on the family tradition, but if you don't, that's fine, too."

Draco cut him off, pulling him in for a deep kiss. He rested his forehead against Harry's when they finally broke apart.

"I love you," he said, leaning in to kiss Harry again.

"I love you, too," Harry said, a bit bewildered by Draco's abrupt turn-around.

"All constellations," Draco repeated, a huge smile spreading across his face. He kissed Harry again, whirling around as soon as their lips parted.

"The crib should go there, not against the far wall," Draco said, motioning to a spot closer to the door. "We'll put the bookshelves and the rocking chairs over by the window, so we can look out into the garden when we're rocking Cassie or Corvus to sleep."

Harry smiled, still completely baffled by Draco's sudden enthusiasm. "That sounds lovely."

"And we'll have a mural on this wall," Draco said, running his hand over the nearest wall. "Illustrations of some of the *Tales of Beedle the Bard*. Nothing too scary, just some of the tamer ones."

"That sounds great, Dray," Harry said, his chest warming at the sight of his fiancé darting around the room, planning for the arrival of their child.

"All constellations," Draco said again, grabbing Harry by the hand and leading him back toward their own suite. "I'm an idiot. You've been planning to include me in the baby's life all along."

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Chapter: 24

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They belong to JKR.

"I thought we'd – *fucking hell!*"

Harry blinked, turning to Hermione to confirm she'd just seen Draco Disapparate out mid-sentence, too. The witch frowned, still staring at the space where Draco had been standing. Seconds later, Lucius tore into the room, looking around frantically. He seemed to sigh in relief when he caught sight of Harry, giving him a curt nod before Disapparating as well.

"Well," Hermione said, perplexed.

Something was clearly wrong, and Harry's mind raced to figure out what could have happened

that would have caused Draco and Lucius to leave so suddenly. *It almost looked like Draco had gotten some kind of alert* – Harry broke off mid-thought, cursing viciously. *The wards.* Hermione saw his hands fist for a moment, his green eyes flashing as he set his jaw and Disapparated.

"Lovely," she said to the empty room, seething at being left behind. She wheeled around, heading in the direction Lucius had come from to seek out Narcissa.

Draco had Ron pinned by his throat up against a tree just outside the low stone wall that surrounded the property, which signaled the edge of the wards. The wall itself was unimposing – it clearly wasn't a real barrier to keep unwanted visitors out. Harry squinted slightly, just able to make out the crackling wards that extended a foot past the wall. The air shimmered with the magic behind the impenetrable barriers, which had obviously alerted Draco and Lucius when Ron approached. Lucius was right behind Draco, his wand out, his gaze sweeping the grounds for other unwanted guests.

"Let him go," Harry said, his teeth clenched.

Draco didn't turn at Harry's voice. He tightened his grip on Ron's throat, which earned a gurgle from the purple-faced man.

"Go back inside."

"Let. Him. Go." Harry repeated, drawing out each word.

"Go. Back. Inside." Draco answered in kind, his teeth bared as he watched Ron choke, showing no sign that he intended to release the suffocating man.

"Goddamnit, Draco!" Harry yelled, waving his hand to send a Stinging Hex at the blond's wrist. Draco yelped in surprise, releasing his grip on Ron. The wheezing redhead collapsed at the base of the tree.

"Why are you here?" Harry asked, his voice cold. He was glad he hadn't waited to tell Hermione what was going on – he didn't want Ron anywhere near her.

"Needed … tell you," Ron panted, his hands in the air as Lucius and Draco both held him at wandpoint. "Owl … came back."

Only George and Angelina could get owls through the wards, but Harry figured they hadn't told Ron about that. *That's good*, Harry thought grimly, wondering what Ron could possibly have to talk to him about. *At least that means they're not involved in whatever he's plotting now.*

Harry looked at Draco, whose face was a mask of pure fury. Lucius seemed more in control of himself, but only marginally. Ron definitely had reason to be afraid.

"I have nothing to say to you," Harry said, shrugging indifferently.

"'s about Ginny," Ron gasped out, struggling to catch his breath.

Draco kicked Ron in the side, eliciting a sharp howl. Harry was fairly certain he heard the crack of at least one rib breaking.

"She's in Azkaban, where she belongs," Draco said, narrowing his eyes. He wondered if this had anything to do with the exchange he'd witnessed right after the trial ended.

"Not," Ron wheezed, curling up to protect his broken ribs from another assault. "Not in Azkaban."

Lucius was on him in a flash, the tip of his wand pressed to the tender flesh of Ron's chin.

"Explain."

"We –" Ron said, shuddering as Lucius' wand pressed hard enough to break the skin " – had a plan."

"Continue," Draco said, his eyes narrowed to slits as he listened to Ron's panicked words.

"Ginny knew she was going to lose the case," Ron said in a rush, cringing in anticipation of more pain as Draco took a step closer to him. "So she and Mum came up with a plan. Ginny was supposed to confess to everything and promise not to challenge Harry for custody of the baby. The Wizengamot was supposed to be lenient. She thought she had a few witches who sympathized with her, so she didn't think she'd end up being sent to Azkaban."

Ron paused, swallowing hard and continuing when no one else spoke.

"We knew it was risky. That Bones woman has had it out for Ginny since the beginning of the trial," Ron said, sneering slightly as he mentioned the Chief Warlock. Lucius increased the pressure on his wand slightly, as though reminding Ron he was there. "So we had a plan for what to do if it went wrong, so Ginny wouldn't actually go to prison."

Harry's teeth ached slightly from the effort to keep his thoughts to himself, his jaw clenched tightly. He had learned a lot of hard truths about the female Weasleys over the last few months, and he knew there had to be more to the story than Ron was telling them. Ginny wouldn't have given up her chance – even as miniscule as it was – at Harry's money if she hadn't had something better waiting in the wings. He glanced uneasily at the Manor, worried that Ron's sudden appearance might have been some sort of distraction to keep them busy while Ginny kidnapped Pansy or another member of their family.

Harry's face gave away none of his thoughts, but Draco knew him well enough to guess what was on the dark-haired man's mind when his eyes shifted toward the house. He shook his head slightly, watching as Harry's shoulders relaxed ever so slightly at the gesture. Draco was

monitoring the wards closely, worried about the same thing as Harry. Nothing – not so much as an owl – had crossed the magical barrier since Harry joined them at the gate.

"What happened after she was taken away by the Aurors? I saw her look at you, and it seemed like you two were communicating," Draco said, nudging the tip of his dragon hide boot against Ron's broken ribs, causing the redhead to cry out again.

"There's some Ministry law that says you have to let a prisoner visit if a member of her immediate family is in the hospital. Ginny told me that Mum was going to fake an illness so the guards would have to help her, and we'd Stun them and help Ginny escape when they brought her to Mum's room at St. Mungo's."

"Is that what happened?" Lucius asked, his face impassive. Harry knew the man's sharp mind was at work, running through dates and other calculations. Certainly they'd have heard about Ginny's escape by now if it had happened last week.

"No," Ron said, flinching as Draco put pressure against his aching ribs again. "Not exactly. The guards took Ginny straight to Azkaban instead of putting her in a Ministry holding cell like we thought they would."

"You said she's not in Azkaban. How did she escape, then?" Draco asked, his eyes narrowed as he watched Ron for any sign he was lying.

"I – I don't know. I don't know if she's still there or not," Ron said, instinctively curling into himself tighter when he saw Draco's wand twitch.

"What *do* you know?" Harry asked, his green eyes flashing. Ron was wasting their time. If Ginny really was out there somewhere, they needed to figure out a plan of action fast.

"I know Mum and her cousin Rodolphus were planning to break Ginny out of Azkaban," Ron said, tripping over his words.

Harry uncrossed his arms, crouching so he could get a better look at Ron's face. The man was clearly terrified, his eyes wide and frightened as he watched Draco and Lucius.

"Rodolphus said he had some potion that would help Gin escape. Mum took it to her today when she visited, and I came here as soon as she left. Rodolphus , he's –" Ron's wild eyes shot to Lucius, his lips trembling as he continued " – he's a nasty piece of work."

Ron shifted slightly, leaning closer to Harry, who was still crouched beside him. He lowered his voice, his eyes darting from Lucius to Draco.

"He's a Death Eater," Ron whispered, not noticing how Draco growled at his movement toward Harry.

"Lestrange," Lucius said quietly. It wasn't a question, but Ron nodded anyway. "Do you know what the potion was?"

Ron hesitated, earning himself another kick from Draco. Harry glared at the blond, who just rolled his eyes, looking bored. Harry knew it was just an act – Draco had to be as desperate to find out what Ginny was planning as he was.

"Something absorbed through skin contact," Ron said, tears in his eyes from Draco's most recent abuse. "I didn't want any part of it. I heard Rodolphus tell Mum –"

Ron broke off, sending a pleading glance toward Harry. It was the first time he'd actually looked right at the dark-haired wizard, and Harry smiled grimly as he saw the instant Ron noticed he wasn't armed. Ron's eyes lost some of the sheen of terror they'd held moments before – he obviously thought he had an ally in Harry. Harry briefly considered showing off his talent – he'd become so proficient at casting that Draco had taken to calling him the Wandless Wonder – but decided having that particular ability up his sleeve, so to speak, was worth more than crushing the hope his former best friend seemed to be harboring.

"Tell her what, Ron?" Harry asked, glaring at the crumpled redhead.

"He told Mum it would get Gin past the guards, but I didn't like the way he said it. I think – I think they mean to *kill* them," Ron said, horrified. After everything he and his family had already done, Harry was a little surprised to hear such revulsion in his voice at the thought of murder. "He sent me to Knockturn Alley for the ingredients – Aconite, Belladonna, Valerian."

All lethal, Harry thought, swallowing back panic.

"Letifer Corium," Draco whispered, naming the potion. Harry had never heard of it, but given Draco's grave tone, it had to be very, very Dark. Draco looked to his father, who nodded grimly. "We have to warn them. If she took that potion, everyone there is at risk."

Their Fire-call was too late by mere minutes. Three guards were dead, and Ginny and her mother had escaped. The Aurors on the scene wanted to interview Harry to find out how he knew about the attack in advance, but he and Draco had insisted they'd talk only with the Minister of Magic himself. Harry was usually against using his fame to garner favors, but he had no problem throwing his name around in this instance.

"How did you know about this, Harry?" Kingsley asked, his usually booming voice dampened by the poor connection.

"We received an anonymous letter," Draco answered, his hand moving to press against Harry's lower back, invisible to the man they were talking to through the Floo.

"I'd like to see it, Mr. Malfoy," Kingsley said, distrust clear in his tone.

"It was charmed to disintegrate after we opened it," Harry said, his voice perfectly even. "Not surprising, I suppose."

Kingsley paused, hoping one of the men would say something to fill the silence. It was an old Auror interrogation technique, and one the Minister employed frequently when he suspected a diplomat or politician was lying to him.

"No, it's not surprising," he admitted after several beats of silence. He watched Harry's face carefully, grainy though it was through the green flames. He didn't detect any subterfuge, but he knew there was more to this story than the men were sharing. "Do you have any idea what she wants from you?"

"Other than money? No," Harry said with a shiver, grateful for Draco's warm palm against his back.

They both knew Ginny was likely to make a move on Pansy, since the baby was the only bargaining chip she had left. It was something he and Draco would rather keep from the Ministry, since Auror involvement would make it harder for them to act on their own. *The Malfoy family creed,* he thought cynically, unhappy that acting alone really was their best option in this case.

"If you hear from her, or anyone in the family, you'll let us know immediately?" Kingsley asked, a slight edge to his voice, as though he suspected Harry and Draco would take off on a vigilante mission of their own the moment the connection closed. "This is a matter for the Aurors, Harry. I know you feel threatened, but the best thing you could do is stay in the safety of Malfoy Manor."

"We intend to," Draco said, his thumb slipping under Harry's jumper to caress the soft skin there. "Thank you for your concern, Minister."

"Well, yes," Kingsley sputtered, surprised his warning had met no resistance. "I'll keep you as informed as I can. Harry, Mr. Malfoy," he said, nodding to each of them before the fire winked out.

Harry's defensive posture relaxed slightly, and he leaned back against Draco's hand, enjoying the caress.

"He knows more than he was letting on," Lucius said from the corner, where he'd been listening to the conversation. He had a glass of Port in his hand, swirling the tawny liquid absently as he spoke.

"Of course," Draco said easily, sliding his hand out of Harry's jumper. "As do we."

Lucius inclined his head, taking a sip of the sweet wine.

"Was Weasley able to tell you anything more?" Draco asked, wrapping his arm around Harry's

waist.

The move was affectionate, but it was also to restrain the dark-haired man. Draco knew his father's interrogation techniques were rougher than any Harry would have condoned. Harry stiffened, his fears confirmed by the feral glint in Lucius' grey eyes as he answered.

"He was quite – talkative," Lucius drawled, choosing his words carefully. "Unfortunately, Ginevra and her mother are quite clever. They told him nothing of consequence. It was probably their intention to leave him behind all along."

Draco nodded. He'd expected as much. Ron had been little more than a pawn in Ginny's game from the start, and he'd be dead weight if they were on the run.

"Did he have any idea where she might go?" he asked, knowing it was unlikely.

"Just that it was protected by Fidelius," Lucius said, taking another slow sip of wine, savoring the rich flavor. There were some things that couldn't be rushed, no matter what the circumstances. "He thinks Rodolphus is the Secret Keeper."

"Ron said he was Molly's cousin, but I've never heard that before," Harry said, curious about how Molly had managed to form an alliance with the fugitive Death Eater.

"By marriage," Draco said, answering the question directed at his father. "You knew Molly was related to Sirius somehow, right? Sirius was Bellatrix's cousin, and Molly was related to her distantly as well. So the Weasleys are related to Rodolphus by marriage."

"But Molly killed Bellatrix," Harry said, frowning as he worked over the familial connections.

"Yes," Draco said, shrugging.

"Why would Rodolphus agree to help the person who killed his wife?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"You're thinking like a Gryffindor," Lucius said with a hard smile.

"Rodolphus has been on the run for years. It's a hard existence, even more so for those without considerable means behind them," Lucius said, referring to the months the Malfoys had spent in hiding before Harry's testimony made it safe for them to return to Great Britain. Harry still didn't know where they'd been, but he suspected he'd find out if he and Pansy ever had to disappear. "He'd be willing to deal with anyone who offered him enough money."

Harry considered Lucius' words, his back straightening slightly as he came to a conclusion.

"So we'll find him and offer him more," he said, confident the solution would work. He wanted his family to be safe, no matter what the price. "If he's so easily bought, we should be able to keep him in our own pocket."

Lucius shook his head, his eyes sad.

"I'm glad to finally have you thinking like a Malfoy, Harry, but I'm afraid there's a flaw in that plan."

Harry looked from Lucius to Draco, unsure of what he had missed.

"I'd bet Molly and Ginny offered Rodolphus more than money, Harry," Draco said, exchanging a meaningful glance with his father.

"You'd win," Lucius said, silently toasting Draco with his glass. "Weasley says they promised Rodolphus he could be the one to exact their revenge."

"What?" Harry asked, confused. Ginny wanted money, as did Molly and Rodolphus, apparently. *What more do they want from me?* Harry wondered, the heavy feeling in his stomach growing at Draco and Lucius' grim faces.

"You, Harry," Draco said, tightening his hold around his fiancé. "They want you. Dead."

"Why would he warn us?" Harry asked, perched on the arm of Draco's chair in his study. The blond hadn't let Harry out of his sight since Ron arrived yesterday morning. "Why should he care?"

Draco was absorbed in the ledger he was working on. He'd spent much of last night in the study making Fire-calls to his attorneys and several to Gringotts. Ron was safely ensconced in the Manor's dungeons, with one of the house-elves Harry didn't know as a guard. The precaution was largely unnecessary; the only way in or out of the dungeons was to Apparate, and only those accepted by the wards were allowed to do so. Not even Hermione or Pansy had access to Apparate without a member of the family, and Harry was certain that none of the Malfoys would help Ron escape. *Or me*, he amended, his lips quirking at the knowledge that as a soon-to-be member of the Malfoy family, the privilege extended to him as well.

"I'm not going, so you can stop transferring money and talk to me," Harry snapped, drawing Draco's attention.

"You *are* going, and you're taking Pansy and Hermione with you. And Mother."

"I'm not. We can send them – I think we should. But I'm staying here with you and Lucius."

Draco wanted to send him to the safe house, since it was under a Fidelius, but Harry refused to go. He knew he was safe at the Manor – the wards had proven that yesterday, when Ron hadn't been able to get in.

"What do you think he wants?"

Draco sighed, dragging a hand through his hair. Harry knew it was a sign of extreme aggravation, since the blond rarely did anything that mussed his usually perfect locks.

"I don't know," he admitted, pushing the ledger away and drawing Harry into his lap. He pressed a kiss to his temple, wrapping his arms around the dark-haired man. "That's part of what bothers me so much. We don't know what he wants, or what his motivation for coming to you was. It could be part of their plan."

"A Trojan Horse?"

Draco laughed, resting his chin on Harry's shoulder.

"I don't think so. He wouldn't be able to help get them in the wards. The dungeons are guarded against Portkeys, too, so no worries there. More like a red herring."

Harry's brow creased as he puzzled over Draco's words. He traced a pattern on Draco's chest absently, relishing the feel of the soft cashmere under his fingers.

"Trying to draw me out?"

"Potentially," Draco said, nudging Harry with his knee. Harry hopped out of his lap, and Draco stood, walking toward the window.

"Where, though?"

Draco shrugged slightly as he paced, his stormy grey eyes narrowed as he thought. He nodded toward the parchment in Harry's hand.

"Is that from Abramson?"

"Kingsley," Harry answered, tossing it to Draco. "Someone leaked Ginny's escape. It should be in the papers tomorrow."

"What does he make of it? Anything new?" Draco asked, closing his hand around the scroll but making no move to read it.

It was Harry's turn to shrug negligently, the action carefully orchestrated to portray a sense of indifference and calm he definitely didn't feel. He wanted to assure Draco that he could handle himself, though, and strove to be as composed as possible so he didn't give the blond any more reason to ship him off.

"The same thing we do. He warned me to be careful, and he suggested I stay inside the Manor's wards whenever possible. They have a team of Aurors looking for her, but if she's under Fidelius like Ron says, they probably won't find her anytime soon."

"Harry, you can't count on–"

"I know," Harry said, stopping Draco's lecture before it could begin. "I know. But I'll be damned if I'm going to sit around like a bloody helpless woman while you and Lucius go out to protect our family."

"A *what?*" Hermione shrieked from the doorway, her eyes narrowed to slits. "*What* did you say, Harry James Potter?"

Fuck, he thought, wondering if there would be enough of him left for Rodolphus to kill after Hermione finished.

"I just want to help," he said lamely, cringing as the scarlet-faced witch advanced on him.

"Instead of sitting around with the rest of the helpless women?" she asked, her tone scathing. "If you'd been with *me*, instead of gnashing your teeth and growling uselessly like a Grindylow hopped up on testosterone all day, maybe you'd actually have *accomplished* something today."

Draco raised an eyebrow, waiting for the inevitable bloodbath. He'd gladly step between Harry and all manner of danger, but he drew the line at an enraged Hermione. He was sure she knew hexes that could literally make his skin crawl, and he wasn't stupid enough to interfere.

"I'm surprised you could get anything done, what with the sound of all the gnashing and growling in here," Harry said, frowning at her.

Hermione rolled her eyes, squashing her desire to laugh. This was no laughing matter.

"As a matter of fact, I did," she said haughtily. "I've figured out how to track Ginny despite the Fidelius. Would you like me to share, or should I go back to sitting and being *helpless* somewhere?"

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Chapter: 25

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. I own nothing. JKR is a god.

"It's too risky," Harry said, folding his arms across his chest emphatically. They'd been arguing about this for most of the evening, and he hadn't budged from his original stance. "I won't do it."

"It's less risky than having to look over your shoulder constantly for the rest of your life," Pansy

said, her face drawn and anxious. She rested a hand protectively over her belly – shielding the child that, while not biologically hers, had become very important to her."The rest of *his* life, too."

"You don't know it's a boy, Pans," Draco said absently, correcting her as he often did when she spoke about the baby. "And have a little faith. We'll find her some other way. Harry's right. It's too dangerous."

Hermione slammed a hand down on the table, rattling the dinner service that hadn't been cleared away yet.

"It's *not*," she said, her eyes blazing. "Do you think I would put your child at risk? I wouldn't, not even for this. It's perfectly safe. Healers do it all the time."

Hermione wanted to draw a tiny amount of the baby's blood to use in a *Defluo Cognatus* spell, a type of blood magic that could be used to track a lost relative. It was one of the only types of blood magic the Ministry condoned.

"It would be safe if a Healer did it, but it's not the kind of thing we can just waltz into St. Mungo's for," Draco said, his tone brusque.

Hermione smiled, happy the blond had danced nicely into her trap.

"How fortunate we know a Healer who makes house calls, then," she said, winking at Pansy. "He'll be here tonight."

"This would be best if I had the baby's full name," Theo said, turning to look at Harry and Draco. They were in Pansy's room, where she could recline comfortably on the bed. He glanced down at his wand again, recording Pansy's pulse. "The more specific the spell is, the less risk there is."

"You said there wasn't any risk!" Harry cried, wrenching his hand from Draco's to advance on the Healer.

"I said there was very *little* risk," Theo corrected, tapping his wand to Pansy's chart to transfer the vitals he'd just taken. "There's always a small risk of complications from any medical procedure, especially one performed on an unborn child."

"We're not doing it," Harry said, his face stony. He glanced at Pansy, who looked unsure for the first time.

"Harry, there are risks to any spell. I imagine you use *Pilo* every morning to shave, right?" Theo asked, squeezing Pansy's hand. Harry nodded. "Did you know you risk eliminating all of your body hair every time you use the spell? Worst case, you could actually slit your throat with it. But you don't, because you were trained how to use the spell correctly. You gauge how much power to put into the spell subconsciously, and your intent is clear when you cast."

Harry's frown deepened as he considered Theo's words. He understood the Healer's point. Even mundane spells carried an inherent risk if they were administered inappropriately.

"The same is true of the spell I'll use on the baby," Theo continued, seeing his words were having the desired effect on Harry. Pansy had also relaxed slightly, her fingers no longer rigid in his. "I've done this spell hundreds – if not thousands – of times. Drawing blood is routine. It's a bit more complicated in this case, which is why I asked for the baby's name. Using it will help me focus my magic on my precise intent, meaning the procedure is that much safer."

Draco cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention. Hermione stood next to him, her hand on his shoulder.

"I think we should go ahead, Harry," he said, studying the dark-haired man's face. "I trust Theo. He's taken great care of Pans so far, and you know he'd never do anything to intentionally put her or the baby at risk."

"I've read about using the spell on unborn babies, Harry," Hermione said, squeezing Draco's shoulder. "It's perfectly safe. All the Healing journals say so."

Harry looked at Pansy, his only ally. When he saw her eyes flick from Theo's face to his own, he knew he'd lost her, too.

"Alright," he sighed, stepping away from the bed. "Corvus Parkinson Potter Malfoy or Cassiopeia Pansy Potter Malfoy."

Pansy, who hadn't heard their choices for middle names before, teared up at the words. Draco grinned and rolled his eyes at her show of emotion, drawing a slightly watery smile from the witch.

Theo nodded slightly, drawing a small glass vial out of his bag. He held it up to the light, inspecting it for any tiny imperfections. Finding none, he cast a quick Sterilizing spell on it, letting it hover in the air so he didn't re-contaminate it with his hands.

"Do you want to step out for the procedure?" he asked, knowing Harry and Draco wanted to be surprised by the sex of their child, which he'd have to cast a spell to determine so he could use the correct name.

"How long will it take?"

"Just a few seconds," Theo assured Harry, patting Pansy's hand. "Neither Pansy nor the baby will feel anything. As soon as I have the name, I'll cast the spell to retrieve some of the baby's blood. That will be painless, too."

Harry and Draco exchanged a hesitant look. They both wanted to be there in case anything went

wrong, but at the same time, they didn't want to learn the sex of the baby if they could avoid it.

"Go," Hermione said, giving Draco a shove toward the door. "I'll stay with Pansy, and we'll call you as soon as it's over."

Theo waited until the two men had closed the door behind them before drawing his wand. He held it over Pansy's swollen belly, his gaze locked with hers as he cast the spell. The air above her shimmered slightly before a blurry image of the baby materialized. Theo studied it for a moment, Banishing the image when he found what he was looking for.

"Poor kid," he said, smirking. "Corvus. What a name to saddle a kid with – like life isn't going to be hard enough for him as is, being the son of a Potter and a Malfoy."

Pansy squealed, reaching out to grab Hermione and drag her closer.

"I was right! I just *knew* it!" She rested both of her hands against her belly, palm side down. "Hello in there, Corvus! You're going to be the most perfect baby ever, aren't you?"

Hermione laughed, touching her own palm to Pansy's stomach.

"Don't listen to the bad man, Corvus," she crooned, leaning in so she could speak directly to Pansy's bump. "Your daddies will hex anyone who even thinks about teasing you."

Theo laughed, flicking his wand in a complicated pattern that brought the image back, hovering off to the side this time.

"I want to monitor the baby, just in case," he explained, Summoning the vial to his side. "I'm not expecting any problems, mind you, but I like to be cautious."

Pansy swallowed and nodded, her eyes wide with fear, all lightheartedness forgotten as Theo touched the tip of his wand to her stomach. She and Hermione watched the projected image, holding their breath.

"This will be over in just a second, Pans," Theo said, his voice low and assuring. "*Minuo* Corvus Parkinson Potter Malfoy."

He drew his wand away, tapping it with a soft tink against the side of the hovering glass vial. The vial immediately began to fill with blood, stopping as soon as Theo removed his wand. He narrowed his eyes to inspect the hovering image, apparently happy with what he saw, since it promptly disappeared. The whole procedure took less than five seconds.

"All finished," he said, muttering a spell that capped the vial, which dropped into his waiting hand. He handed it to Hermione with a smile, flourishing his wand again and Conjuring a large lollypop for her as well.

"A little Muggle humor," he whispered conspiratorially to Pansy, winking at Hermione. "Their Healers – doctors, they call them – always finish procedures by presenting candy."

Hermione laughed, eyeing the lollypop appraisingly.

"Where's mine, then?" Pansy said, jutting her lower lip out in a mock pout. "I deserve two. I'm eating for Corvus, too, you know."

Theo brandished his wand again, a bouquet of forsythia and gardenias appearing in his other hand. Another flick, and a basket of Chocoballs and an assortment of other Honeydukes' chocolates materialized on the bed near Pansy. She grinned in delight, reaching out to take the fragrant flowers from him.

Theo leaned forward, burying his face in her dark hair and breathing in her scent. He pressed a kiss against her warm throat, his lips quirking when he heard her breath catch.

"Anticipation and secret love, Healer?" she asked, her voice pitched for his ears only.

Theo blushed slightly, sitting back. Hermione quickly excused herself on the pretense of fetching Harry and Draco.

"The language of flowers never lies," he whispered, winking at her. "And I think the chocolate states my case rather well, too."

"Just one more time, Hermione," Harry said, his brow furrowed as he thought.

"Fine," the witch sighed, smoothing out the map in front of her. They'd been discussing this since lunch, and Harry's reluctance was wearing on her nerves. "I will dip the scrying crystal into the vial with C-" Hermione broke off, unspeakably grateful that both names the men had chosen started with the same letter. She'd nearly slipped twice already, and Pansy wasn't faring much better. "– the baby's blood and say the incantation. I'll then hold the crystal over the map, and it should point us to the general area where Ginny is."

"And it works even if she's under Fidelius?"

"Even if she's under Fidelius," Hermione agreed, nodding. She had several maps spread out around her – one of Great Britain and several that covered most of the Continent. They thought it unlikely Molly and Ginny had left the country, but they could try again with other maps if this yielded nothing. "Shall I start?"

Harry opened his mouth again, but Draco took him by the shoulders, forcing him into a nearby chair. "Yes," he said, sending a stern look at his fiancé. Harry was worried Draco would leave him behind in the search for Ginny, and he'd spent the afternoon stalling.

Hermione stretched before hunching over the map in front of her, the scrying crystal she'd gotten

from Lucius clutched in her hand. She carefully opened the small vial of blood, letting the crystal's silver chain unfurl so she could dip it inside. A tiny amount of crimson liquid adhered to the point of the crystal, and Hermione re-capped the vial, just in case they needed more blood to try again.

She tapped her wand to the crystal, concentrating as she said the incantation. "*Parens Reperio*," she said, focusing all her will on finding Ginny.

The crystal shimmered and glowed slightly, pulling on the silver chain in Hermione's hand as it sought Ginny's location on the map. The crystal spun and shuttered, changing direction several times before honing in on a tiny island off the coast of Wales. The crystal dropped heavily on the map, the blood marking the location clearly.

"Holyhead?" Harry asked, incredulous. "She's hiding in *Holyhead?* As in, the home base for her Quidditch team?"

Draco laughed, shaking his head.

"Apparently," he murmured, taking a closer look at the dot on the map, trying to forget the fact that the mark was his child's blood. "She may be hiding out with a teammate, or maybe a fan."

"That would complicate the Fidelius," Harry said, squinting as he studied the map. "Maybe they're not using one."

"It might just be an intermediate stop," Hermione said, casting a Cleaning charm on the crystal and returning it to the velvet-lined box where Lucius kept it. "We should move quickly, just in case they don't plan to stay there long."

"We should," Harry agreed, folding the map and stuffing it in his pocket. "We'll go just as soon as we get you, Narcissa and Pansy to the safe house."

Hermione rolled her eyes, Summoning the map from Harry's pocket. She grabbed it as it flew toward her, rolling it up and smacking him over the head with it.

"Don't be an idiot," she sniffed, inspecting the map and daintily placing it in her bag.

"You're not all going with us, and there's no way I'd leave Pansy here unprotected!" Harry yelled, his jaw clenched.

"Nor would I expect you to," Hermione conceded. "But *I* am going with you. Lucius can go with Narcissa and Pansy."

"That's –"

"A good idea," Draco finished, cutting Harry off. He shrugged off his glare easily. "Father's one

misstep away from Azkaban. You said so yourself, Harry. He shouldn't go with us."

"But Hermione –"

"Is a brilliant, capable witch who can look out for herself? Yes, I quite agree," Draco said, smirking at Harry's reddening face. "Let's tell the others what we're doing. We can have Pansy in Bulgaria by dinner, and we can leave for Holyhead at first light."

"Bulgaria?" Harry asked, so surprised by the location of the safe house that he forgot to argue.

"Of course. Did you think I learned the language for fun?" Draco asked, rolling his eyes.

"So Krum?"

"Helped us, yes," Draco said, nodding. "I owe him a great deal for that."

Harry glanced at Hermione, who was poring over a spell book in the corner, and raised his eyebrows suggestively.

"I wouldn't, Potter," Draco warned, following Harry's gaze. "She'd send you arse over ears if you so much as suggested that getting them back together was part of repaying Krum's kindness."

Aware that he'd baited Hermione far past her boundaries over the last few days, Harry just nodded sagely, pulling Draco closer for a kiss. He favored Draco with a lopsided grin when they broke apart, leaning in to whisper in his ear.

"Arse over ears?"

Draco chuckled, his skin heating at Harry's words.

"It could be arranged, if you'd like to take your punishment with me instead," he purred, laughing when Harry nodded emphatically.

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Chapter: 26

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They're fun to play with, but they aren't mine.

"Was I close?" Pansy asked, her face pinched with concentration.

"*Ne*," Draco answered from across the room, where he and Harry were using Shatter-proof

charms on several vials of Healing potions for their trip. "Try this one. Repeat after me: *Balgarskiiat mi e losh."*

Viktor frowned at Draco, shaking his head.

"*Ne pravi taka*, Draco," he chided. He turned to Pansy, smiling. "*Da*, Pansy, very close."

"What did he say?" she asked Viktor, narrowing her eyes at Draco, who was smirking.

"'My Bulgarian is very bad'," Draco translated, laughing. "And I was being generous. Besides, Krum wasn't teaching you anything useful."

"I don't need to know anything useful," the dark-haired witch snapped, crossing her arms over her swollen belly. "I won't be leaving the house, remember? Not that I mind. It's not like we're going to be in Costa Rica."

"*Balgarya e welikolepna strana,"* Draco said solemnly, earning a smile and a nod from Viktor.

"Draco says Bulgaria is a wonderful country, and he's right. Let's try again," he said, slipping into Bulgarian and speaking very slowly, enunciating each syllable. "*As hareswarm balgarskiiat."*

"She doesn't," Draco said, cutting Pansy off before she could repeat the words.

"I don't what?"

"Like Bulgarian."

"Fair enough," Pansy said, tossing the blanket off her lap and struggling to her feet.

She was already enormous – to her mind, at least –and she couldn't imagine what she'd look like by April, when the baby was due. The Healers had originally proposed magically inducing labor in March, but she'd had a change of heart over the last month. She wanted Corvus to be as healthy as possible, which meant carrying him to term if she could. Viktor stood quickly and grabbed her arms, easing her up out of the window seat.

"*Blagodaria,"* she said clearly, throwing a pointed look across the room at Draco, who actually looked impressed.

"You're very welcome," Viktor said, bowing to her. "You'll have a better accent than Draco's in no time."

Draco just laughed and shook his head, advancing on Pansy with his arms out, dramatically contrite. He enveloped her in a hug, kissing her cheek.

"You did amazingly well, Pans," he said, wrinkling his nose at Viktor. "It took me much longer to

even make that much progress, and we had the same teacher."

"I still don't see why we couldn't hide out somewhere warm and sunny, like Costa Rica," she said, peering into the canvas bag Harry was filling with supplies.

"I was all for it," he said, holding up his hands. "Talk to Mr. Moneybags about that one. He's the one who didn't want to drop the Galleons for a new safe house."

"What, when we had a perfectly good one just gathering dust in Bulgaria?" Draco cried in mock offense. "I can see I'll have to watch my pocketbook around you, Potter. Are you just marrying me for my money?"

Harry dropped a kiss on Draco's nose, earning a laugh from their audience.

"Money, schmoney," he said dismissively, running possessive hands down Draco's sides, squeezing his arse. "I'm marrying you for your body, and don't you forget it."

"*Bolen sam,"* Viktor moaned, making gagging noises at the display.

Draco rifled through the bedside table, throwing the last odds and ends he thought they'd need into his satchel. Harry and Hermione were waiting for Viktor to return from Bulgaria, since he offered to accompany Pansy and the Malfoys to the safe house. It was hard for Pansy to Apparate long distances, even by Side-Along, which meant the normally five-minute trip took closer to an hour, giving the pregnant witch a chance to recover between each of the short legs of Apparition.

He tapped his wand to Harry's spare pair of glasses, muttering an incantation that would render them unbreakable. He carelessly tossed them on top of the pile of things in his bag, satisfied the charm would do its job and keep them safe.

Draco's lips quirked when his fingers touched the bottle of Muggle lube Harry had given him for Christmas. It was meant as a gag gift, since they relied on magic most of the time to Conjure whatever they needed, but Draco had been quite intrigued by the slippery substance, which warmed on contact, resulting in some very interesting sensations. *There must be a charm that does the same thing*, he thought absently, pushing the bottle further into the drawer. He stopped when he felt unexpected resistance, stooping to peer into the deep drawer to see what the small bottle was caught on. *Papers?* he wondered, batting the bottle aside so he could grab the parchment, which had curled haphazardly around itself when it was shoved inside.

A gasp escaped his lips as he thumbed through the pages. It was the letter George had written Harry, given to them by Abramson more than two weeks ago. George had jotted a quick note of apology across the top, telling Harry he regretted challenging him for custody of Ginny's baby, and that he hoped Harry and Draco would be able to forgive him in time. What caught Draco's attention, though, were the neat lines of dates – a few even precise enough to list the time – that filled the rest of the page.

It wasn't Ginny; it was Ron, Draco thought, thumbing through the pages. Each was filled, just like the first, with dates and other observations. A log of Ron's suspicious activity over the last four months – lists of times he'd disappeared, along with a few notations of times George or Angelina had actually seen Ron while he was Polyjuiced as Draco. They'd known he was up to something, but unsure of what it was, had written down their suspicions.

"That bastard," Draco hissed, his eyes widening as he realized just how often Ron had seduced Pansy wearing his body. It was much worse than he and Harry had thought; Ron had been with Pansy for hours a day, several times a week between September and late November. "That *fucking* bastard!"

Draco's outrage quickly turned to curiosity when he reached the last page. A thin slip of paper was attached, with a note in handwriting that wasn't George's –*Angelina's, maybe?* he wondered – that said simply "*Patesco* N.N.". It was an O.W.L.-level spell most merchants used on their receipts to keep the customer's information private – unless you knew what store the receipt came from, it was next to impossible to reveal the contents of the slip. Draco hesitated, tempted to try to puzzle out the note instead of heading off to Holyhead.

"Are you in here?" Hermione called, poking her head in the suite's half-open door. "Viktor's back."

"Yes – I'm coming," Draco said, shoving the papers and receipt back into the drawer. "I'll meet you out there."

They'd had the letter for a few weeks already – it was more important to follow Ginny to Holyhead, since she could leave at any time, he decided. He shot a complex Locking spell at the drawer, ensuring no one other than he or Harry could open it.

Viktor and Hermione were wrapped around each other in a corner of the entryway, kissing as though they'd never see each other again. Draco cleared his throat as he entered, catching Viktor's amused grin as he reluctantly pulled away from the brunette witch. Draco smirked, certain Viktor had used the opportunity at least in part as revenge for Harry's earlier arse grab.

"Are we ready? Harry has the coordinates, so we should probably just Side-Along with him," he said to Hermione, who had crossed over to stand next to the two of them.

"*Iskash li pomosht?"* Viktor asked, his eyes shifting from Draco to Hermione.

Viktor wanted to come along, but Hermione didn't want to put him in danger, too. Draco wanted him to stay for an entirely different reason – there was a Magpies game in just a few hours, and he didn't want the team's coach to miss it.

"*Ne*," Draco answered.

Hermione huffed, figuring out what the men were talking about even though she didn't

understand the language. *I'm going to have to learn Bulgarian,* she thought to herself, *or at least find a good Translation spell.*

"Honestly, Viktor," she sighed, rolling her eyes. "We'll be fine."

"I'd say I'd take care of her, but I think she'd take a chunk out of my hide for the sentiment," Draco said, grinning at the witch's narrowed eyes. "So I'll say we'll all take care of each other. *Ne se trevoji,* Krum. Hermione's right. She'll be fine.″

The Bulgarian nodded gravely, kissing Hermione hard one last time before stepping back so they could Apparate.

"*Vnimavai*," he said to Draco, knowing the Slytherin would do anything necessary to get to Ginny, even at great risk to himself. Draco had become important to him since the war ended – he didn't want to see the blond hurt any more than he did Hermione.

"*Da*," Draco answered, returning Viktor's nod right before they Disapparated.

"It's cold."

"It's January in Wales, Harry; *of course* it's cold. Now shut up," Hermione snapped, leveling her wand at his back and casting a Warming charm. "You could have done that yourself – without a wand! – if you'd just thought about it a moment instead of complaining."

"You don't have to be here if you don't like how I'm acting," Harry spat back, tucking his freezing hands inside the pockets of his dark denims.

One of the limitations of the blood tracking spell was that it could only give a general location. They'd spent the last four hours skulking around Holyhead, checking around the outskirts of the island town for any sign of Ginny or Molly. So far, they'd come up short.

"I don't like how either of you are acting," Draco groused, pulling his wool trench coat tighter around himself. "And I hate this coat. Why don't Muggles just wear cloaks? They're much warmer."

Hermione sighed again, Transfiguring Draco's stylish coat into a thick down parka. They were all alone – no Muggles were foolish enough to climb the large hill known as Holyhead Mountain just outside the town proper on such a bitter winter night.

"You're lucky I like you," Draco complained, smoothing out the thick parka. "You shouldn't just cast on someone without warning. It's a good way to get hexed."

"You know what else is a good way to get hexed, Draco?" Harry grumbled, stumbling slightly on the rocky ground as they wandered around the remains of *Caer y Twr*, an ancient Roman watchtower. The blond's petulant attitude had been getting on his nerves all night.

The entire island was covered with prehistoric magical and Muggle remains. Parts of it fairly vibrated with magical energy, and the feeling had put all three of them on edge. Combined with their frustrating lack of results and the chilly, damp sea air, it was enough to have them sniping at each other frequently.

"Provoking me when I'm cold and tired?"

"You're not the only –"

Harry's words died out as Hermione shouted from a few meters away. Both men hurried to her side, anxious to find out what had caused her to send up the alarm.

"Why didn't I think of this sooner?" she asked no one in particular, crouching to examine a piece of ancient, weathered stone jutting out of the ground.

Neither Harry nor Draco said anything. They both knew it would do no good to rush Hermione – asking questions only slowed down her thought process and annoyed her.

Draco shoved his hands in his pockets, impatiently waiting for Hermione to help them follow whatever intuitive leap she'd just made. Harry shifted restlessly from foot to foot next to him, and Draco had to fist his hands to quell the urge to reach out and grab the man. He found Harry's tendency to fidget especially infuriating at the moment.

Hermione stood, holding out her hands to the two men. *We must be Apparating wherever she thinks we should check next*, Draco thought, grasping her upturned palm. He fervently hoped it was somewhere away from the blasted wind, preferably indoors.

Harry braced himself for the uncomfortable squeeze of Apparition, closing his eyes tightly. He'd found the most reliable way to ease the nausea of magical travel was to avoid watching whenever possible. When the tight feeling failed to materialized, he opened his eyes, looking straight into Hermione's expectant gaze.

"Well?" she asked, cocking her head.

All Harry felt was the warmth of Hermione's palm through her gloves. His own fingers were stiff from the cold, since he refused to wear gloves in any situation in which he might need to access his wand quickly. It was a throw-back to his Auror days, when the briefest hesitation before casting – even just the slight slip of wood against wool – could have cost him his life. He noticed Draco – despite his lamentations about being freezing – had also forgone covering his hands.

"What do you feel?" she asked, turning to look at each of them.

"What are we supposed to feel?" Harry asked, shifting his weight restlessly again. Draco rolled his eyes.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake!" she said with an exasperated sigh, jerking her arms so the two men stood next to each other, still grasping her hands. "Hold hands."

The men eyed each other warily. Clasping their free hands would mean giving up easy access to their wands. Neither wanted to do that – they were too on edge.

"Just do it!" Hermione yelled, tightening her grip on their hands to the point of pain.

They hesitated slightly before complying. The change in atmosphere was instantaneous. Suddenly, the edgy, uncomfortable feeling of alertness was gone. The air seemed to still, the gentle breeze calming rather than disquieting. Harry felt the tension flow out of him, his shoulders visibly relaxing as his hostility ebbed. Suddenly, Draco didn't look so haughty in his over-sized parka – in fact, the blond looked cute swathed in the shiny Muggle fabric.

"Of course. *Locus Infeste*," Draco whispered, squeezing the hands he held. He grinned at Hermione. "You really are the brightest witch of our generation, you know. How did you figure it out?"

Hermione shrugged, the movement lost in the voluminous Muggle coat she wore.

"I've been to areas with concentrated ancient magic. You can even feel it around Wiltshire. The atmosphere was wrong here. It should shimmer, not crackle. The energies should comfort us, not make us anxious."

"I should have picked up on that," he said, grimacing. "I've lived near Stonehenge all my life, and both the Manor and Hogwarts are teeming with this kind of energy. Not on this wild scale, but still."

"Could one of you enlighten me?" Harry asked, drawing their attention back to him. "I assume it has something to do with the fact that I no longer want to hex the hell out of either of you, but I'm not sure why."

"A localized hostility spell," Draco said, not releasing Harry or Hermione. "One of them blanketed the area with them. There's probably a good Confundus or two in there as well. Someone knew we'd be able to follow Ginny through the baby's blood. The spells were meant to distract us, probably so they could get further away."

"We'd have noticed if it was anywhere but a magically hot place like this," Hermione said, casting a glance around the rocky hillside. "There are magical remains all over the Isle of Anglesey. They knew we'd waste a lot of time looking around here before we noticed the spell at work."

"If we noticed it at all," Draco said grimly, squeezing their hands again. "Witches and wizards have been known to kill people under the influence of that spell. I was close to hexing both of

you several times."

"Me too," Harry said, shuddering at the thought of hurting one of them. It seemed so obvious that the bickering and hostility of the last few hours were spell-induced now, though they had felt real at the time. "What should we do?"

"Well, first, we need to get out of here," Draco said. "The field is negated by contact, but the instant we let go of each other all those feelings will return."

"Home, then?" Hermione asked.

"Let's go straight to Krum," Draco said. "I think we're going to need his help, after all. He'll be at the stadium. We can Apparate to his office and wait out the rest of the game."

They nodded, steeling themselves for Draco to take them there by Side-Along.

"Harry, you've been there before, right?" Draco asked suddenly, thinking of the papers he'd left in their bedside table. Harry nodded. "You take Hermione there. I'll join you in a minute. There's something I need to pick up at home."

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Chapter: 27

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. Not mine.

"Look. The dates match perfectly," Hermione said, her gaze shifting between Pansy's deposition and the letter from George.

"But what do we do with the information?" Harry asked, scooting his chair closer to the fire. Warming charms were alright, but nothing matched the feel in of actually *being* warm. Luckily, Viktor's office had a large fireplace."Turn it over to the Aurors when we let them have Ron?"

"Who said we were letting them have Ron?" Draco asked, not looking up from the large book in his lap, *The Guide to Wizarding Shopping*, another item he'd grabbed from the Manor on his brief detour home. He was trying to figure out what store the receipt was from, but coming up short. He missed Harry's sharp look, since his face was buried in a map of Tinworth's wizarding shopping district.

"Of course we're giving Ron over to the Aurors," Harry said, looking to Hermione for help. The witch just shook her head, rising from her seat to study the photos Viktor had hung on the wall. "Hermione!"

"I'm sorry, Harry, but I really don't care what happens to Ron," she said, squinting to watch a tiny Viktor fly a victory lap after catching the Snitch in a game last year. She paused, amending her statement. "So long as it's nothing *good*."

Draco jumped up, the book tumbling to the ground, forgotten. Viktor's desk had parchment scattered all over it – pages of George's letter, Pansy's deposition, maps of Holyhead – and the blond rifled through them impatiently until his fingers closed over the blank receipt.

He tapped it with his wand. "*Patesco* Nocens' Notions."

Ink began to materialize, faded at first, then easily readable. It was a receipt for powdered Bicorn horn, Knotgrass, Boomslang skin, fluxweed, lacewing flies and leeches, dated early September. The customer had billed the potions ingredients to her store account. Fleur Weasley.

"Merciful Merlin!" Draco yelled, a grin stretching his face. "Finally, something we can use! This is perfect! It's exactly what we need to fight their custody claim!"

Harry read over the receipt again, unsure how Fleur's shopping list could do them any good.

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione cried, wrapping her arms around him. "This is fantastic!"

"What? Why is the fact that Fleur bought Boomslang, fluxweed, lacewing flies and Bicorn horn useful? Are they poisonous? Could they hurt the baby?"

"They make Polyjuice, Harry," Krum said from the doorway. The game must have just ended – Harry could hear the crowd milling around near the entrance to the team locker room, waiting for a chance to see their favorite players. "Honestly, what did they *teach* you in that school of yours?"

"Don't judge Hogwarts by Harry," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

"Hey!" Hermione said, sticking up for her bewildered friend. "Harry had a lot on his mind during school. Like an evil wizard with delusions of grandeur trying to kill him."

Harry started to thank her, but she wasn't finished.

"Of course, one would think you'd know this potion, since we brewed it in first year. Really, Harry, do you *ever* pay attention?"

"So Fleur brewed the Polyjuice on Ginny's behalf?"

"It would seem so," Draco said, bending to retrieve the book from the floor. He flipped back to the map of Cornwall. "Does she usually shop in Tinworth?"

"She would, yes," Hermione said, running her finger over the small dots that denoted the towns in the region. "They live right about here," she said, resting her finger on the coast. "A place called Shell Cottage. It's just outside of Tinworth."

Draco pumped his fist in the air, flashing his teeth as he smiled. "George! I could kiss him!"

"I wouldn't," Harry and Hermione said at the same time. They looked at each other, blushing slightly and laughing.

"Nothing good ever comes of kissing a Weasley," Harry said solemnly, winking at Hermione.

"Too true."

Viktor and Hermione had already Apparated home, leaving Harry and Draco in Viktor's office, where they were updating Abramson on their latest findings via Fire-call.

"This is good news, gentlemen," the lawyer assured them, reaching through the Floo to take the parchment Harry offered him.

"We'll have their motion thrown out before the baby is born," the wizard said, smiling at Harry. "I'll have someone visit this store – Nocens' Notions, you said? – to verify that Fleur Weasley shops there. We can subpoena their records as well, so we can show the charges to her account."

"Thank you," Draco said, feeling hopeful about their future for the first time since Ron's arrival at the Manor.

"My pleasure, Mr. Malfoy," Abramson said. "I trust you and Mr. Potter are being careful? I saw the news of Miss Weasley's unfortunate escape from Azkaban."

"We are – taking measures to protect ourselves, yes," Draco said slowly, choosing his words carefully. If things ended the way he hoped, he might need the lawyer's help later. He didn't want to put the man in an uncomfortable – or unethical – position. "No need to worry."

"I see," Abramson said, his eyebrows rising in a manner that made Draco think he really *did* see. *I really need to remember to ask him what House he was in,* Draco thought, more certain than ever that the answer would be Slytherin.

"Yes," Draco nodded, slinging an arm around Harry's shoulder.

"I'll be in touch," the lawyer said, closing their connection before Draco could say anything more.

Harry leaned into Draco, letting the blond shoulder more of his weight as he sagged against him.

"That's one thing fixed, I suppose, but what about Ginny?"

Draco dropped his head to rest on Harry's, sighing.

"We'll head back to Holyhead in the morning," he said, kissing Harry's messy hair and turning the man around so they faced each other. "It's late, and we need to give Hermione a chance to figure out how to counter the *Locus Infeste* spells they spread around the island before we go back. It needs to be done – Muggles are susceptible to it, too. I wouldn't be surprised to hear the crime rate exploded there today."

Harry nodded, burrowing into Draco's warm neck. He was still chilled from their expedition earlier.

"So, since there's nothing we could be doing to find Ginny tonight, why don't we indulge in something fun?"

Harry lifted his head, narrowing his eyes at Draco's innocent tone.

"We're here, at the stadium, all alone," Draco said, his smile growing with every word. Challenge sparkled in his eyes. "It occurs to me that this is the perfect opportunity to act out one of your fantasies, Mr. Potter."

Harry's pulse jumped. He was tired and stressed, but his body still responded to Draco's suggestion. He backed out of Draco's embrace, falling into the chair. Draco raised his eyebrows suggestively, perching a hip on the side of Viktor's desk.

"I- I never expected to have my interview with the team's *owner*, Mr. Malfoy," Harry said, his voice timid and unsure. He intertwined his fingers, fidgeting nervously.

"I like to inspect my players' *talents* personally," Draco said, his shoulders squared. He looked every bit the business mogul he was, even in the Muggle clothes he was still wearing. "I need to figure out if the players would be a *good fit* for the team before we sign them."

Harry chewed on his bottom lip nervously, knowing the move would draw Draco's attention to his mouth. Grey eyes zeroed in on the slightly swollen flesh, and Draco felt his cock jump at the sight of Harry's red, wet lips.

"I didn't bring my broom, but I'd be happy to use one of the team's, if you want to watch me in action," Harry offered, swallowing hard when he saw the interest flash in Draco's eyes.

"Oh, I'd like to see you in action, Mr. Potter," Draco assured him, rising from the desk. "I've always found the private boxes are the best place from which to watch the pitch. Join me, will you?"

Harry stood, his erection straining against the stiff cloth of his Muggle denims. He saw Draco's eyes travel down his body, lingering on the hard ridge visible at his crotch. *Robes definitely have*

some advantages, Harry thought, fighting the urge to smile. Draco looked so damn hot playing the part of the licentious and haughty team owner.

"Don't you want to see me ride a broom, Mr. Malfoy?" Harry asked, enjoying the slight shudder he saw ripple through his fiancé at the words.

"I do, Mr. Potter," Draco said, sweeping the office door open and gesturing for Harry to follow. "I have a very special broom in mind."

Harry almost laughed at the corny line. He could see the corners of Draco's mouth quirk as well, and he knew the blond was having just as much fun playing out this little fantasy as he was.

"I'll ride any broom you like, Mr. Malfoy," Harry said earnestly, following Draco up the stairs to the Owner's Suite. "Anything to get this position. I've dreamed of playing Seeker for the Magpies for years."

Draco stopped in front of his personal suite, tapping his wand against the door to gain entry. They hadn't spent much time at the stadium recently, but it used to be one of their favorite places for secret rendezvous when Harry was still married. Harry had joined him for most of the home Magpies games for the last four years, though they'd been more intent on the game being played *inside* the suite than the one out on the pitch.

Harry breathed deeply, letting the scent of Quidditch leathers and Draco's cologne sweep over him. The elder Malfoys rarely visited the stadium, since Narcissa hated Quidditch. As a result, the room was purely Draco, from the elegant fabrics on the furniture to the photos that lined the walls – dozens of shots of both Draco and Harry in their Quidditch glory days at Hogwarts. The last photo in the line was of the two of them, sitting closer than propriety allowed, cheering for their respective teams at the final Slytherin/Gryffindor match of their Hogwarts years. They hadn't been allowed to play – as returning seventh-years, their class had been deemed ineligible for sports – but they'd taken to watching the games together as their friendship grew.

Harry watched their younger versions bump shoulders and joke in the photo. Then *it* happened. One of the worst moments of Harry's life. A Bludger careened into the shot, slamming into Draco's head. Harry shuddered as he watched it, mirroring the expression on his younger self, still horrified to see it happen, despite knowing Draco was fine now. Draco's body crumbled, falling heavily against Harry. The crowd erupted around them, the bleachers emptying as Slytherins of all ages poured onto the pitch, followed by most of the Gryffindors, who ran to defend their Beater. Ginny hovered at the edge of the frame, glowering at them, her bat still raised.

Draco turned toward the back of the room to say something to Harry, his lips curving into a soft smile as he saw what had captured his fiancé's attention. He knew Harry hated that photo – he flinched every time he had to re-live Draco's injury. It wasn't a pleasant memory for Draco, either, who still had headaches whenever the weather changed rapidly, a side-effect of the severe head trauma he'd suffered from Ginny's Bludger. He walked up behind Harry, resting a hand on

his shoulder as the photo progressed, revealing the reason the Slytherin had kept – and displayed – the gruesome picture.

Panicked, the younger Harry wrapped his arms around Draco's still body, supporting him so he didn't fall further. He shot a horrified look at Ginny, whose face fell when she realized her boyfriend was sticking by the injured boy instead of racing to the pitch to defend her from the growing mob of Slytherins who were gathering beneath her.

Draco's pulse jumped in anticipation as the younger Harry turned his attention back to the unconscious boy in his arms, bringing his free hand up to gently wipe the blood out of Draco's closed eyes. Then he leaned closer, whispering something in Draco's ear. His lips lingered there, hesitating a few beats before lowering to press a furtive kiss to Draco's neck.

And then it was over. The photo looped back around, showing two happy, smiling boys clad in their House colors cheering for their teams. The moment Harry and Draco's relationship had begun. Draco squeezed Harry's shoulder, pulling him away from the bank of photos.

"Reliving your old glories, Mr. Potter?" Draco teased, drawing Harry back into the present.

Harry smiled slightly, shaking his head as though trying to clear it. He understood *why* Draco kept the photo, but he wished he hadn't. His stomach lurched when he remembered the feeling of abject horror that had swept over him immediately after the Bludger struck, when he thought Draco might be dead. That was followed by months of angst and doubt, the two boys tip-toeing around their feelings until it all came to a head on graduation night. *And look at us now*, Harry thought. *Ginny's trying to come between us yet again.* He shook off the melancholy thoughts, determined to enjoy this opportunity.

"And yours, Mr. Malfoy. You were quite the Seeker in school."

"I was," Draco agreed, guiding Harry deeper into the room, settling him on the wide, comfortable sofa in front of a floor-to-ceiling glass wall that overlooked the pitch. "As were you. Which is why we're here now."

Harry shifted on the sofa, knowing Draco would correctly interpret the suggestive wiggle he gave his hips as he did.

"I'd do anything for this position on the Magpies, Mr. Malfoy," Harry said innocently, struggling not to smile.

"Your flying skills are above reproach –" Draco said, scooting closer to Harry. Their thighs were touching now, and Draco ran a pale finger up over Harry's. "—but there's more to being a successful team member than that. I need to see how you interact with others."

"Mr. Malfoy –"

"Shh," Draco said, brushing a finger against Harry's soft lips. "Do you play well with others, Mr. Potter?"

"I do. I have several recommendations from former team mates –"

"And do you have a history of taking direction well from the management?"

"I'm very flexible," Harry offered, his breath catching as Draco's hand neared his crotch. "I'm very easy to get along with."

Draco smiled, his grey eyes darkening as he let his fingers ghost over Harry's erection. The dark-haired man stiffened and groaned, his eyes falling shut at the sensation.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Harry cried, trying to sound scandalized but falling short.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" Draco asked, leaning in to kiss Harry's neck.

"Mr. Malfoy, w-what are you doing?" Harry stuttered, groaning as Draco's tongue dipped under his collar, following the line of his throat.

"I'm determining whether or not you're a good fit for the team," Draco whispered, his breath hot against Harry's skin. "It's something I do with everyone I think might do well – under me."

Harry swallowed, his hands coming up to bat at Draco's, which were busy unbuttoning Harry's shirt.

"Mr. Malfoy –"

"Didn't you say you'd do anything for this position?" Draco purred, abandoning his efforts to unbutton the Oxford shirt, wresting it open with a hard tug on the shirt tails instead, sending a shower of buttons to the floor.

"Yes, but –" Harry squeaked as Draco's mouth closed over his nipple, his hips bucking up despite his efforts to control his reaction.

"But?" Draco asked, sitting back slightly and studying Harry's face.

"I thought you wanted to watch me ride," Harry said weakly, fighting the urge to abandon the game and just attack Draco.

"Oh, but I do," Draco whispered, his voice low and seductive.

"I want to watch your tight, hard body," he continued, lowering his head again to nip at Harry's chest, "ride –" his mouth lowered again, his tongue tracing Harry's bellybutton, "—me."

He flicked his hand, Summoning his wand from his wrist holster. With another quick motion, he spelled the rest of Harry's clothes off, leaving him completely naked.

"But, I'm not gay," Harry protested, his eyes sparkling as he saw Draco hold back a laugh. It was exactly what Harry had said right before the first time they'd had sex.

"How fortunate for us that I *am*, then," Draco replied, using the response he'd given Harry all those years ago.

"Mr. Malfoy, are you saying I have to have sex with you to get this job?"

"Potter, I am telling you that in order to get this job, you must show me," Draco said, pausing to run his tongue up Harry's throbbing cock, "that you can ride *me*," he continued, and Harry shivered as he blew on the wet strip of skin, "satisfactorily."

Harry choked slightly as Draco swallowed his cock, a bolt of pure pleasure spiking through him.

"I -"

Draco removed his mouth from Harry's rock-hard member, slithering up Harry's body until they were face to face. He silenced Harry with a hard kiss.

"Choose your words carefully, Potter," Draco whispered, close enough to see that Harry's green eyes had gone nearly black with arousal. "The future of your career may well hinge on what you say next."

"Do you want me on top or bottom?" Harry asked, his voice scratchy.

"Hmm," Draco hummed, considering his options. "Well chosen. You're definitely going to bottom, Potter, but I think you need to go for a ride so I can see how you handle a bucking broom."

Harry couldn't help himself – a laugh escaped at Draco's words. The blond looked so solemn, his face a mask of sincerity. Harry bit his lip, reigning in his amusement.

"Alright, Mr. Malfoy," he agreed, meeting Draco's gaze again. "Let's see your broom."

It was Draco's turn to chuckle, his eyes sparkling with lust and amusement as he shucked his clothes quickly. He grabbed his wand, muttering a few spells to stretch and loosen Harry. The dark-haired man quirked an eyebrow at the lack of Lubrication spell, but Draco just smiled, digging in his trouser pockets for the last item he'd grabbed from the Manor – the Muggle lube.

"Do you have a fetish for Muggle sex aids, Mr. Malfoy?" Harry asked, biting his lip to hold back his gasp when Draco spread the cool liquid around his entrance.

The viscous gel began to warm immediately on contact, and Harry moaned when Draco dipped a finger in the pool of lube and traced Harry's hole, his gaze intent on Harry's face.

"Merlin," Harry gasped when Draco's finger slipped inside, the deliciously hot sensation spreading there as well.

"You're very eager to please, Mr. Potter," Draco whispered, crooking his finger in exactly the right spot to make Harry writhe.

"I'm a dedicated player," Harry agreed, squirming against Draco's hand to encourage the blond to insert another finger.

"So receptive," Draco whispered, lowering his head to suck on Harry's neck as he fingered him.

"I take –" Harry moaned as Draco twisted his fingers, "— suggestions very well."

"Is that so?" Draco asked, withdrawing his fingers and settling himself on his back against the cool leather of the sofa. He grabbed the bottle of lube again, coating his own cock with it this time. He hissed out a breath as the liquid warmed, almost enough to be uncomfortable. "I suggest you come over here and sit on my cock."

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy," Harry demurred, positioning himself above Draco's waiting cock.

They both held their breath as Harry slowly lowered himself onto Draco's length, giving himself plenty of time to adjust to the intrusion before taking more in. By the time he was fully seated, his arse resting against Draco's pelvis, they were both sweating and panting.

"Very good, Mr. Potter," Draco said, gasping as Harry began to move.

"I ride very well," Harry answered, his eyes closed. "Go ahead and try to throw me off. You won't be able to."

Draco grinned at the challenge, grabbing Harry's hip bones and using them to steady him as he thrust up into Harry's tight heat. Harry groaned, moving himself up and down Draco's cock in a complementary rhythm, shuddering each time Draco's thick cock brushed against his prostate.

"You're very – skilled," Draco panted, his hands gripping Harry's hips hard enough to bruise.

"Having a good broom makes all the difference," Harry whispered with a laugh, quickening his pace. He could tell Draco's release wasn't far off, so he brought up a hand to fist himself, eager for his own.

"Oh, shit," Draco groaned, his thrusts becoming frantic. "Harry. Fuck!"

Harry felt Draco tense underneath him, and his own strokes became frantic, his hand a blur as it

shot up and down his cock. Moments later, Harry was coming, too, jets of thick white fluid covering Draco's sweaty chest.

"Merlin," Draco said, loosening his grip on Harry's hips. He let his hands wander up Harry's torso, gently caressing the golden skin.

Harry laughed, slipping off Draco's softening cock and collapsing next to him. There was just enough room on the oversized sofa for him to lay on his side next to the blond, their bodies overlapping slightly.

"So, did I get the job?"

The first thing Harry saw when he exited the Floo was Hermione's tear-stained face. He dropped Draco's hand, rushing toward the witch. Viktor was nowhere to be seen.

"Hermione?" he asked, checking her over for injuries. Viktor hadn't hurt her, had he?

"Where's Krum?" Draco demanded, obviously wondering the same thing.

"D-downstairs," she answered, her words thick with tears. Harry sat down next to her, wrapping an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"Downstairs? In the Dungeons? But how –"

"Your father's back," Hermione sniffed, snuggling into Harry's embrace. "He took him down."

"Why?"

"R-Ron," Hermione managed before bursting into tears again. "Ron."

Harry shot Draco a helpless look of confusion, mouthing the same question Draco did. What about Ron?

"I'll go down and check it out," Draco said, studying Hermione carefully. She seemed alright there with Harry. "I'll be back."

Draco Disapparated, and for a few minutes, the room was silent but for Hermione's intermittent sobs. Harry just rocked her, holding her tight in his arms. He never asked for an explanation, knowing it would be best to wait for Draco to return. He'd get a much clearer story out of him.

Draco returned, but he wasn't alone. Viktor dropped Draco's arm, bolting for his weeping girlfriend. Harry transferred her into Viktor's arms, noticing the usually ebullient wizard was drawn and quiet. Viktor gathered Hermione up, lifting her effortlessly.

"I'll have Tizzy bring in some Calming Draught and Dreamless Sleep," Draco said, his face hard.

"For you, too. You're staying tonight."

Harry expected Viktor to have some smart response, but the Bulgarian wizard simply nodded before he carried Hermione out of the room, likely bound for her suite.

"What the hell happened?" Harry asked, jumping up from his seat now that Hermione was gone.

"Ron's dead," Draco said, pouring three tall shots of Firewhisky. "Father's taking care of the body. He'll be up in a moment."

"Dead?" Harry asked, his voice sounding strangely wooden to his own ears.

"He killed himself," Draco confirmed, downing his shot and pouring another. "It was – messy. Muggle means."

"Your father –"

"— was summoned by the house-elves. They found Ron, and they didn't know what to do. Viktor and Hermione can't Apparate down to the dungeons."

"Oh," Harry said, his accusation dying on his lips.

"Do you think so little of me, Harry?" Lucius asked, gliding into the room. Draco was relieved to see he'd showered and changed before joining them – the Dungeons really were a mess.

"Lucius, no," Harry said quickly, stumbling over his words.

Lucius smiled, taking the shot glass of whisky Draco offered him and downing it in one swallow.

"Of course he doesn't, Father," Draco said, pouring them all another shot. He wanted to drink until he couldn't remember the sight of Ron's bloody body anymore. "Harry knows you'd never stoop to Muggle means. You'd use a spell."

Lucius chuckled, collapsing onto the nearest sofa. He looked tired – there were lines around his eyes that Harry had never noticed before.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Lucius said, his grey eyes finding Harry's. "I know you were friends, once upon a time. And I know you'll feel responsible, but you're not."

"He came here for protection –"

"He came here because he wanted something from you, just like the rest of them," Draco spat, reaching for the bottle again.

"Draco, he was scared –"

"He was using you, Harry! He was going to try to get you to trust him so he could turn you over to Rodolphus himself."

"You don't know that –"

"Actually, he does," Lucius said, pouring himself another shot. Draco held his glass out, but Lucius shook his head slightly, returning the bottle to the cabinet. "I questioned him under Veritaserum last night. He admitted everything. We didn't want to tell you, but it's important you know you had nothing to do with the choice Weasley made."

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Chapter: 28

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. I don't own them.

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Draco woke with a start, automatically reaching out to touch Harry. His hands closed over nothing, and he panicked for a moment when he realized the empty bedclothes were cold. He sat up quickly, blinking to clear the sleep from his eyes as he scanned the still-dark room for his fiancé. His relief was palpable when he spotted Harry standing in front of the window, looking out over the Manor's moonlit grounds.

Draco slipped silently from the bed, padding over the chilly floor toward Harry. The dark-haired man had pulled on a pair of Draco's pajama bottoms, standing with his back to the room and his arms crossed. The blond paused to wrap a dressing gown around his own naked body before approaching him.

"Harry," he whispered, wrapping his arms around Harry's unyielding body.

"We need to get married," Harry said suddenly, turning his head so he could look at Draco.

Draco studied Harry's drawn face carefully, pulling back slightly so he could see him.

"We *are* getting married," he said slowly, wondering what was bothering Harry.

"No, now. We need to get married *now.* As soon as possible. Before we go after Ginny."

Draco tightened his grip on Harry, feeling the man tense as the words tumbled out of his mouth. His green eyes were slightly wild, and Draco saw rather than felt his erratic pulse at the hollow of his throat.

"Harry," he said again, running his hands up and down the man's chilly arms. "What brought this on? We'll be married, love, I promise. Before the baby is born, if you like."

Harry pulled away, turning fully so their faces were almost touching.

"Tomorrow – today – whatever," Harry said, casting a glance outside at the pre-dawn darkness. "As soon as possible."

"Why?" Draco rubbed Harry's exposed arms briskly now, concerned at how cold the skin was. He'd obviously been standing near the window for some time, if he'd managed to get this cold.

"Ron's dead," Harry said flatly, meeting Draco's worried gaze.

"Yes," Draco said, wondering if he should call Tizzy for some Calming Draught. He'd tried to get Harry to take some last night, but the man had refused. "He is. He killed himself."

"Exactly," Harry said, triumph lighting his eyes. Draco narrowed his gaze, wondering if Harry was going into shock again.

"I'm not following, Harry," he said carefully, pulling Harry away from the window, where the air was the chilliest. He grabbed a cashmere throw off the divan, wrapping it around Harry's shoulders. "You're going to have to explain what you're thinking, love."

Harry shook his head, grabbing Draco's hands.

"We could die – either of us. It's dangerous, going after Ginny and Rodolphus. We could die," he repeated, gripping Draco's hands tightly. "*I* could die. And if I did, what would happen to you and the baby? The adoption petition can't go through until the baby's born, which means you'd have no rights if I died before that could happen."

Draco swallowed, the fear in his chest loosening slightly when he realized what had driven Harry from their bed in the middle of the night. It wasn't grief about Ron, or worry about Ginny. It was worry about something Draco could actually *fix*.

"The adoption petition is just a formality," Draco assured him, pulling him close and running his hands under the blanket, running them around Harry's waist. He pressed a kiss to Harry's jaw, resting his chin on Harry's shoulder. "We're already linked. If anything happened to you – which it won't – I already have the magical status I need to try to get custody of our baby."

"Magical status?"

Draco kissed his neck, his lips curving into a smile against the warming skin.

"Remember how Tizzy knew the baby was in danger?" He could feel Harry nod. "That's only

possible if she's bonded to one of the baby's parents."

Draco raised his head, smiling at Harry.

"Tizzy is bonded to me?" Harry asked, frowning. He didn't remember any kind of formal ceremony or contract between himself and the house-elf.

"She is," Draco confirmed, pulling Harry back toward their rumpled bed. Harry didn't fight him, climbing in and ducking under the heavy covers for warmth. "House-elf magic responds to familial bonds."

Harry raised an eyebrow expectantly, waiting for Draco to rephrase in a way he'd understand. He saw the blond's lips quirk – he was enjoying this lesson in pure-blood customs.

"Tizzy was my nanny house-elf growing up," Draco continued, opening his arms in invitation to the dark-haired wizard. Harry leaned forward, resting his head on Draco's chest. The rumble of his words was comforting. "All the Malfoy house-elves were automatically bonded to me when I was born, since they are loyal to the family, not a single person. My bond with Tizzy is different, though."

Harry waited for Draco to explain, rubbing his cheek against the soft material of Draco's dressing gown.

"Have you noticed how in-tune she is to my needs? She always knows if I need a potion, or if I'm hungry or tired."

Harry nodded, stifling a yawn. He was getting drowsy, swaddled in blankets and laying on Draco's warm body.

"That's the nanny bond. We've never removed it, since it's so convenient. For awhile, it was my parents' way of tracking my health – even though I was at Hogwarts, they knew Tizzy would alert them if I fell ill or was injured."

Harry nodded again, letting his eyes drift closed. He was still worried about their baby's future, but if Draco was sure everything would be fine, it probably would be. He wasn't one to sugar-coat things.

"I started to get suspicious when Tizzy began to respond to your needs in the same way," Draco continued, slipping his hand under the covers to absently caress Harry's shoulder. "After she alerted us to Pansy's - illness, I sent an owl to that magical bonds specialist Abramson found."

"Malven?"

"Mmm," Draco said, squeezing Harry to his chest in a one-armed hug. "I had him send me the report of all the active bonds you have."

Harry raised his head, dislodging Draco's arm.

"I don't have any," he said, confused. "He said I don't have any."

Draco grinned, tsking as he shook his head.

"No, he said you didn't have any active bonds to that *wench*. Not that you didn't have any at all. Abramson must have coached him well if even you didn't find anything suspicious about his testimony."

Harry sat up, pulling the blanket with him. He raised an eyebrow at Draco, suddenly fully awake.

"You have two active bonds," Draco said, sitting up as well. "One to Tizzy, and one to me."

"To you?"

"Have you ever heard of an Animus Bond?" Harry shook his head, so Draco continued. "It's rare. Most people call them Soul Bonds. They happen organically – you can't forge one yourself. There's no spell or potion, no way to force one to form."

Harry waited expectantly, knowing Draco would fill the silence with a better explanation.

"When a pair of people – or even a group, sometimes – have magic that complements each others' on every level, it's known as an Aptus Link. Plenty of people have those without even knowing it. It just means any spell you cast together will be stronger than if you cast alone, or with someone you weren't compatible with."

Harry nodded, wondering where this was leading. His magic was compatible with Draco's and Tizzy's?

"When two people who share an Aptus Link commit themselves to each other – body, mind, spirit, magic – an Animus Bond forms. They're rare, since it's not often that people give themselves over to someone else so completely. The bond merges the pair's magical cores. Most of the Animus Bonds in history have been between lovers, but it's not unheard of for them to form between people in a platonic relationship who trust each other implicitly."

"So we have this bond?"

"Yes," Draco confirmed, linking his fingers with Harry's. "Malven said it's quite strong."

"Wouldn't that have been enough to nullify my marriage to Ginny?" Harry asked, his brow furrowing at the thought.

"No, not by itself," Draco said, squeezing Harry's hand. "That's probably why Abramson never

mentioned it to you. If he knew about it, Ginny's lawyer would have tried to use it against you."

"So, because of this bond, you'd be able to get custody of the baby, even if I died before the adoption petition was heard?"

Draco yanked on their joined hands, sending Harry tumbling into his lap. He leaned down, pressing a sweet kiss to the tip of Harry's nose.

"No one is dying," he chided, kissing him again for good measure. "And yes, the Animus Bond – especially paired with the petition we already filed – would likely be enough to convince a judge to allow me to have custody. Especially with what we have on the Weasleys."

Harry nestled into Draco's lap, his head cradled by Draco's folded legs. He looked up, studying Draco's face with a smile. Even this early in the morning, the blond was gorgeous. Harry rarely got to see him like this – all scruffy and tousled.

"Wait – does that mean you were affected by Ginny and Molly's spells as well?"

Draco paused, his expression becoming serious.

"Yes," he said, his voice harsh. "Do you really think I'd have let you walk away? I was ruled by the same compulsions you were – although not as strong, since they came through you as a buffer. I never fought for you, because deep down I was convinced being with Ginny was the right thing for you, too. All because of that damn spell –"

Harry pushed himself up, stopping Draco's bitter rant with a kiss. There was nothing they could do to change the past, or to get back the years they'd lost.

"Do I have the same bond with Tizzy?" Harry asked, changing the topic quite effectively.

Draco grinned, shaking his head. It was easy to see through Harry's tactics, but he knew the dark-haired man was right. They shouldn't waste any more of their time on Ginny. *Aside from finding the bitch and making sure she can't ever touch Harry again,* he amended, his eyes flashing briefly.

"Actually, you have the same nanny house-elf bond I have with her," he explained, laughing when Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise. "And so does the baby. House-elf magic transfers to blood relatives, but in this instance, it transferred to you, since our magical cores are fused."

"So as far as Tizzy is concerned, you're the baby's blood relative?"

"Yes," he answered, smiling when a huge grin split Harry's face.

" – stupid, hard-headed, misogynistic bastard!" Hermione yelled, throwing a book across the drawing room.

Draco stooped to retrieve it, glancing idly at the spine to see which the enraged witch had thrown. *Your Magical Garden: Helpful Hints for the Herbologist in All of Us*. He arched an eyebrow at her, waving the book in the air.

"You don't have to garden if you don't want to," he said, smirking. "We have house-elves for that."

"You!" she yelled, putting her fisted hands on her hips as she spoke. "Don't tell me you didn't know what he planned."

Draco gave her his best innocent look, earning a growl. She picked up the nearest book, ready to launch it at him. Draco threw up his hands, grinning.

"Alright, no need to abuse any more hapless books," he said, tossing the book in his hand on the nearest table. "Yes, Viktor came to me this morning to get the coordinates. And yes, I thought it was a good idea."

"Of course you did!" she shrieked, crossing her arms over her chest. "You men are all the same! 'Let's protect Hermione'," she mimicked, her voice low and heavy. "Just because I don't have a penis doesn't mean I can't take care of myself!"

Draco stifled a laugh, knowing the witch wasn't trying to be funny. Laughing would likely get him hexed.

"Be reasonable," Draco said, pouring a cup of tea on the sideboard. "It was a job for a single person. If a group of us went out, we'd be at each others' throats in no time. Viktor was right."

"He could have told me what he was doing."

"You were asleep. The potion knocked you out, and he wouldn't have been able to wake you even if he wanted to," Draco said, stirring a bit of sugar into his tea. He glanced up at the clock, pursing his lips. "He'll be back soon. You estimated, what – twenty different spots where someone had cast *Locus Infeste?"*

Hermione nodded, still glaring at the blond. He sipped his tea, running through the numbers in his head.

"Estimate, say, ten minutes per site, if the caster was reasonably competent. He left – oh, more than two hours ago, I'd say. He'll be done soon."

"I should go out there and –"

"If you went out there to confront him you'd likely hex his balls off," Draco said dryly, poking through the morning newspaper, which sat next to the pot of tea. "The spell would only magnify

the anger you already feel toward him. Just stay here."

"Easy for you to say," she hissed, narrowing her eyes. "Harry's tucked safely away in your bedroom. Viktor could get hurt! They could still be there! What if it was Harry?"

Draco looked up, shaking his head.

"Harry's not here. He's setting extra wards around the safe house."

"And Lucius?"

"Is with him, of course," he said, squinting at a particularly bad photo of Ginny.

The *Prophet* had been running a daily column with supposed "sightings" of the witch; people all over Britain were certain they'd seen her at their corner apothecary or sweet shop. He rolled his eyes at the account from C. Little of Surrey, who was sure she'd seen the red-haired witch cast the Imperius Curseat the paperboy.

"No need to worry," he smirked, shaking the page at Hermione. "According to this woman, she's in Surrey."

"Don't be an idiot," she snapped, grabbing the paper from him and marching to the nearest chair, throwing herself into it and pointedly ignoring the blond.

They both jumped when Harry's Patronus burst into the room. The silvery stag stopped in front of Draco, and Harry's voice echoed through the silent room.

"Get out now. Rodolphus has found a way through the Manor's wards. Meet me in Holyhead – the Ty Mawr Hut Circles."

They were both silent for a moment before springing into action, Summoning their bags and coats from the night before.

"But Viktor –"

"We'll send him a message as soon as we get there," Draco said, grabbing Hermione's arm. "Let's go."

Tizzy popped into the room just seconds after they had Disapparated, a note in her hand from Lucius. He and Harry had decided to visit a former Death Eater who had been close to Rodolphus, and they'd sent Tizzy to tell Draco. Harry knew Draco would be opposed to letting him wander around London, but he figured he was safe enough with Lucius by his side. They were both quick thinkers and smart duelers – someone would have to be a fool to take them both on. He figured sending a note with the house-elf would be smarter than Fire-calling, since he'd be gone before Draco could stop him this way.

Tizzy narrowed her bulbous eyes, concentrating on locating Draco. She could tell he was some distance away, and that he was absolutely panicked.

"Master Harry is not to be liking this," she said gravely, placing the note on the table before Disapparating herself.

"If you see him, don't tell him we've been asking after him," Lucius sneered, tucking a sack of Galleons into the other man's robes.

" 'Course not," the grubby wizard said, his eyes flicking toward Harry."You weren't 'ere. An 'im, I've ne'er seen 'im."

The man shuddered slightly, shaking his head emphatically. Harry knew there were still some circles where a wizard could be killed for having a civil conversation with the Boy Who Lived Twice.

"Indeed," Lucius drawled, glaring at the wizard. He looked around the dirty room – trash littered the floor, and table and counters were laden with rotten food and other refuse – and grimaced. "Don't forget. Ten thousand Galleons if you give me information that leads to the woman."

The man nodded, his hand automatically going to his pocket, weighing the bag Lucius had placed there. Fifty galleons would make quite a difference for him.

"Aye," he said, his greasy hair falling into his face as he nodded.

Lucius turned in disgust, his fine wool cloak swirling around his feet. He scanned the filthy room once more, delicately picking his way back to the door. Harry followed him, careful not to trip over any of the rubbish on the floor.

He and Harry had made it halfway back to the Apparition point when Tizzy appeared at their sides, running to keep up with Lucius' long strides.

"Master Harry! Master Lucius! Tizzy isn't finding Master Draco!"

The men paused, stooping slightly to better hear the elf.

"Draco wasn't home?" Harry asked, his eyes sweeping the street for any threats as he listened to Tizzy.

"No, Master Harry!" the elf said, pulling at her fingers. "Wherever he is, he is being very upset!"

"Wait – Tizzy, what do you mean 'wherever he is'?" Lucius asked, his brow knitting in confusion.

"Tizzy isn't finding him, Master Lucius," the elf said, her eyes filling with tears. Even though he

was an adult, the house-elf counted Draco's safety among her responsibilities. She began tearing at her ears, punishing herself for losing him.

"Stop, Tizzy!" Lucius barked, and the house-elf froze. "Why can't you find Draco?"

The elf moaned, covering her face with her spindly fingers.

"Tizzy isn't knowing, Master Lucius. Tizzy is trying to find Master Draco, but she is being bounced every time!"

"Bounced?" Harry asked, his wand out, on alert. He didn't like having this conversation in the middle of Diagon Alley.

"Bounced," she said, her ears waggling as she nodded emphatically. "Tizzy is hitting a wall when she tries to get to her Master Draco."

"A wall – an anti-Apparition ward?" Harry wondered aloud, not expecting an answer from the elf.

"Yes!" she squeaked, hopping on one foot in excitement. She grabbed Harry's hand, pulling him forward slightly. "Tizzy can be taking you there!"

"Wait!" Lucius snapped, flinging out a hand to stop them. He gripped Harry's shoulder, ensuring that if the elf did Apparate them somewhere, he'd go along. Or get splinched trying. "Can you *tell* us instead of showing us?"

Tizzy shook off Harry's hand, Disapparating instantly. She returned a few seconds later, her eyes even wider with fright.

"Tizzy is not knowing where," she said frantically, twisting her fingers together. "Tizzy is trying. Master Draco is with a very bad wizard! Master Draco is scared!"

"Who, Tizzy? Can you tell who he is with?"

The house-elf closed her eyes, her face pinched with concentration. Her eyes flew open after a moment, and she Conjured a pad and pencil, quickly sketching the face she'd seen in Draco's mind.

"Rodolphus," Lucius hissed, ripping his sleeve back.

Harry watched as Lucius gripped his unblemished forearm, muttering an incantation. The Dark Mark had dissolved when Voldemort died, but some of his magic remained. Lucius knew he'd be able to trace Rodolphus through the weak bond they all still shared.

"I can find him," he said, his voice low and urgent. "You need to go warn Narcissa –"

"The hell I do," Harry growled, gripping Lucius' other arm. "I'm going with you."

The older wizard studied Harry's furious face for a moment, considering their options. He had no way of knowing if Rodolphus was alone or not. He could be taking Harry straight into a trap.

"Keep your wand out," the man said after a moment, his eyes blazing. "If you can't aim to kill, then make sure you at least incapacitate him so I can. I want that bastard finished."

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Chapter: 29

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. They belong to the fabulously talented JKR.

Many thanks to my fabulous beta, Lady_Aubrey, for all her painstaking work. You rock!

Draco woke slowly, grimacing as he felt a sharp rock dig into his side. He cracked open his eyes, wondering where he could possibly be. He saw the low mound of stones around him, and suddenly the memories came flashing back.

He and Hermione had Apparated straight to the base of Holyhead Mountain, to the 4,000-year-old Roman settlement dotted with the remains of nearly two dozen stone huts. That was one of the last things he remembered. Draco glanced around, realizing he was inside one now – it was open to the sky, but the low ring of stones around him hid his immediate surroundings from view. He didn't dare sit up, figuring his attacker was probably just outside the circle of stones.

Carefully, Draco shifted, searching for his wand. Gone. He heard a soft moan nearby, and moved again – he could see Hermione on her side, just out of reach. Viktor was there, too, one of his eyes swollen shut and his wand arm hanging at a strange angle. They were both unconscious.

Think, he berated himself, anxiety pouring through him. *Harry has to be here. He's the one who told us to meet him here. Think. Did I catch sight of Harry before the Stunner hit?*

They'd hardly had a chance to get their bearings before someone unseen had hit both he and Hermione with a powerful Stunner. He'd barely had the chance to register the attack before he was out cold. He concentrated, using his Occlumency meditation skills to retreat into his mind, trying to remember exactly what had happened.

Harry's stag came to the Manor, and we followed his instructions, Draco thought, his eyes closed as he concentrated. *Hermione came with me by Side-Along, since she didn't remember exactly*

where it was. *I had my wand out, but I heard the person too late – the Stunner was already too close to deflect when I turned around.*

He flexed his hand, wincing as pain lanced through his arm. *I fell on my wrist, probably breaking it. I remember Hermione falling at the same time – there must have been at least two of them, because it was a separate Stunner.*

He opened his eyes, his gaze settling on Hermione's still form. She appeared to be breathing, and she had no injuries he could see. Not like Krum.

So, two attackers, maybe more. They moved us in here, but we're still in Holyhead. I'm sure of that, he thought, narrowing his eyes as he studied the grass-covered stones. He looked around again, desperate for any sign of Harry. He found no evidence of anyone other than the three of them.

Harry's Patronus said it was Rodolphus. *Does he have Harry? Is Ginny with him?* Draco's pulse raced as he considered the possibilities. None of them were positive. *Harry was with Father – does that mean he's here too? Oh fuck – did they find the safe house somehow*?

Draco fought the urge to struggle to his feet, frustrated by his impeded view. He didn't move – for all he knew, the area could be blanketed with detection spells that would bring their attackers back if he shifted too much. He let his head fall back against the cold ground, focusing on meditating again. He'd relied on the technique before to help him sharpen his senses, and he hoped he'd be able to hear something of use if he could block out everything else.

He shoved his worry for Harry and his family aside, clearing his mind. He focused on the rustle of the wind – *it sounds like there must be a bank of tall grass nearby*, he thought – casting his senses out as far as he could. He could smell the faint scent of a fire, which probably meant the attackers were still nearby. He zeroed in on the scent of burning wood, trying to trace it, hoping he could figure out whether their camp site was up or down-wind from his location.

And then he felt it – Tizzy's consciousness batting up against his. He probably wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't been meditating, but he grabbed onto it like a lifeline, pushing all his panic toward her. *If she knows something is wrong she can get help,* he thought frantically, sending images of everything he could to the house-elf. He brought an image of Rodolphus to the forefront of his mind, concentrating on blocking everything else out. If the attackers didn't have Harry or the rest of his family, he wanted them to know who his most likely suspect was.

Just as quickly as it had appeared, his link to Tizzy seemed to disappear. Tears pricked Draco's eyes – he didn't know if he'd been successful or not. He swallowed hard, reigning in his panic. He had to keep his head to get them out of there.

He noticed a flurry of motion out of the corner of his eye, and he shifted, watching Hermione's return to consciousness. He didn't dare whisper, worried about attracting attention from the people he was relatively sure were outside. Instead, he waited until she struggled back to

wakefulness, shaking his head furiously when her gaze swept over him. She nodded, her eyes filling with tears when she saw Viktor's crumpled body. Her gaze flashed back to Draco, who inclined his shoulders slightly. He didn't know if Krum was alright or not.

"Harry?" Hermione mouthed silently, her eyes wide with terror.

Draco shook his head again, his expression grim.

"Detection spell?" she mouthed, furrowing her brows as she looked around the circular enclosure.

Draco shrugged again, miming not having his wand. Hermione checked her own wrist holster, shaking her head slightly when she realized that she had been disarmed, too. They both froze when they heard footsteps approaching, the sound muffled against the frozen grass.

"Awake, then?" Ginny called, stepping inside the opening of the stone circle. She smiled sweetly at Draco and Hermione, nudging Viktor's still body with her foot. Hermione started to shout, but stopped when she caught the slight shake of Draco's head. *Right*, she thought, the tension in her chest lessening slightly when Ginny stepped away from Viktor, *don't antagonize her.*

Ginny perched on the low stone wall, twirling her wand in her hand.

"Sit up," she ordered, grinning when Draco and Hermione both scrambled to comply. "Not so sure of yourselves when you don't have your wands, are you?"

Draco and Hermione remained silent, waiting for Ginny to reveal why they were there.

"I imagine Harry will be joining us shortly," she said, examining her nails with a bored expression. "Very clever, using your house-elf to try to escape, Malfoy."

"She's a determined little thing, isn't she? She almost made it through the anti-Apparition wards, but they held," she said, sneering at him. "I don't know how you managed to contact her without your wand, but points to you."

"I can only assume she'd go straight to Harry to tell him what was going on," she continued, her lips quirking into a hard smile. "I hope she did, at any rate. That might speed things along nicely. Though I suppose she might have gone to your father, instead."

Ginny shrugged, her eyes gleaming with amusement and malice.

"No matter. I have a score to settle with him, too. I win either way," she laughed, winking at Draco. "And you lose. Did you know the handy little spell you used to track me here has a counterpart?"

She grinned at Hermione, whose eyes widened in horror.

"Of course you do. Always so smart, Hermione. Always so haughty and sure of yourself," Ginny drawled, snorting. "It was so easy to convince Ron that you needed taken down a peg or two. Too easy, really. No challenge in that one – he was all too eager when I suggested he use his fists. You'd be too ashamed to report that – the Mudblood beaten by Muggle means."

Hermione's jaw clenched as she fought to hold her tongue, determined not to give Ginny the satisfaction of baiting her into a reaction. Ginny turned her gaze on Draco, whose face was completely impassive.

"You'll have to tell me why you chose Bulgaria before we're finished," she said, laughing when his wand arm twitched, the reaction ingrained. "The water's awfully cold this time of year. The seaside is so *boring* if you can't swim. Dear old Roddie is there now, retrieving something that belongs to me."

Draco swallowed, forcing himself to remain still. His eyes flashed, but he gave no other sign he'd heard her.

"The spell can't get around the Fidelius, but nasty cousin Rodolphus has another way in," she said, cocking her head as she watched Draco. "Do you know about that, I wonder? No? What, Daddy never told you he still has links to all the other big, bad Death Eaters?"

She laughed as Draco flinched, unable to curb his reaction. *If he's in Bulgaria, we might have a chance*, Draco thought, frantically trying to piece together a plan. He glanced over at Hermione, who was watching Ginny with an expression of complete revulsion. *If I can just tackle her, Hermione might be able to get to Ginny's wand. It might be our only chance.*

"Daddy's been keeping secrets," Ginny sang, smiling wider when Draco shifted, getting ready to spring. "Uh-oh, I wouldn't do that."

She jumped up from her perch, standing on top of the low wall. Molly joined her a second later, her wand trained on the three hostages.

"Mum's a bit protective," Ginny whispered loudly, wrinkling her nose. "Remember Bellatrix?"

"Leave them alone, Ginny," Molly said, narrowing her eyes at her daughter. Ginny sat back down, smiling. Molly turned her gaze on Draco, her eyes burning with hate. "Where's my son?"

Draco shrugged, his calm exterior not betraying the frantic beat of his heart. He met Molly's slightly crazed eyes, smirking.

"Where. Is. My. Son?" Molly repeated, punctuating the words with jabs of her wand.

"You have so many," Draco drawled, his voice indolent. "Am I to guess which one?"

"You know which one, you bastard!" she shrieked. "What have you done with him? I know he went to the Manor."

Draco inclined his shoulders arrogantly again, tilting his head slightly.

"I've not done anything with him," he answered, careful to keep his voice level. "It's true he's enjoying my family's hospitality, but he's there of his own choice."

"Stand up," Molly spat, her teeth clenched. She motioned with her wand, instructing Draco to come closer. "You're going to take me to him."

Lucius Disillusioned both himself and Harry before following the thread that connected him to Rodolphus. The longer-than-expected Apparition surprised them, and Harry stumbled slightly as they finally reached their destination. Though he couldn't see him, Lucius reached a hand out to steady the man instinctively, knowing Harry always struggled with magical travel.

Harry glanced around, glad Lucius' hand remained on his arm. He didn't want to lose track of him, especially since he had no idea where they were.

"Bulgaria," Lucius whispered, holding fast to Harry's invisible arm. "Tsarevo."

Harry's blood ran cold at the word – the safe house was in Tsarevo. The coastal resort town along the Black Sea was an ideal place to disappear, since so many European tourists came through each year. Harry frantically looked around, still not recognizing any landmarks. He could smell the sea, so they must be close to the coast. *That's good*, he thought, mentally estimating how close to the ocean they must be. The safe house was further inland, toward the extreme northwest of the town.

"He knows?"

"He must have tracked me the same way," Lucius hissed, and Harry didn't have to be able to see him to know the wizard's grey eyes were blazing. "Earlier, sometime yesterday, perhaps. I was here, in town, buying some supplies before the house-elves summoned me back to the Manor. He must have tracked me here then."

"He doesn't know where the house is, then?" Harry asked, panic tinting his words.

"No, it's unlikely," Lucius whispered, pulling Harry along as he started to walk down the deserted sidewalk. The coast was fairly desolate this time of year, since the weather turned cool in the winter.

"You go check on Narcissa and Pansy," Lucius said, tightening his fingers around Harry's arm. "I'll wait here, in case he tries to track me again. Hurry."

Harry Disapparated as soon as Lucius let go of him, headed straight for the safe house. He was

still Disillusioned, so his sudden appearance in the large kitchen went unnoticed by the home's occupants, who were poring over baby catalogues at the rough-hewn table.

Harry concentrated on the wards, feeling them out with his magic. Nothing had disturbed them, and no one had been in or out since he and Lucius had shored them up that morning. Breathing a quiet sigh of relief, Harry Disapparated again, seeing no reason to worry the witches.

When he returned to the deserted street, however, he found it was no longer empty. Rodolphus stood near a wall, his hands clenched around something invisible. *Lucius!* Harry thought, aiming his wand at the man's back. He shot off a quick Stunning spell, praying he wasn't too late. He ended the Disillusionment spell on himself, rushing to Lucius' side. He felt around on the cool pavement for a moment, searching for him. The moment his hand closed around invisible flesh, Harry uttered the incantation to cancel the spell, sighing in relief when Lucius shimmered into view. Harry waved his hand, not bothering with his wand, ending the Body-Bind Rodolphus must have cast on the wizard. He could see evidence of no other spells, but he sent out a quick pulse of magic nonetheless, searching Lucius for injuries.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked, running his hands over his torso to check for any injuries the spell might have missed.

"Fine," Lucius gasped, rubbing his throat where Rodolphus' hands had held him. The skin was already splotchy and bruised. "You didn't kill him, did you?"

Harry shook his head, looking over his shoulder at the unconscious man sprawled nearby.

"No. I wanted to, but I figured we needed him to tell us where they have Draco. No one had been by the house," he added, nodding when Lucius' shoulders sagged in relief.

Lucius propped himself against the wall, dragging in deep, painful breaths. He'd need a Healing potion for his throat, but it could wait. He fumbled in the pocket of his cloak, withdrawing a small vial of clear liquid.

"Veritaserum?" Harry asked, taking the proffered vial from Lucius' trembling hand.

"Yes," he rasped, trying to swallow past the burning in his throat.

Harry raised his hand, waving it in front of Lucius' battered throat. He didn't know many Healing spells, so he simply focused his magic on healing the damage there without a spell to guide it. He could feel the pulse of energy leave his arm, smiling slightly in satisfaction when he noticed Lucius was breathing easier. The angry red and purple marks remained, but it no longer looked like the man was struggling to draw in air.

Lucius arched his eyebrows, impressed with how far Harry's wandless magic had progressed. Harry just shrugged, waving his hand at Rodolphus. He Levitated the man out of the street and into a small alley where they would have more privacy. Another flick of his hand, and the man's

arms and legs were tightly bound, his body propped up against the wall stiffly. Harry turned, nodding to Lucius as the other man joined him.

Harry used a quick Enervate spell to wake the Stunned man. Rodolphus' eyes shot open, and he immediately struggled against his bonds. Lucius gave him a cold smile, shaking his head.

"Where is my son?"

The man blanched, his eyes shifting from Lucius to Harry. Both looked formidable in the half-light of the alley, their faces wearing nearly identical sneers.

"Wales," the man answered, clearly not loyal to anyone but himself.

"You can do better than that," Lucius purred, raising his wand.

"Holyhead Mountain," Rodolphus shouted, cringing in anticipation of whatever hex he thought Lucius was likely to use.

"More."

"The ruins," Rodolphus said, opening his eyes when it became clear Lucius hadn't hexed him. "The ruins of the ancient stone huts."

"The Ty Mawr Hut Circles?" Harry asked, moving closer with a menacing glare.

"Yes. He's there, with the other man and the woman."

"Hermione?"

"Yes, and that Quidditch coach."

"Krum?"

"I don't know," Rodolphus said, grimacing at Harry's stony expression.

"Who's with them?"

"Those crazy Weasley bitches," the man answered, sneering a little. There was obviously no love lost between them. "Who else?"

"What do they want?" Lucius asked, his silky voice dangerously low.

"Him," Rodolphus said, inclining his head – the only part of his body he could move – toward Harry. "And the older one wants her son back."

Lucius smiled now, his teeth gleaming in the murky semi-darkness.

"Who else is working with you?"

"No one," Rodolphus said, his eyes widening as Lucius raised his wand again. "No one!"

"None of the other Weasleys?" Lucius asked, watching as Harry drew nearer out of the corner of his eye.

"No," the bound wizard said, his voice edging toward hysterical as Harry advanced. "No one, I swear!"

"Is it true you were using Ron as bait to draw Harry out?" Lucius asked, his eyes glinting.

"Yes," Rodolphus answered, his gaze flicking toward Harry again. "But it obviously didn't work. He never showed up at the meeting point."

Enlightenment dawned on the man, and his lips drew back as he grimaced, his eyes terrified.

"He's dead, isn't he?"

Lucius smiled, holding his hand out for the vial of Veritaserum. Harry placed it in his palm, his eyes never leaving Rodolphus.

"We're going to do this again," Lucius purred, forcing the man's mouth open and pouring much more than the requisite three drops into his mouth. "Now, where is my son?"

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Chapter: 30

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. Not mine. Last time I checked, I wasn't an internationally famous author. Or even British. Damn.

Draco swallowed hard, his mind working overtime as he tried to figure out a way to keep Molly away from the Manor. He had no idea what she would do when she found out Ron was dead, and he figured their best chance at survival was to keep them distracted.

He concentrated on sending another message to Tizzy, unsure if it would work. They'd never really tried to communicate through the bond – not both ways, at least. He'd always been able to call for her if he was hurt, scared or ill, but the anti-Apparition wards Ginny told him about must still be blocking her.

Find Harry, he thought, his jaw clenching as he focused on the panic welling up inside him, letting it have free reign instead of suppressing it like he had been. He let the pain from his broken wrist flow through him as well, certain those sensations, at least, would get through to the house-elf. *We're hurt. Find Harry. Help Harry and my father get here. Tizzy. Tizzy. Help.*

He doubted much more information could flow through the bond, since it was attuned to his physical needs only. He hesitated for a moment, deciding it wouldn't hurt to try. *We're in Wales, Tizzy*, he thought, his mind focusing on the sights around him. *The ancient stone circles near Holyhead Mountain. There are just two of them, but we don't have our wands. Krum is badly injured. Send help, Tizzy.*

Tizzy was hysterical with grief, slamming her head repeatedly in the oven door. Narcissa and Pansy stood back, aghast, too shocked by the normally gentle house-elf's behavior to intervene. A trickle of blood hit the tiled floor after a particularly hard slam, rousing Narcissa into action.

"Stop it this instant, Tizzy!" she yelled. Tizzy's abuse slowed, but did not stop. Narcissa ran forward, grabbing the diminutive elf around the waist to physically restrain her. "Stop it! That's an order. Stop hurting yourself, Tizzy!"

The elf collapsed in Narcissa's arms, sobbing noisily. Blood from the cut above one of her drooping ears smeared onto Narcissa's robes. "Posie!" Narcissa yelled, summoning the other elf they'd brought with them to Tsarevo.

"Mistress Narcissa!" Posie cried, immediately tugging on her own skin in distress at the sight of her mistress holding the wailing elf. She grabbed Tizzy's thin arm, pulling her away from Narcissa with all her strength. "Posie is sorry, Mistress Narcissa. Tizzy is being a bad elf, and Posie will be taking her away."

"No!" Narcissa said, her voice sharp, her arms tightening around Tizzy. The incoherent house-elf was sobbing Draco's name over and over, and the witch was certain something must be wrong. "Heal Tizzy's wounds. I would have done it myself, but I'm not sure if Healing spells work on house-elves."

Posie's eyes grew even wider as she obeyed, holding her trembling hand over the worst of Tizzy's injuries. Like all house-elf magic, the result was instantaneous – the wounds sealed themselves, the blood clearing away as though it had never been there. Narcissa glanced down at her robes, which were still wet with Tizzy's tears, but no longer held evidence of her blood.

"What about Draco, Tizzy?" Narcissa demanded, forcing her voice to remain level. Inside she was nearly hysterical herself, fear for her son coloring her every thought. "Where is Draco? Is he hurt?"

Tizzy sobbed even louder at the mention of Draco's name, her tiny body nearly convulsing with the force of her wails. Narcissa gripped her around her bony shoulders, careful not to hold her

too tightly.

"Tizzy, I need you to answer me. What has happened to Draco?"

The elf showed no sign of hearing or understanding Narcissa's request, lost in her agony. Posie stepped forward, her eyes drifting to Narcissa for permission even as her hands hovered about Tizzy's tear-drenched face. The witch nodded, her own gaze flicking briefly to Pansy, who was still seated at the kitchen table, eyes wide with fright and panic. The pregnant witch clutched at her swollen belly, her protective instincts awakened by the scene in front of her.

Posie placed her hands on Tizzy's cheeks, drawing the elf's attention. She bent down, stooping so her mouth touched the other elf's wizened ears. Narcissa couldn't hear whatever the younger house-elf told Tizzy, but the effect was immediate – her sobs ceased, and her spine straightened as she sat up in Narcissa's arms.

"Master Draco is in danger," Tizzy said, her eyes filming over with tears at the mention of her charge's name. "Master Draco is trying to tell Tizzy how to help, but Tizzy isn't understanding."

"What do you mean, danger?" Narcissa asked carefully, her eyes narrowed as she studied the elf's face.

"He is being with bad witches," the house-elf answered, shaking her head frantically. "He is not safe. He is being scared, Mistress Narcissa! Master Draco is being in pain."

Narcissa shuddered at the thought of what it would take for her independent and fearless son to be so panicked – she knew the situation had to be grave if Draco's emotions were wild enough to upset Tizzy so much. She swallowed, turning over Tizzy's words in her mind. *Witches,* she thought quickly. *Bad witches. The Weasleys?*

"Do you know where he is?"

Tizzy nodded, a small sob escaping as she pressed her eyes shut.

"Master Draco is saying he is near stones," she said, her voice barely a whisper as she called up the memories of the images she'd gotten from Draco. "And whales. He is saying he is near whales."

"Whales?" Pansy asked, speaking up for the first time.

"Whales," Tizzy confirmed, looking just as perplexed herself. "Holy whales where there are old stones."

"Wales," Pansy said, the word escaping in a rush of breath. "Wales. They must be back in Holyhead. Draco said that's where they were going last night."

"Good," Narcissa said, catching and holding Tizzy's gaze. "Very good, Tizzy. What stones? Can you see them?"

The elf closed her eyes again, concentrating on Draco and the images he had projected.

"Many stones," she said slowly, unsure of how to explain what she had seen. "Not tall, but many. Stones that be –" She broke off, miming a circle around herself.

"Old stones," Narcissa whispered, wracking her brain for any trivia about Holyhead she could remember. There were ancient wizarding ruins all over the town – Draco could be anywhere.

"She's talking about the ruins of the stone huts, Narcissa," Pansy said in a rush, squeezing her eyes shut to think. "There was a goblin rebellion there hundreds of years ago, and most of the homes were destroyed. Binns said only the foundations remained. *Damn it*. It's – the big hill – something mountain! The base of the hill, just outside the town!"

" – at the base of Holyhead Mountain," Rodolphus said, his voice the flat monotone of someone under the influence of Truth Serum. "They set up camp there after the younger one escaped from Azkaban."

"We were there yesterday," Harry said, his teeth clenched. It was hard to lie under Veritaserum, but possible. "Why didn't we see the camp?"

"The tent has a Fidelius," the man answered, his eyes dull.

"What do they want?" Lucius asked, his fingers itching to raise his wand.

"Now, or before?"

Lucius gritted his teeth, his grip on his wand tightening. "Both."

"They wanted his money," Rodolphus said, his lifeless eyes moving to Harry. "But now they want him and the other one dead."

Harry's blood ran cold. They were wasting time questioning the wizard when they should be rescuing Draco. He twitched impatiently, his muscles vibrating with fury.

"Who?" Lucius asked, his voice like honey-coated steel.

"The girl."

Harry's thoughts immediately flew to Pansy, who he'd left safe and sound less than twenty minutes ago. His tense shoulders relaxed a fraction, his relief that the witch – and his child – were safely stored away where Ginny couldn't get to them evident.

"Pansy," Lucius said, his gaze still hard. "What are they planning to do to D-"

"No, the other one. The Mudblood."

"*Hermione*?" Harry asked, a fresh spurt of terror running through him.

He would have Disapparated on the spot, had Lucius not reached out to grab his arm.

"Wait," the older wizard said, not relinquishing his grip on Harry. "A few more questions. We only get once chance at this."

"You've never been there. You won't make it on your own," Pansy said, her own eyes as wild and panicked as Narcissa's.

"I can't just let –"

"I know," the pregnant witch said, wrapping her fingers around Narcissa's. "I'll take you."

"He can't take you inside the wards, Molly," Hermione said quickly, stopping the older woman's advance on Draco. "They're keyed to the head of the family. That's Lucius."

Hermione swallowed, hoping Molly didn't have some way of knowing Lucius had turned over the title to Draco some months back. It wasn't the sort of thing that families typically announced, and she doubted Draco had told anyone Molly or Ginny would know.

Molly paused, studying Hermione's face.

"Is that true?" she asked Draco, her wand still trained on him, her face grim.

"Yes," he said evenly, and Hermione nearly sagged in relief that he was playing along. *We can't let her near the Manor,* she thought, her chest tightening with fear. *We can't let her know Ron is dead.* "No one but Father can authorize a member of your –" he broke off, sneering as his gaze swept over her "— family entering the Manor's wards."

"But Ron is there," she said slowly, her gaze flicking between the two of them, trying to tell if they were lying.

"Yes."

Ginny narrowed her eyes at Draco's answer, and he could tell she was plotting something. She flashed her teeth in a cold smile, quirking her eyebrow at him in challenge.

"We'll send him a Patronus," she said to her mother, who nodded quickly. "He can meet us outside the wards. Can't he, Draco?"

Draco's back was so stiff with tension that he felt as though his spine might snap. He was careful not to betray his thoughts, shrugging indolently as though the witch had just asked him something inane like who he favored for the World Cup.

Ginny prepared to cast, and a wave of terror flashed through him, heavy and sharp. *How long will they wait for an answer before they realize one isn't coming*?he wondered, his heart slamming against his ribcage. *How much longer do we have left?*

"Answer something for me, Ginny," Hermione said, her voice holding an orchestrated mixture of curiosity and anger. Draco let himself breathe again when he saw Ginny's wand waver, then lower, as she looked at the brunette witch. "How did you do it? Send Harry's Patronus, I mean."

Brilliant, Draco thought, mentally promising to buy Hermione flowers, chocolates, a house, a bloody *island* – anything she wanted when they got out of this.

Ginny smiled, obviously proud of her ploy to draw them there. She slid her wand through her fingers, playing with it as she spoke.

"That was easy," she said, her eyes flashing as she barked out a laugh. "You really don't know?"

Hermione shook her head, and Ginny laughed again, her face darkening.

"The smartest witch of our generation," she said, shaking her finger at Hermione. "Always so smug, so much better than everyone else. I bet this is killing you, isn't it? Not knowing?"

Hermione fought the urge to sneer at the witch, knowing their best chance lay in keeping her talking. If she was taunting them, she wasn't concentrating on finding her brother. They expected contempt from Draco, but Hermione doubted they'd accept it from her.

"Oh, it *is*," Ginny giggled, smiling at her mother, whose lips quirked as well. "I can tell."

"Tell her, Ginny," Molly urged her daughter, favoring Hermione with a motherly smile that made her skin crawl. *How many times has Molly looked at me like that, and I bought it, never suspecting anything?* She suppressed a shudder at the thought. "Give her this one little thing before she dies."

Hermione saw Draco's arm twitch again out of the corner of her eye, knowing Molly's words had him instinctively reaching for the wand he no longer carried. She didn't let herself falter, hoping he could see she was fine. The last thing she needed was Draco being a martyr. She turned her head slightly, checking on Viktor, before meeting Ginny's gaze, hoping the witch hadn't noticed her concern for the unconscious wizard on the ground.

Ginny rolled her eyes at her mother, sharing a conspiratorial wink with Hermione, as though they were still sisters-in-law mocking the family matriarch behind her back. Hermione's teeth ached with the effort of holding her jaw tightly shut, preventing herself from saying something that

would only serve to get her killed faster.

"I have a rather hard time believing one of you hasn't worked it out," she said, sighing as though she was disappointed in them. "It's simple, really. That's always the best plan – the simplest one."

Ginny paused, cocking her head slightly as she thought.

"That's where this all went wrong, I think," she confided, lowering her voice as though telling a secret. "I should have killed Harry the moment I found out he'd gone back to sneaking around with *you* –" she nudged her wand at Draco, her eyes flashing with hatred, " – but I didn't. I thought I could convince him to stay by telling him I was pregnant. It would have worked, too, except we couldn't find a Healer willing to re-implant the fetus."

She wrinkled her nose, as though the memory was particularly distasteful.

"They had all these *questions*. 'How did you manage the spell on your own? Why didn't you go to a Healer in the first place? Why isn't the father here with you?'" she mimicked, rolling her eyes. "We could have tried transferring it back ourselves, but the spell is quite risky."

She moved closer, and both Draco and Hermione cringed when they saw how unhinged her expression had become.

"I could have died," she said in a stage whisper, laughing coldly and dancing back to the wall where her mother still stood.

"I was terribly glad dear Pansy didn't, of course," she said graciously, grinning. "It would have been *so* inconvenient. Not that it worked out, though, in the end."

She twirled her wand again, shrugging like the chain of events that led to her murdering several prison guards and holding Draco and Hermione hostage had been unavoidable.

"Which is why simple is best. So tell me, have you figured out how I sent Harry's Patronus yet?"

Draco had, and he figured Hermione had probably worked it out as well. *Keep her talking*, he thought, forcing himself to sneer and shake his head. He spread his hands wide, his posture full of contempt. His wrist ached as he stretched it, but he didn't flinch – he didn't want her to know he was injured.

"Enlighten us."

"Every ounce the aristocrat, even now, Draco," she said, bowing prettily in response. She reached into her robes, pulling out a silver flask. "Polyjuice," she said, waving the flask in the air in a mocking motion, "never leave home without it."

Neither Draco nor Hermione reacted to her revelation, and Ginny stuck her bottom lip out in an

exaggerated pout.

"No recriminations? No shame for falling for such an obvious trick?" Ginny shook her head, smirking. "I admit, I wasn't sure it would work myself. Imagine my elation when Harry's oh-so-noble-looking stag burst from my wand. You never doubted it was from him for a moment, did you? I have to say, it was a brilliant idea."

"But flawed, like all your other plans," Pansy spat, startling everyone. Draco's eyes flew to the pregnant witch, who stood with Narcissa just behind Molly and Ginny, both of their wands drawn.

Molly kept her wand trained on Draco while Ginny whirled around, her expression radiant.

"Oh, good. The cavalry has arrived," she said, smiling as she shot a Cutting curse straight at Pansy.

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Chapter: 31

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. No part of the Potterverse is mine, unfortunately.

"*Oh, good. The cavalry has arrived," she said, smiling as she shot a Cutting curse straight at Pansy.*

The Shield spell came out of nowhere, and Ginny's curse rebounded. The redhead looked stunned for a moment, staring at the unharmed pregnant witch in front of her before bringing her hand up slowly to touch the wound on her own chest. Her fingers came away coated in crimson, and a fine trickle of blood escaped her lips when she opened her mouth to speak.

"No one touches my family," Harry said, his voice cold and hard.

He and Lucius had arrived just in time to see Ginny fling the Cutting curse at Pansy, and he hadn't even stopped to think – he'd simply flung out his hand to shield Pansy and his child. He watched dispassionately as Ginny slumped to the ground, her brown eyes full of confusion and surprise. Molly immediately ran to her side, ignoring the four wands that were now trained on her.

"Ginny!" she screamed, pressing her hands over the gaping wound on her daughter's chest. "Ginny, Ginny listen to me!"

Ginny's eyes slowly traveled to her mother's frantic face, her breathing becoming more labored

as blood filled her chest and made it hard for her lungs to inflate.

"Ginny, no!" Molly cried, casting every Healing spell she knew over her daughter's ravaged torso.

Harry's eyes sought out Draco, who was still standing in the same position, his eyes wide as he watched the scene unfolding before him. He's been poised to spring on Ginny after the witch leveled her wand at Pansy, but her curse had rebounded before he could. Relieved grey eyes locked with Harry's, posing a silent question. They both knew the spells to repair enough of the damage to get Ginny to a Healer – Snape had used them on Draco years ago when Harry had used the curse against him in the lavatory. Harry shook his head minutely, and Draco nodded.

"Ginny!" Molly screamed again, throwing her wand aside so she could grip the woman's still body with both hands, pulling her up off the rocky ground. "Ginny? Ginny?"

Lucius was by her side in an instant, his wand pressed into her heaving back as she sobbed, clutching her daughter's lifeless body to her chest. Narcissa, after confirming Pansy was fine, hurried to Viktor's side, casting a full complement of scans and spells to determine the severity of his injuries. Hermione hovered impatiently beside them, helpless without her wand.

"Get up," Lucius growled, nudging Molly with his wand. She took no notice of him, or the grim smile on his face when his dragon hide boot snapped her wand, which lay on the ground beside her. "Get up!"

Molly pivoted, faster than anyone expected the grieving witch could. Lucius had been braced for an attack, but he was prepared for her to turn toward him, her most immediate threat. Instead, the older witch twisted around to face Pansy, Ginny's wand in her hand as her arm shot out to cast.

"*Infelix Proprius*," she screamed, and time seemed to slow as the bright purple light shot toward Pansy. Harry threw up his own hand, sending another wandless Shield spell, and Pansy's own mouth moved to block the curse, but the jet of light struck the witch just half a second before the other spells reached her.

"Stupefy!" Lucius roared, and Molly's body stiffened and fell, the wand still clutched in her hand.

He grabbed it, snapping it before following Harry to Pansy's side. The witch was still standing, no obvious injuries appearing. Harry ran his hands over her, moving her robes aside when necessary to check for any wounds.

"Pansy!" Draco screamed, closing the distance between them. He could taste his fear, a bitter, metallic tang at the back of his throat.

"I – I don't feel any different," Pansy said, looking down at her body. She ran a hand over her belly, seeming satisfied with what she felt there. "The baby's still moving. H- it seems fine."

Draco's hands joined hers, splayed out so he could cradle as much of her stomach as possible. He felt it, too – reassuring kicks that barely registered under his palm.

"We need to get you to St. Mungo's," Harry said, cupping her face in his hands so he could tilt her head up. He looked into her eyes, which seemed clear, before running a finger down to her neck to test her pulse. "Someone needs to see you right away. Theo – anyone. We don't know what that curse was."

"Wake her up," Draco spat, grabbing Pansy's wand out of her unresisting fingers and turning toward Molly's still body.

"Draco –"

"Wake. Her. Up." His words were dripping with venom, his eyes snapping with fury.

"We need to find out what the spell was," Lucius agreed, gripping Harry's shoulder before turning to Levitate Molly away, probably seeking out the tent Rodolphus had told them about. Draco paused, his eyes still following his father.

"We need to call the Aurors," Harry responded, his teeth clenched. "We've already done enough to ensure a stay in Azkaban today. I don't want to take any more chances."

"Rodolphus?" Draco asked, his narrowed gaze thawing slightly when it slid over his fiancé.

"Dead," Harry said flatly, returning his wand to its wrist holster. It wasn't as though he needed it, after all.

"Father?" Draco whispered, his eyes widening in panic as he studied Harry's face. His thoughts raced. *If Father killed him, the Ministry –*

"No."

"I see," Draco said, the words heavy in his throat as he realized what that must mean. "As soon as we get the answers we need from Molly, we'll turn her over to the Ministry."

"I won't be responsible for another death, Draco," Harry said evenly, his emotionless voice sending cold tendrils of fear down Draco's spine. It was a tone he'd never heard him use.

"Harry –"

"I won't take another life today!" Harry spat, storming off after Lucius. "Get Pansy and Viktor to St. Mungo's."

Draco started to follow, but Pansy's gentle grip on his arm stopped him.

"Let him go," she said, and Draco turned to look at her pale, scared face. "Please come with me. Please."

Draco hesitated before nodding, the terrified light in Pansy's eyes enough to convince him. Harry was with Lucius, and he knew the two of them would be fine. He just hoped Harry let his father do what was necessary – if they didn't know what curse Molly cast, they might not be able to stop its effects. Part of Draco ached for Harry, knowing the dark-haired wizard would likely be haunted by today's events for the rest of his life. Killing was not something Harry took lightly, and Draco felt an intense stab of worry at what toll this would take on him.

Draco twined his fingers with Pansy's, pulling her over toward Viktor. The man was leaning heavily on Hermione, but at least he was on his feet. From the worried looks on his mother and Hermione's faces, Draco knew the wizard's injuries must be severe.

"You go out on a simple mission and end up unconscious," Draco said, trying to bring a bit of levity to the appalling situation they found themselves in. "Hermione may never let you out of her sight again, if this is what happens when you disappear."

"*Na kukovo ljato*," Viktor mumbled, the humor glinting in his eyes despite the grimace on his lips. He was quite clearly in a lot of pain.

Draco laughed, wincing a bit as his mother grasped his other hand. Pain shot through his wrist, the sharp sensation countering the dull ache in his head where he had hit the ground.

"He'll be fine," Draco assured Hermione with a wink. "He's clearly still coherent."

Viktor ducked his head, nuzzling Hermione's hair.

"*Obicham te poveche ot vsichko na sveta*," he whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to the sensitive skin behind her ear.

"Oh, Viktor, how sweet," Narcissa cooed, reaching out to gently brush a trickle of blood away from his eye.

Draco rolled his eyes, finding the movement caused his head to throb viciously.

"There will be time to declare your undying love later, Krum," he said, tightening his hold on Pansy. "For now, we need to get to St. Mungo's."

He looked at his mother, nodding toward Hermione and Viktor.

"They took our wands – would you go with Hermione and Viktor? I've got Pansy's, so I'll take us."

" – realize that, Harry, but we must know what she cast," Lucius said, his pale face lined with worry.

"Aurors are trained in interrogation," Harry argued, his eyes flashing.

"The Aurors must follow regulations that can make it difficult to extract information."

"Lucius, I won't allow you to kill her. She'll be taken to the Ministry, and Merlin-willing, she'll spend the rest of her life in Azkaban. But she'll be alive."

Lucius rested a hand on Harry's shoulder wearily, his haggard face looking much older than his years. He knew what this was doing to Harry, but he could see no way around it.

"Leave, if you like, but –"

"I will *not*," Harry hissed, shoving Lucius' hand away. He paced the small tent, glancing uneasily over to the bed where Molly lay, still unconscious.

"I won't kill her," Lucius promised, inclining his head formally. "You have my oath as a wizard."

Harry burst into the private room, Theo trailing behind him.

"I know the curse she used," he panted, skidding to a stop at the foot of Pansy's bed. "It's –"

Harry broke off, glancing back at Theo. He'd gone to the young Healer first, hoping he could shed some light on the effects of the Dark curse Molly had used. The news had been alarming.

Theo crossed the room, resting a hip lightly on Pansy's bed and taking one of her hands in both of his.

"It's not good, love," he said gently, his gaze holding hers. "It was an Infertility spell."

Draco cursed softly, feeling the hot prick of tears at the back of his eyes. He knew how much Pansy wanted children of her own.

"But why?" Pansy asked softly, still looking into Theo's eyes. Why would Molly have struck out at her, not the others?

"The effects of the curse can cause a miscarriage," Theo said, shaking his head when Pansy's eyes widened. "It didn't. We won't be able to test you until after you've had the baby. There's no way of knowing whether or not she cast it correctly, or if the pregnancy shielded you from its effects."

"We might not be able to -"

Theo cut her off, pressing a light kiss to her lips. Neither Draco nor Harry missed her words – she and Theo were clearly more seriously involved than they'd known.

"Don't worry about it now," he said, kissing her hair when she leaned into his shoulder.

Draco found Harry sitting on the shower floor, water cascading over his naked body. Harry had his knees drawn up, and his face was tucked between them, protecting it from the torrent of hot water. Draco had no idea how long Harry had been there – he hadn't seen him since they'd returned from the Ministry two hours ago and Harry had disappeared.

Draco shivered despite the billows of steam that warmed the room, quickly shucking his own robes so he could climb in with Harry. The dark-haired man didn't move when Draco sat behind him, wrapping his arms around him and cradling his body tightly.

"Harry," he whispered, his lips touching the other man's ear. "Harry, talk to me."

Harry had maintained an eerily calm façade during their long interview with the Aurors at the Ministry, covering everything that had happened over the last few days. They didn't mention Ron, since they were sure the Ministry would use his death as an excuse to press charges against Lucius somehow. After all, he died at the Manor, and the conditions were certainly suspect. He'd been a prisoner in their dungeon, and they'd taken measures to cover up his death after he committed suicide. Even an incompetent lawyer could fit a Hippogriff through the holes in their story.

Draco had never been so thankful for house-elves in all his life. His father had instructed them to dispose of Ron's body, and no one knew where it was. When the Aurors questioned them – under Veritaserum, even Harry – about Ron's whereabouts, they could honestly answer that they didn't know. Questions about the last time they'd seen him had been harder to evade, but they'd all managed to keep his visit to the Manor a secret.

Draco pressed closer to Harry's body, worried about how still the man was. He expected to find him sobbing, but seeing Harry so emotionally closed off was worse. "Harry," he said again, his throat constricting with unshed tears.

The silent man turned in Draco's embrace, shifting them around so he was sitting between Draco's legs and could rest his head on Draco's shoulder.

"I haven't been able to cry," he whispered, his voice cracking. "And I've been wondering why. I *killed* a person today, and I cast a Shield that caused another's death. And the worst part is that I haven't been able to *cry*."

He leaned heavily into Draco, his words muffled by the blond's chest.

"All day I've thought there was something wrong with me, that I could do these horrible things and not just break down."

Draco remained silent, stroking Harry's bare back. The water from the shower ensured they were warm, separated from the rest of the world by a cocoon of fragrant steam.

Harry sighed, and Draco felt shudders start to wrack his body. He tightened his arms again, squeezing Harry almost to the point of pain, but neither man complained.

"But now I know why. I couldn't cry because you weren't there, holding me. Part of *me* was missing," Harry whispered, tears streaming down his cheeks, the constriction around his heart easing as his unbearable grief was finally able to pour out.

They sat like that for more than an hour, silent but for Harry's wracking sobs. Draco rocked him gently, his arms wrapped around Harry despite his cramping muscles. He stilled when Harry's sobs finally stopped, ducking his head to see if the man had finally calmed or simply fallen asleep.

Vehemently wishing he had Harry's talent for wandless magic, Draco shifted his grip on the wet man and struggled to his feet, dragging Harry with him. He must have been completely exhausted, since the jarring movement didn't wake him. Draco steadied Harry against the tiled wall, shutting off the shower and grabbing several fluffy towels from the rack. He quickly dried both of them, lifting Harry into his arms and carrying him to their bed. He gently eased the sleeping man between the covers, pulling the warm duvet up to Harry's chin and kissing his forehead before getting dressed.

Draco stretched, wincing at the pain in his wrist and head, joined by aches in his back from maintaining the uncomfortable position on the shower floor for so long. He'd refused treatment at St. Mungo's, more interested in having the Healers examine Pansy and Viktor than waste time with him. *Not the best idea, perhaps*, he thought wryly, slipping his foot into his boot and straightening. Before he could call for her, Tizzy materialized in front of him, bearing vials of Pain and Bone Knitting potions and a tray with dinner.

"Master Draco!" the house-elf cried, wrapping herself around his legs. "Master Draco, Tizzy is so sorry! Tizzy is trying to help, but she is not getting to her Master Draco!"

He flicked a glance back toward the bed, where Harry was still soundly sleeping. Draco pried Tizzy's surprisingly strong fingers from his trousers, kneeling down so he could talk with her.

"Tizzy, you did exactly the right thing," he said, his voice smooth and reassuring. His mother had told him the toll his kidnapping had taken on the elf. "You were a very good house-elf. Your help was invaluable."

The elf's eyes swam with tears, and she threw herself at him again, practically strangling him with her firm grip around his neck. Unsure of what to do, Draco brought his hand up, tentatively patting the crying elf on the back.

"Er, there, there, Tizzy," he crooned, feeling ridiculous. "Everything is fine now."

"Oh, Master Draco!" she cried, squeezing him even tighter. "Master Draco is the best master, he is! Tizzy is being so happy Master Draco and his Master Harry are being alright!"

"Yes, everyone is fine," Draco said, his awkward pats turning to rubs as he tried to comfort the small elf. "Tizzy, I need you to do something for me."

The elf released him instantly, standing straight and proud. Her eyes gleamed with tears, but it was clear she was honored to still be considered in good enough standing to serve him. Draco suppressed an eye roll. *I'll never understand these creatures*, he thought, sighing.

"I need to go make a few Fire-calls and do some research in the library, but I don't want to leave Master Harry alone. Would you sit with him? He'll likely be asleep for awhile, but summon me at once if he wakes."

The elf scrambled over to Harry's bedside, perching on a low chair she Conjured with a wave of her hand. Draco gave her a tired smile before downing the Pain potion with a grimace. It had the bitter aftertaste of a commercially brewed potion. Draco looked at the label – sure enough, it was from an apothecary in Diagon Alley. His supply of home-brewed potions must have run out. He chased the potion with the Bone Knitting vial, steeling himself for the sharp pain that always accompanied bone regrowth.

It would be good to get some brewing time in soon, he thought, grabbing a sandwich off the tray that levitated in front of him and heading out the door. *It would be brilliant to do something relaxing.*

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Chapter: 32

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. Not mine.

" – wish you'd allowed me to be present during the questioning. I can't protect you if you tie my hands behind my back like that."

Draco sighed, rubbing a hand over his tired face. He was on his third Fire-call of the evening with Abramson, who was justifiably upset that they'd agreed to be questioned by Aurors – under Veritaserum, no less – without consulting him.

"I understand, but we felt it would raise suspicions to ask to have a lawyer present."

Abramson snorted, and his head disappeared briefly from the fire. Draco figured he was probably digging around in that ever-present briefcase of his, finding some parchment that would prove Draco wrong.

"The judge has agreed to throw out Bill and Fleur Weasley's motion for custody of the baby," Abramson said when his head swam back into view, and Draco flinched. It wasn't what he'd been expecting.

"Really?" he asked, pouring himself another cup of black coffee. He needed to wake up. "That's good news, then. But Ginny's death – that won't affect our claim?"

"Not at all," Abramson said, passing a scroll through the fire. Draco sat forward and grabbed it, sloshing coffee over the rug. "The Minister of Magic himself has declared it a closed case. Accidental death by spell rebound."

Draco's mouth went slack as he absorbed the words. Their biggest fear – today, anyway – had been that Harry might lose custody of the baby because he killed its mother.

"Spell rebound."

Abramson nodded, his glasses slipping slightly on his nose. Draco could see the collar of his dressing gown – it was very late. He took another sip of coffee, absently wondering if Abramson charged more for middle-of-the-night crises.

"But the Aurors –"

"I am well aware of how the questioning went, Mr. Malfoy," Abramson cut in, the reprimand strong in his voice. "Some of their unfortunate assumptions and comments could have been avoided if you'd simply notified my office of your intent to speak with them."

The Aurors – even several that had been Harry's friends when he'd worked with them – had questioned them harshly, implying it had all been part of a conspiracy to stop Ginny from claiming custody of their child. *Like we'd go through the trouble of breaking her out of Azkaban and setting her loose on society just so we could stage my kidnapping to kill her? Besides, she was in* prison*; she couldn't have claimed custody.*

Draco's tired brain mulled over the Aurors' sneers and vicious little asides, all designed to make Harry feel like less of a man because he was gay. It wouldn't have been a big deal if the comments had been directed at Draco – he had no such insecurities – but they were devastating for Harry, who struggled with his sexuality when he discovered he was attracted to Draco nearly a decade ago. Draco was a little surprised Harry had been so receptive to his touch earlier that evening – usually, when people made comments like that it set them back a ways in their relationship, with Harry becoming skittish about touching in private, much less in public.

"What will happen to Molly?" Draco asked, unfurling the scroll so he could read Kingsley's

decision.

"The Ministry Mind-Healers have examined her, and they say she is not competent to stand trial," the lawyer said, his face pinched. Draco knew the man would love to get her on the stand. So would he, for that matter. "They found evidence that she'd repeatedly been a victim of the Memory Charm and Suggestion spells. It's their opinion that she wasn't acting in her right mind."

Draco huffed, not sure what to think of that. Knowing Ginny, it was possible she'd used those methods to manipulate her own mother, he supposed.

"Where will she go?"

"She'll be spending the rest of her life in the high-security ward at the Dilys Derwent Home for the Criminally Insane," Abramson said, frowning and shaking his head. "My office will take care of the – er – arrangements I'm sure you'll want to make with the staff there?"

Draco grinned, suppressing a laugh at the man's reluctance to admit the Malfoy family often paid substantial bribes to prison guards to keep an eye on their enemies.

"Of course," Draco said with a negligent shrug. He narrowed his eyes as he thought. "Let's say, twice the normal amount, shall we? I want to be kept very well informed."

"Consider it done, Mr. Malfoy," Abramson said, ducking his head to make a note on a piece of parchment that likely contained Molly Weasley's mental health assessment.

There's precious little that isn't available for sale if you have enough money, Draco thought dryly, sitting back after re-filling his coffee. They'd be monitoring her condition, making sure her illness was not faked and that she was well-contained there. Draco wouldn't take any chances with his family. They'd allowed Molly to live, but that didn't mean they'd forget she existed.

"Anything else, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco hesitated, then set his coffee aside, kneeling in front of the fire. He glanced over his shoulder, reassuring himself the doors to his study were closed and they were alone.

"I assume you have all of Molly Weasley's hospital admissions papers and Healers' reports," he said, pausing to yawn. "Sorry. Do any of them mention why she cast that spell against Pansy? Was her goal to kill her grandchild?"

Abramson looked down at his notes again, and Draco could hear the shuffling papers this time, since he was so close to the Floo.

"It seems Mrs. Weasley was under the impression that Miss Parkinson was carrying a child that was biologically hers and Mr. Potter's," the lawyer said, squinting at the small words printed on the parchment. "The younger Miss Weasley apparently told her recently that the Surrogacy

transfer hadn't worked because Miss Parkinson was already pregnant."

"And she believed it? I thought she helped with the transfer."

More rustling filled the silence while Abramson juggled the parchment, trying to find an answer.

"Ah, yes. Apparently the Mind-Healers found evidence that her memory of that had been tampered with. It seems Miss Weasley used a Suggestion spell when she told her mother about the baby being Miss Parkinson's. Does that clear things up?"

Merlin, what an evil bitch, Draco thought bitterly. *Manipulates her own family with Dark spells, tries to use them to kill Harry and Pansy. Is there anything she wouldn't do?* He couldn't bring himself to be sorry she was dead, though he did regret that it was at least partially by Harry's hand. He knew the wizard well enough to know that Ministry pronouncement or not, Harry would always believe that he had caused Ginny's death.

I'm not blameless there, he thought, remembering the look on Harry's face when they failed to use the spells they knew to save her. *I wouldn't have spit on her if she was on fire, but Harry – that was a huge decision for him. I'm sure it's eating away at him.*

"Yes, thank you, Abramson," Draco said, effectively dismissing the lawyer. "I'm sure you'll be in touch."

"Certainly, sir," Abramson said, bowing his head formally before the flames winked out.

Draco sat back heavily, groaning as his muscles protested. He was sore from holding Harry in the shower, despite the Pain potion. He knew he'd feel better after a good night's sleep, but he couldn't spare the time. He still had a few important documents to read that couldn't wait – the various businesses that comprised Malfoy Industries did not stop simply because their chairman had been attacked and kidnapped.

He rubbed his eyes, which were drooping despite the caffeine he'd ingested. Draco didn't want to resort to a Pepper-Up potion, since he'd likely be awake for days if he took one. He decided a cold shower might help him most, so he heaved himself up off the sofa, leaving his parchments scattered around the table. The house-elves knew better than to disrupt his paperwork, so he didn't have to worry they'd tidy things up in his absence.

Draco was startled to see Harry sitting on the marble counter when he exited his shower. The water had been painfully cold, and he was now wide-awake, as intended. He shivered as he drew a towel through his wet hair, water dripping down his body to pool on the tile floor as he approached the dark-haired wizard.

"Did I wake you?" Draco asked, his voice low.

"No. I've been awake for awhile," Harry answered in the same tone. He still looked absolutely

drained.

"I'll have Tizzy bring you a –"

"I don't want a potion," Harry said, his voice tired.

Draco paused, not sure what to say. He settled for sidling up to the counter, settling between Harry's legs and putting his arms around Harry's waist.

"You need to rest, love," Draco said softly, kissing Harry's naked chest. He was wearing a pair of Draco's pajama bottoms without a shirt, exactly like he had been the night before. He must have slipped the trousers on earlier, since Draco had put him to bed completely nude. "Your body needs sleep."

"So does yours," Harry said pointedly, his forehead resting on the top of Draco's head.

Draco pushed Harry's concerns aside, raising his head to look into his green eyes.

"How can I help you sleep?"

"You could –" Harry hesitated, biting his lip. He looked so fragile and unsure that Draco wanted to gather him up in his arms and murmur promises of love and safety until the sun rose. He settled for light caresses up and down Harry's bare back. " – you could listen."

"Listen?"

Harry sighed, running his fingers through Draco's fine blond hair. He focused on the feel of the silky strands caressing his skin, distancing himself from what he was about to say.

"About Rodolphus."

Draco stiffened slightly, his hands stilling against Harry's back. He'd asked his father about it earlier that evening, but Lucius wouldn't say anything aside from the fact that it had been necessary.

"Do you want to move back to the bed?"

"No, here," Harry said, using his hands to press Draco's head back to his chest. "This will be easier for me if – if you aren't looking at me."

Draco obliged, letting his head rest against Harry's warm chest. He could feel the frantic beat of Harry's heart, and the answering thrum of his own fast pulse. Did Harry think he wouldn't love him if he knew how he killed Rodolphus?

"Harry, it doesn't matter to me –"

"I know," Harry said easily, petting Draco's head. "But it matters to me. I want you to know what I did. I want you to know that I murdered a man in cold blood."

Draco's eyes drifted shut, trying to block out what Harry was saying. He didn't like the knife-edge to Harry's voice, or the way his body had tensed underneath him as he said the words.

"I did," he continued, his fingers still absently carding through Draco's hair. "We got all the information we needed, and we were going to Apparate away to find you. Lucius had agreed to leave him there, bound, in the alley for the Aurors to find when we contacted them."

Harry trailed off, and he was silent for several minutes, his fingers still working their way through Draco's hair. The blond finally spoke up, worried Harry wasn't able to finish.

"What happened?" he whispered, his breath hot against Harry's naked chest.

"He said he wouldn't rest until you were dead. Both you and your father. He called you Death Eater scum, and said that no one could trust you, since your allegiances were so easily swayed."

Draco was speechless. Harry had killed Rodolphus because of him? Because he was worried the man would kill him or Lucius?

"I – I could see the terror in his eyes, Draco," Harry continued, his voice falling to a mere whisper. Tears pricked his eyes. "He was scared of something, and it wasn't me. He – he said if I didn't kill him, he'd make sure you died in the most painful way he could imagine."

Harry fell silent again, his heart still racing. He swallowed past the tears constricting his throat, trying to finish his confession before he lost his nerve.

"He knew Ginny would hunt him down for what he told us," Harry whispered, tears falling freely now. "He *wanted* me to kill him. He knew that way, at least it would be painless and fast."

Draco fought his own tears, trying to stay as calm as possible. Harry had been in an impossible situation and – like always – acted in the manner he thought was best. *Always sacrificing himself for others*, Draco thought bitterly, *even if that sacrifice means feeling guilty for the rest of his life for agreeing to kill someone.*

"So you killed him?" Draco prompted, hating the way the words grated against his throat.

"I wasn't going to. Lucius just laughed at him, and we turned away. We were just about to leave when he broke through the spell somehow. He had a broken bottle in his hand – I guess he grabbed it off the ground."

Harry fell silent, but Draco didn't prompt him again. He had a sick feeling that he knew exactly where this was going. He owed Harry more than he could ever express.

"He lunged at Lucius. He just came out of nowhere – we were standing there, and the next second your father was on the ground, and Rodolphus had the jagged edge right up against his throat."

Harry's hand came up to caress his own unblemished throat, and Draco swallowed hard. He caught Harry's hand, gripping it tightly with his own.

"Thank you."

"I haven't finished," Harry said, shaking off Draco's grip.

Draco let his own hand fall back to Harry's waist, his mouth dry from fear – both from the horrifying story and the thought that it might cause Harry to withdraw from him.

"I just froze," the dark-haired wizard continued, his voice hoarse with unshed tears. "I couldn't move. He was about to kill your father, and I couldn't raise my wand."

Harry struggled to reign in his tears, pausing until he could speak normally again.

"I didn't do anything until the glass cut into his throat," he said, his voice flat. "I saw the blood trickle out of the long gash – it wasn't deep enough to kill him, but certainly enough to slow him down. Lucius threw Rodolphus off, but he got right back up and launched himself at your father. I panicked, and I just let my magic run free. I didn't even put any intent other than to stop him behind it."

They were silent again, the only sound in the room Harry's uneven breathing as his memory ran over the events of the day. Two people dead, either directly or indirectly because of him. He shuddered slightly at the thought. *I'm a killer, now*, he realized, the weight of taking another life falling heavily on him. *Voldemort killed himself with a backfired spell, but Rodolphus – I* killed *him. I reached out with my magic with the intent to harm. And I did nothing to stop Ginny's death, even though I could have. What kind of monster am I?*

"You're a good man," Draco said softly, sensing where Harry's thoughts had strayed. "A brave man."

Harry snorted, shaking his head. He was filled with a wave of anger that Draco couldn't just let him wallow in his emotions.

"I'm a killer," he spat, shoving the blond away from him and hopping down off the counter.

"In defense of another," Draco said, and Harry could feel his gaze burning into his back.

"I could have just disarmed him."

Draco walked forward, sensing Harry's capitulation. He wrapped his arms around Harry's naked shoulders, pulling him back against his chest. "He wanted to die. He wouldn't have stopped. It was an act of mercy," he whispered against Harry's ear.

Harry went slack against him, leaning his full weight against Draco. It was as if all the fight had gone out of him. Draco bent his knees and scooped the other wizard up, staggering under his weight. They were nearly the same height, and it was difficult to carry Harry like this.

Tizzy appeared a moment later, casting some sort of Lightening spell on Harry's body. Draco straightened and made his way to their bed, gently placing Harry in the nest of covers, just as he had earlier that night. The house-elf climbed up on the bed, holding a vial of Dreamless Sleep. Harry didn't make any move to protest, opening his mouth obediently when she touched the glass to it.

"You *are* a good man, Harry Potter," Draco whispered, his lips feathering across Harry's eyelids as they drifted shut. "I love you."

Draco knocked on his parents' door, realizing he'd be waking them up. It was still a few hours before dawn, but he wanted the full story of Rodolphus' death.

"Draco?" Lucius muttered, his voice thick with sleep. He opened the door wider, inviting his son into the suite's sitting room. "What's wrong?"

Draco paced impatiently, his over-tired mind racing.

"I need you to tell me what happened."

Lucius required no further preamble. He sighed, tightening the belt of his dressing gown and sitting on the antique wingback chair near the fireplace. He made an impatient motion at Draco, who rolled his eyes and perched on the chair's ottoman, close to his father.

"I've told you it's Harry's story to tell," Lucius said, his eyes sympathetic as he surveyed his son.

"He told me," Draco whispered, his chest tightening as he remembered how difficult it had been for the wizard to complete the story. "But I want to hear it from you, too. I get the feeling there's a lot he's leaving out."

Lucius nodded, shaking his head to clear the remnants of sleep away. He needed to be coherent for this conversation.

"Have you been to bed at all?" he asked, studying Draco's tired grey eyes.

"No. Tell me what happened."

"I imagine he told you we had gotten the information we needed and were preparing to leave

when Rodolphus somehow freed himself from his magical bonds, yes?"

Draco nodded, his body tense as he braced himself for what he suspected came next.

"I'm still not sure how he managed that, but strange things are possible when you are angry enough, or when you fear for your life enough," Lucius continued, his eyes faraway as he recalled the scene in the alley.

"He was spitting meaningless vitriol about vowing a vendetta against you and our family – nothing surprising, given the situation," Lucius said, waving the words away with a negligent gesture. "It was nothing we couldn't handle. Then he lunged at Harry, and he caught him around the throat."

Draco's breathing faltered, his stomach clenching at the omission from Harry's story.

"He didn't tell you that, did he?" Lucius asked, shaking his head. "No, he wouldn't . He would have seen the threat against his own life as inconsequential. Stupid man."

Draco nodded woodenly, waiting for his father to finish. He knew he could count on him not to leave anything out.

"I couldn't cast any defensive spells, since they were wrapped around each other, fighting like Muggles, rolling around on the filthy pavement in the alley," Lucius explained, grimacing slightly as he remembered watching, helpless, as Harry struggled against the bigger man. "Rodolphus was strangling Harry, but Harry's body was shielding him from me. He actually blacked out, and that's when Rodolphus let him go."

Lucius shook his head again, remembering the sick sound of Harry's head hitting the pavement. He hadn't known if the wizard was alive or not when he leveled his wand at Rodolphus, who was holding his hands out, waiting for the final blow, welcoming a quick death.

"I knew he wanted me to kill him, which is why I didn't," Lucius continued, sparing his son the description of the way Harry's motionless body looked, limbs splayed haphazardly across the ground. It was a picture he wished he didn't have, either. "I think he saw it in my eyes – that I was going to capture him, not finish him. That's when he lunged at me. I didn't see the broken bottle until it was too late," he said, his voice almost apologetic.

"He had the bottle at my throat before I could cast anything. It happened quickly. I managed to throw him off, but I lost my wand in the struggle. He was headed for me again when Harry –"

Lucius broke off, unsure of how to describe exactly what Harry had done. He hadn't used his wand, and he hadn't cast the Killing Curse. He'd simply thrown out his hand, and Rodolphus had crumpled.

"– I don't know what he did, to be honest. It was nonverbal and wandless. I'm not sure he even

had a spell in mind. I felt the wave of magic he sent out, and Rodolphus – he just died. Instantly."

TBC

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Chapter: 33

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. I don't own them, but I wrote a very hopeful letter to Santa, so we'll see.

Author's note: Thanks to for the plot bunny. Y'all have her to thank for the lovely of bondage that follows!

Harry didn't stir as Draco crawled into bed beside him, collapsing in an exhausted heap as soon as his head hit the pillow. It was just barely dawn – he'd spelled the curtains shut before coming to bed to keep out the rising sun – and Draco was finally giving in to his body's demand for sleep.

He closed his eyes, burrowing into the warm blankets with a sigh. He expected to drift off immediately, but sleep eluded him. Something just didn't feel right. He cracked open his eyes, looking at the sleeping wizard beside him. Draco inched closer, pressing his body against Harry's still form, which reacted instinctively, leaning toward him. *There*, he thought with a contented sigh*, that's better.* He slung his arm over Harry's warm torso, snuggling into his body as he finally succumbed to his bone-numbing exhaustion.

Draco awoke slowly, vaguely registering the sensation of something silky gliding across the sensitive flesh of his inner wrists. He moved his hands impatiently, as though trying to swat the disturbance away. The sensation returned, more persistent this time. When something warm gripped his hands, urging them up, Draco started, his eyes flying open as he realized this wasn't part of a dream.

"What the fuck?" he asked muzzily, twisting from side to side. His face brushed his arms, which were now extended above his head. He tried to bring them down, but something stopped him. He blinked, rocketing into full awareness when he realized he couldn't move them at all. His hands fisted against the restraints that held him captive, pulling at them frantically.

He heard Harry chuckle, and the tension flooded out of his body. He went limp against the restraining cloth, and it immediately loosened. *Spelled to become tighter when I struggle,* he concluded, tilting his head back so he could get a look at them.

His cock instantly jumped to attention when he grasped what was going on. Harry had tied him

to their bed with the strips from ruined silk robes they'd used a few months ago. Draco's heart skipped a beat.

"I can't believe you saved those," Harry whispered, fingering the frayed strips of silk and letting his finger trail down Draco's raised arm as he bent to lick an exposed nipple.

Draco shivered at the sensations, which went straight to his cock. He squirmed against the restraints again, not trying to gain his freedom, just unable to lie still under the sensuous assault.

"I can't believe you went through my things and found them," Draco retorted dryly, arching and gasping when Harry's teeth closed around the pebbled nipple in response.

Harry sat back on his heels, and Draco got his first look at him. He was completely nude, his golden skin shimmering slightly in the scarce amount of light that intruded between the closed curtain panels. He was also completely hard, wearing a mischievous expression and a Cheshire grin.

"I was looking for these," Harry said, grabbing a velvet box off the bed and snapping it shut. Draco recognized it – it held the cufflinks Harry had given him when his divorce trial had started.

"Why?" Draco asked, his brow furrowing even as Harry's wicked hand stole up his thigh, closing around his cock.

"Are we really going to have this discussion right now?" Harry purred, tightening his hold on Draco's hard length and giving it a good tug.

"No," Draco gasped, his mouth going dry at the sight of Harry's flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he wouldn't trade places with anyone in the world right now. Any fears he had about Harry's state of mind fled as waves of pleasure and desire shot through him.

"Good," Harry whispered, lowering his mouth to press gentle kisses to Draco's kneecap.

Draco gasped as Harry's tongue flicked out, tracing obscure patterns across his knee. He'd never considered his kneecap to be an erotic zone before, but his twitching cock definitely had different ideas about it now.

Harry laughed – a low, rumbling sound that had Draco's heart accelerating – at his fiancé's reaction, nibbling his way up Draco's pale inner thigh until he reached his pelvis. Harry's hot tongue ran up his hipbone, marking it with a light bite as he passed it, and trailed its way to Draco's aching cock, licking a teasing stripe from root to head.

Draco shuddered violently, his hands pulling against his silken bonds as he tried to reach for Harry. The dark-haired wizard raised his head, and Draco felt a jolt when he looked into bright

green eyes, clearer than they'd been in days and blazing with desire.

"No moving," Harry chastised, clucking his tongue. He grinned when the sound focused Draco's gaze on his mouth, teasing the other man by running his tongue wetly across his bottom lip. Draco groaned, letting his head fall back heavily against his pillow, relaxing against the restraining silk bonds.

"Let me do something for you," Draco whined, hearing the petulance in his voice but not caring.

"Hmm," Harry hummed, considering. Draco's mind wandered to what it felt like to have Harry hum like that around a mouthful of his cock, and his erection jumped, making him groan at the painful sensation of being several levels past hard.

"No," Harry said, quirking an eyebrow at the blond tied to the bed. Draco let his legs fall open, realizing he was completely at Harry's mercy. Though he was sure Harry would have spelled the bonds to release him if he truly wanted to be free, he didn't try it. Harry seemed to be enjoying himself, and Draco had a few thoughts about how he could pay him back for this later.

"Well chosen," Harry whispered, nudging Draco's sprawled legs with his knee. He bent to his task again, taking great care to be gentle as he ran his teeth across the soft head of Draco's cock, eliciting a moan so erotic from the blond that Harry's own cock twitched in sympathy.

He let his tongue glide down over Draco's balls, teasing each globe with a few swirling licks before dropping down to let the flat of his tongue slide over Draco's entrance. The blond arched up off the bed as though touched with a live wire, his hands fisting around the soft silk that bound his wrists.

"Fuck, Harry," he groaned, letting his legs slide bonelessly over Harry's shoulders when the dark-haired man urged them up.

Harry settled into his spot, pinned to the bed by the comforting weight of Draco's legs, his tongue still teasing Draco's hole. He shifted slightly, bringing his hands up to gently spread Draco's cheeks, giving his tongue greater access and drawing another moan from the blond. He let the pointed end of his tongue breach Draco, applying gentle pressure until the quivering ring of muscles allowed it to pass. Draco was mumbling incoherently, using Harry's shoulders as leverage to grind his arse against his face.

Harry chuckled, and the vibrations made Draco groan. He fought against his bonds again, desperate to touch his lover. He wanted Harry to bury his thick cock deep inside him and pound into him until they were both screaming.

"Ahh," he whimpered when Harry's fingers joined his tongue, gently scissoring inside him to stretch his tight channel. It wouldn't be long now. Draco stopped fighting against the silk and relaxed into the sensation, certain he'd get his wish soon.

Harry sat back, apparently satisfied that Draco had been sufficiently prepared. He waved his hand, Conjuring a handful of slick lubricant to spread over his cock, groaning softly at the sensation of the cool liquid smoothing over his thick length. Draco hitched his legs up, pressing his knees to his chest to show Harry exactly what he wanted.

"You are such a slut," Harry laughed, rubbing the head of his cock against Draco's entrance. Both men moaned at the sensation, and Harry indulged in a bit more teasing before thrusting inside with one smooth jerk of his hips.

Harry's laughter stopped the moment he slid inside Draco, all thoughts of anything other than the tight channel surrounding his throbbing cock fleeing. Harry's world narrowed to that small sliver of reality, his vision flickering as he moved his hips in a punishing rhythm, snapping them forward with incredible force to drive into Draco's welcoming heat again and again.

"I want to try something," Harry gasped, earning a confused stare from Draco, who was writhing under him in an attempt to brush his neglected cock against anything he could.

"Just wait," Harry answered, quickening the tempo and driving deeper into Draco.

He seemed to steady himself, his eyes burning with focus for a moment. Then Harry opened his mouth and *hissed*. The sound of Parseltongue sliding from his lover's lips was too much for Draco, who shouted out Harry's name as his balls tightened before jerking violently and coming hard.

Harry thrust into Draco's tight heat several more times before succumbing to his own orgasm, his eyes slamming shut as he shuddered. Tears pricked behind his closed eyes as all the tension and emotions of the last few days left him, flooding out as though pouring out of his cock along with jets of hot come.

"Fuck me," Harry groaned, collapsing heavily on top of Draco. He felt completely drained, but also better than he had in weeks.

"No kidding," Draco drawled from beneath him, his voice muffled by Harry's chest.

"Mmm." Harry slid out carefully, grimacing in sympathy when he saw Draco's small wince. He rolled to the side, snuggling up against Draco and laying his head on his sweaty chest. He waved his hand, and Draco's bonds fell away.

"Was that Parseltongue?" Draco asked, his voice slightly hoarse as he thought about the sounds that had come from Harry's mouth. His spent cock twitched slightly at the memory.

"What, this?" Harry asked in Parseltongue, his lips curving into a self-satisfied smile when he saw Draco shiver.

Draco could feel his exhausted body responding, his cock filling with blood again despite the

fact that he'd just come.

"Merlin, Potter, I'm not 18 anymore," he groaned, closing his eyes in frustration. "Are you trying to kill me?"

Harry laughed, letting his fingers trace a pattern against Draco's smooth chest.

"No, I was just curious," he answered smugly, letting Draco know his reaction had been exactly what Harry expected.

"It was *brilliant*. Why have we never –"

Draco stopped mid-sentence, abruptly realizing why Harry had never used Parseltongue around him before, let alone in bed. It was considered a Dark talent, and he knew it was one Harry was loathe to use. In fact, he'd told the press the ability had left him when Voldemort died, though Draco knew it was a lie orchestrated to make Harry seem less dangerous. Those close to Harry had worried that the wizarding world would turn against him after Voldemort's defeat, simply because no one was comfortable with a single wizard having as much power as Harry did. They still downplayed his talents and abilities whenever possible.

"I was ashamed of it," Harry answered honestly, tilting his head up so he could look at Draco. "I was ashamed of a lot of things. Everything that happened yesterday kind of confirmed something I'd thought for a long time. That – that my magic was dangerous. That *I* was dangerous."

Draco scooted up against his pillows so he could look down at Harry's face. He was relieved to see Harry wasn't wearing the broken expression that he'd had yesterday – it was sad, but more self-assured and content.

"I went to Hogwarts after you fell asleep," Harry admitted, his cheeks coloring slightly at the confession. "I didn't swallow the Dreamless Sleep Tizzy gave me. I spit it out when you left."

Draco opened his mouth to question him, but Harry continued before he got the chance.

"I was worried that it wasn't safe for anyone to be around me, after what happened to Rodolphus," he explained, returning to drawing imaginary doodles on Draco's warm chest. "I couldn't live with myself if I hurt you, or Hermione, or Merlin forbid, our child."

"You wouldn't –"

"I know," Harry answered, cutting Draco's reassurance off. "Now I do, at least. I went to Hogwarts so I could talk with Dumbledore's portrait. He's one of the only other wizards in history who was able to master wandless magic."

Harry paused, pushing himself up so he could look at Draco as he spoke. He settled back into the pillows, his face resting close enough to Draco's that the blond could feel the heat of Harry's

breath against his cheeks.

"You're going to make a big deal about this," Harry whispered, his blush deepening. "But really, it's nothing."

"Make a big deal of what?" Draco asked, his eyes narrowing at Harry's embarrassed expression.

"I suppose you're familiar with the myth of the Omnino?"

"Shit, Harry," Draco sputtered, struggling to sit up. "I thought that was just a legend –"

"See?" Harry sighed heavily, drawing his hand through his hopelessly tousled hair.

"See *what*? You tell me you're a fucking Omnino, a race of wizards I didn't think even really *existed* – because I think that's what you're saying here – and I'm supposed to, what – shrug and ask if you want tea?" Draco yelped, scrambling to his knees so he could fully face the sheepish wizard sitting next to him.

"I *knew* you would do this," Harry muttered, his eyes downcast.

"Merlin, Harry, do you have any idea what this means?"

Harry lifted his head, eyeing Draco speculatively. He waved his hand, and the walls disappeared. Their bed was surrounded by the Forbidden Forest. Draco shivered in the cold early-February air, reaching out to touch the rough bark on the tree bough that dipped just above his head. Just as suddenly, his fingers closed over nothing, and the bed was surrounded by a vast expanse of beige sand. The dry, hot air was a welcome change after the frosty forest, and Draco let his arm drop to his side. He quirked an expectant eyebrow at Harry, who sighed petulantly and waved his hand again, returning them to the Manor.

Draco's grey eyes narrowed as he took in the newest change – the right bedroom, but the wrong time. The muted décor of their suite had been replaced by heavy wallpaper and ornately carved furniture. Music drifted in through the half-open door – the distinctive notes of a harpsichord. Draco's gaze settled on the bedside table, which held a small but recognizable miniature of a long-dead relative – Philippa Malfoy, wife of Benedict – an ancestor so far back in his line that Draco had no idea what to call him. Her tiny portrait hung in the drawing room along with his other ancestors. He twisted around, his eyes widening as he recognized many of the Malfoy heirlooms, all of which looked untarnished and decidedly new.

"Fuck, Potter," he gaped, turning his shocked gaze on Harry. "You've brought us to the 16th century."

Harry shrugged negligently, waving his hand again. The room melted away, reforming with the mix of modern and antique furniture that Draco had been using since he moved into the suite after coming of age and taking over the household.

Another wave of Harry's hand brought a spread of exotic fruits and pastries – things Draco *knew* they couldn't possibly have in the Manor's kitchens. Things it shouldn't be possible to Conjure from nothing, because of Gamp's Law of Elemental Transfiguration.

Harry rolled his eyes at Draco's awestruck face, reaching out and grabbing a ripe lychee, tearing into its textured, berry-colored skin with his fingernail and popping the succulent fruit out. He teased the moist flesh along Draco's lips, urging his mouth open so he could lay it on his tongue.

The sweet flavor burst in Draco's mouth, and he opened his lips without prompting when Harry held another up. Harry grinned, shaking his head.

"It shouldn't be possible, just like this shouldn't be possible, and it shouldn't be possible to kill a man with a thought. But it is. I spent several hours with Dumbledore's portrait this morning," Harry said, wrinkling his nose at a sudden thought. "And Snape's. Between the two of them, they explained things pretty well."

Draco reached out for the platter of diced papaya, tossing a chunk in his mouth as he listened.

"The existence of a true Omnino as the legends define it is most certainly no more than a myth," Harry said, waving his hand again to Conjure a pot of tea for Draco. The blond grinned in thanks, pouring himself and Harry cups of the fragrant jasmine blend. "But the powers the old legends ascribed to the mythical race of powerful witches and wizards *are* grounded in truth."

Draco arched a brow, taking another sip of tea. Frankly, he didn't care *what* Harry was capable of, or what the wizard chose to call his ability – he was just happy that the man had found a way to deal with what happened yesterday.

"Only a few witches and wizards through history have exhibited any of the powers of the supposed Omnino. Dumbledore was one, and Merlin was purported to be another," Harry said, rolling his eyes at the comparison he just *knew* Draco was making in his mind. "What they were – what I am – is actually simple. Just wizards whose magical cores have grown to encompass their whole auras."

Draco waited, knowing Harry would continue.

"It takes a lot of control and an innate understanding of your core to be able to focus your magic without the help of an item to channel it – like a wand. True wandless magic is a myth. Anyone who can do magic without their wand shows signs of being what I am. Dumbledore called it Effreno Fossa."

Draco nodded, the tea a comforting warmth in his stomach. He'd read some theories about this years ago, when he thought he might want to pursue an Arithmancy Mastery.

"Will magic," he said, his brow furrowing in thought.

"Yes, that's what Snape called it," Harry said, nodding enthusiastically. "Basically, my magic has grown to the point that I don't need a channel anymore. I've always had this giant well of magic inside me, and access to the wild magic that's always around us, too."

Draco knew it was theoretically possible to tap into the natural magic that flowed through the world, but he'd never contemplated harnessing it before. Apparently Harry had been doing it unintentionally, with disastrous results – the outbursts of uncontrolled magic he'd struggled with since he was a teenager.

"Was yesterday a magical accident caused by wild magic?"

"No," Harry said slowly, scooping a spoon into the tender flesh of a mango and slurping it up. A trickle of juice ran down his chin, and he swiped at it absently before it could drop to his naked chest. "My magic was responding to my will. I didn't want to admit to myself that I wanted him dead – that he wanted himself dead – but my magic knew the truth."

Draco fell silent, unsure of what to say. Harry shrugged, making distracted half-moons in the orange flesh of the fruit with the tip of his spoon.

"I was afraid that there was a piece of me that was evil, or out of control," he said carefully, focused on the design he was making on the mango. "But Dumbledore and Snape helped me understand that I wasn't losing control, I was finally *gaining* control. Once I embraced that, the magic stopped feeling so alien."

"But time travel?"

"Still not possible. We were here all along," Harry said with a laugh. "It was all an illusion. The forest, the desert, everything."

"But the furniture, and the portrait –"

"The Manor is ancient," Harry explained, gesturing widely. "The past leaves an impression, and those impressions are very strong here. It wasn't hard to seek out a shadow of the room as it once was with my magic."

"So it was all an illusion? But the tree felt so real."

"I wanted to convince you, and my magic made that happen. That's Effreno Fossa. My magic is completely integrated with my being – I can wish just about anything I want into existence."

Draco stilled, studying Harry's face.

"I'm still the same old Harry," the dark-haired wizard said, his messy hair falling softly around his face when he shook his head.

The familiar movement reassured Draco. Harry was right. He was still the same messy, kind, intelligent, funny, breathtakingly gorgeous man he'd been the day before, the week before, the year before – just a bit more powerful. *No*, Draco corrected himself, a smile transforming his serious expression. *He's always been this powerful; he's just finally embraced it and learned to control it.* Worry that he didn't know he'd had about Harry's magical instability washed away, and Draco felt jubilant.

"You're right," he smirked, burying his fingers in Harry's hopeless hair. "Same untamable locks," he said, rubbing Harry's scalp. "Same hideous scar," he said, brushing his lips over it, "and same gorgeous cock."

Harry gasped as Draco smeared the juice of his mangled mango over his flaccid cock, using his mouth and tongue to lap it up. Harry's softened member quickly filled with blood, and he threw his head back, moaning at Draco's ministrations.

"I tell you I'm practically all-powerful, and instead of being scared or apprehensive, all you can think about is sex," Harry gasped, laughing. "*Merlin*, I love you."

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Chapter: 34

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. I don't own 'em.

Author's note: Thanks to my fabulous beta, Lady_Aubrey, for her hard work!

"Open this one next!" Angelina squealed, Levitating a large, gaudily wrapped package toward Draco.

Harry grinned when the bow on top of it exploded, showering the room in glittery confetti. Draco pawed at the bits of paper in his hair angrily, rolling his eyes when everyone giggled.

"I let George wrap it," Angelina confessed, glaring at her laughing husband.

Draco hesitated, then tore into the wrapping, uncovering a plain wooden crate. He cast a spell to open it, gasping in surprise and delight when the contents were revealed. It was a tiny racing broom, the perfect size for a young toddler.

"Harry mentioned he'd had one when he was a baby," George said, coloring slightly when Harry threw a friendly arm around him. "I thought you'd like something similar for your child. It's for later, of course."

"Of course," Draco said, stroking the satiny finish on the dark wood handle appreciatively. He tested his hand against the bristles, nodding in satisfaction when he found them soft, rather than sharp.

"It only Levitates about a foot off the ground," Angelina said, exchanging a smile with Pansy, who sat in the chair next to her.

"I'm sure the baby will love it," Pansy said, running a hand over her enormous belly.

It was late March – just weeks before Pansy was due. She and Hermione had arranged a surprise baby shower for Harry and Draco, and the men were having a blast. They'd eschewed the traditional girly decorations for a more tasteful, masculine theme. The rarely used sunroom overlooking the Manor's gardens was blanketed with twinkling fairy lights and streamers in green and silver and crimson and gold, celebrating the baby's parents' House colors instead of the sex of the child. Harry and Draco had remained stalwart in their insistence they be surprised at the birth – much to the chagrin of Pansy and Hermione, who were fairly bursting to tell the secret.

Narcissa's melodious laugh drifted over from the corner, where she, Lucius and Hermione were flipping through baby pictures of Harry that Hermione had managed to find. She'd written to all of Harry's parents' old friends, begging photos from them to make an album.

Blaise and Viktor were arguing over the decision to suspend the Magpies' Keeper for illegal Potion abuse, essentially guaranteeing that the Magpies wouldn't see any post-season play because the second string Keeper was rubbish. Draco winked at the disgruntled coach, and Viktor's lips twitched in a smile. They'd had this same argument two weeks ago when Viktor had discovered the Keeper's potion-abuse problem. Draco had argued to keep him on, at least until the post-season ended, but Viktor had held firm. No player of his would be allowed to engage in illegal activities.

"Mine next!" Theo called, tossing a small package to Harry. He slid into his seat next to Pansy, handing her another small, wrapped box.

Harry slid a finger under the pastel-colored paper, revealing a soft velvet box. Draco peered over his shoulder as he opened it, their breath catching when they saw the beautiful platinum rings inside.

"Technically, it's from both of us," Pansy said, kissing Theo on the cheek. "But Theo was the only one with the mobility to go pick them out."

She grimaced playfully, rubbing both her free hand and the hand joined with Theo's over her stomach. Everyone laughed, gathering around the men to see the gift.

"I know you already share a soul bond, but you really should still get married," Pansy chided,

shaking her head at them. "Those are for you to wear if you ever have a proper ceremony. Before you protest, it *is* a present for the baby. The baby wants you to get married."

Everyone laughed at Pansy's pronouncement, toasting the couple when they tried on the rings. Theo eyed them speculatively, smirking.

"I don't know," he mocked, waggling his eyebrows. "Why should Draco buy the goat when he can get the bezoar for free?"

Harry made a sound of mock outrage and put his hands on his hips, staring accusingly at Draco, who held his hands up in defense.

"Are you ever going to make an honest man out of me, Malfoy?" he asked, his voice full of indignation.

"Of course, Potter," Draco drawled, rolling his eyes. They both laughed and looked over at Narcissa, who looked guilty. "I'd marry you in a heartbeat if *someone* didn't have a guest list of 800 and more plans than the Ministry has lackeys."

Narcissa had the grace to blush slightly, but she shrugged her elegantly clad shoulders and sniffed, her nose in the air.

"A proper wedding takes time, gentlemen. Since you've already jumped the gun by having a child together before completing the Marriage Bond, I see no reason to hurry things."

There was a beat of silence, then everyone burst out laughing. Harry rolled his eyes, sticking his tongue out at Narcissa, and Draco wrinkled his nose and winked at his smiling mother.

Everyone's eyes turned toward Pansy, who had yet to open her own small package. Her fingers trembled slightly as she unwrapped it, her small gasp audible to the entire silent room when hers proved to be a velvet jewelry box as well.

"Theo?" she asked, her gaze rising to meet his.

The well-dressed wizard slid from his chair, propping himself on one knee in front of her. Pansy's eyes filmed over with tears at the sight, and she could barely focus on his face as his mouth formed the words she'd hoped to hear sometime soon.

"Pansy, you're the love of my life. You're easily the bravest and most selfless person I have ever known, and I would be honored to spend the rest of my life with you. What do you say, Pans? Will you marry me?"

A tear slid down Pansy's cheek as Theo took the box back from her nerveless fingers, popping it open. A gorgeous antique engagement ring was nestled inside, glittering against dark satin. A giant square-cut canary diamond sat at its center, surrounded by smaller white diamonds on all

sides. The rest of the ring was also bejeweled, with pave-set diamonds sparkling off every visible surface.

"Theo," she gasped, goggling at the ring when he slid it on her finger. She flexed her hand experimentally, watching as the diamonds sparkled and shimmered in the rich, natural light of the sunroom.

"But how could you – it's too much," she said, lowering her voice. Theo's family had lost everything in the war, and he didn't make enough to afford this on his Healer's salary. She couldn't possibly accept it. "I love it, and I love you, but Theo –"

"It was a gift from Lucius and Narcissa," Theo said softly, raising her hand to his lips. He looked over toward the Malfoys, smiling at them.

"It was the ring meant for Draco's wife," Narcissa said, her eyes teary. "I think it would look rather silly on Harry," she said, pausing briefly while the room sniggered, "but it would look simply divine on you."

"Narcissa, Lucius," Pansy said, at a loss for words. "This is a Malfoy heirloom. It wouldn't be right for it to leave the family."

She looked at the ring, regret tinting her voice. It was gorgeous, and it looked perfect on her finger. But she couldn't keep something that was meant to stay in their family. If things had been different, if it had been *her* marrying Draco – *I'd have been perfectly miserable,* she thought, her lips quirking. *I would have had a wonderful home and a gorgeous ring, but an empty marriage.* She looked at Theo, raising their joined hands so she could lightly stroke his cheek. He looked back at her, and she could see the love and adoration glowing in his eyes. *It wouldn't have been like this.*

"It won't be," Lucius said, smiling at the couple. "You are a part of this family, whether you like it or not. As are Hermione and Viktor. Family is what you make it, and we choose to include you and the others who are important to our sons."

Warmth bloomed in Harry's chest when he heard Lucius refer to him as a son. Draco's hand tightened on his, and Harry's cheeks ached with the force of his smile. Never before had he felt so accepted, so wanted, so *loved*. So many years ago, he'd been convinced he had to marry Ginny to have a family like this – large, caring and fun – but that couldn't be further from reality. Even before the Suggestion spell, he'd thought he couldn't have a family like this if he admitted he was gay. What Lucius said was absolutely true – Harry and Draco's family *was* large, since it encompassed everyone who loved them.

"Are you going to answer the man?" Draco demanded, snapping the spell that both Pansy and Harry seemed to be under.

Pansy squeaked in embarrassment, turning and flinging her arms around Theo's neck. She

peppered him with kisses, and the rest of the room laughed.

"Yes, of course!"

"Just a little more, love," Theo crooned, sponging Pansy's forehead with a damp cloth. She'd been in labor for hours, but she refused to leave the Manor. She wanted to deliver Corvus here, with Theo as her Healer. "It will all be over soon."

Pansy bit back a sob as a contraction hit her, her hands fisting in the blankets. She'd had a few Pain potions earlier, but she refused to take anything so close to the birth, no matter how many times Theo insisted it was safe for the baby.

"Pansy, please," Harry begged, holding a vial of purple potion in his hand. "Please, take this. It won't harm the baby, and you're in pain. Please."

"No," she spat, glaring at him. He and Draco had been hovering since her first contraction hit, and she was ready to hex both of them.

"Harry, leave her alone," Draco said, pulling Harry back from the bed. The two men stood against the wall, watching helplessly as she writhed in pain until the contraction subsided.

"You're doing so well," Theo said softly, casting a spell to check her progress. "Any time now, Pans. I promise. You're being so strong."

"Too strong," Harry protested, his brow furrowed. "You don't have to suffer like this, Pansy!"

"Potter," she growled, "if you want to be helpful, go get Hermione. I promised her someone would wake her before the baby was born."

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but snapped it shut with an audible click when he saw the expression on the witch's face. He nodded curtly, striding from the room in search of their friend.

"Oh thank Merlin," Pansy sighed, relaxing back against the pillows. "He was driving me absolutely spare."

Draco laughed, coming forward to sit on the side of the bed. She put her hand out, and he captured it between both of his, massaging it lightly.

"You're in excruciating pain for hours, with the prospect of more to come, and the worst part of labor is Harry?"

Pansy giggled, closing her eyes as she enjoyed Draco's massage. He moved up from her hand, rubbing his way up her arm until he reached her shoulders. He urged her forward, pulling a pillow from the stack for her to curl over, and shifted so he was sitting behind her, massaging her aching back muscles.

"Draco," she groaned, wiggling as much as she was able to give him better access. "That feels amazing."

"My mother told me when she was in labor my father massaged her back for hours," he said, his voice wistful. Pansy grinned. She couldn't imagine the stoic Lucius Malfoy doing something like that, either. "She said it was the only thing that helped."

"It is helping," she groaned, tensing as another contraction crested over her. Draco stilled his motions, waiting for a sign from her to continue. After a minute, Pansy blew out a breath, and Draco resumed his massage.

"Pansy, is it time?" Hermione asked as she shot through the door, her hair a mess and her dressing gown trailing behind her, unbelted. The early morning sky was still black outside the windows, not a hint of the sunrise breaking through yet. Pansy had been in labor since just before dinner.

"It's time," Theo said, nudging Draco off the bed so he could help Pansy into a reclining position.

"It's fitting, isn't it?" Draco whispered, his eyes never leaving the baby bundled in his arms.

"What?" Harry asked, nearly choking on the rush of love he felt watching his fiancé cradle their child. *He's holding our son*, he thought dazedly, still amazed that this tiny little person – Corvus Parkinson Potter Malfoy – was theirs.

"That he was born at dawn. It seems like some of the most important events in our lives happen around dawn," Draco murmured, stroking his finger against Corvus' unbelievably smooth cheek.

Harry smiled, tears gathering in his eyes.

"Who'd have thought – the famed Slytherin Prince, reduced to a sappy pile of nostalgic mush by a mere baby," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

Draco looked up, leaning into Harry's kiss when the dark-haired man bent over his rocking chair, pressing his lips to Draco's forehead.

"He's no mere baby," Draco scoffed quietly, both of their gazes traveling back to the fat-cheeked infant with a shock of black hair and startlingly green eyes. "He's *our* baby."

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Chapter: 35

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. Of all the words I could use to describe them – hot, gorgeous, brilliant, yummy – mine is not among them. Sad.

"Perfectly healthy," Theo said, dropping his wand on the couch so he could gather Pansy in his arms and snog her senseless.

Corvus was six weeks old, and the Healer had given them both clean bills of health after their routine exams.

"Healthy, healthy?" Draco asked, laying a sleeping Corvus down in the bassinet by the sofa.

"Healthy, as in, the curse had no effect," Theo confirmed, kissing Pansy again. "As in, there is no reason we shouldn't be able to have children of our own some day."

Draco relaxed, sinking onto the sofa next to Harry. Both men were visibly relieved that Pansy bore no marks or limitations from Molly's attempted Infertility spell, grateful beyond words that it hadn't hurt her.

"Unless you plan to start trying right now, perhaps you'd better stop," Draco said dryly, startling the enthusiastic couple seated across from them. Harry chuckled, resting a hand on Draco's thigh.

"He's just cross," Harry said dismissively, patting Draco's knee. "Corey isn't sleeping as well as we'd thought he would."

Theo laughed. "I hear that from a lot of new parents."

Draco groaned, leaning over to check on Corvus, who still slept soundly in the bassinet.

"If you'd let me keep him awake during the day –"

"You know that's not how it works!" Harry cut in, his face stern. "Corey isn't ready for a schedule yet. He's just getting used to everything. All the books say he'll settle into a schedule soon enough."

"And I say –"

Harry crossed his arms angrily, narrowing his eyes at the blond.

"For the last time, *no*, it is definitely *not* alright to give an infant a Sleeping Draught!" Harry cried, looking expectantly at Theo for support.

Draco heaved a heavy sigh, letting his shoulders slump in defeat. He'd only suggested it once, and he hadn't been serious. Well, not completely serious. *I'm sure Tizzy wouldn't have allowed it, anyway*, he thought glumly.

The house-elf took her job as Corvus' nanny very seriously, but Harry wanted them to have a very active role in their son's life, which meant *they* were the ones to be roused from bed several times a night to feed and comfort him, and *they* were the ones currently walking around like sleep-deprived zombies. *And sex-deprived*, Draco amended, too tired to really protest the dull state of affairs in that arena.

"Theo!" Harry cried when the Healer seemed to pause to consider Draco's suggestion.

"I was only joking," the wizard said, smirking. "Draco, as Corvus' Healer, I absolutely forbid you from feeding the poor boy a Sleeping Draught, or any potion of any kind without my express permission."

Harry punctuated Theo's words with a sharp nod, sticking his tongue out at Draco.

"And Harry, as *your* Healer, I'm telling you to let your house-elf pick up more responsibilities. I've seen many families with perfectly happy, well-adjusted kids who have house-elf nannies. Let Tizzy take over for a few nights so you two can sleep."

"*Thank* you," Draco said, leaning back against the cushions and closing his eyes. *So tired,* he thought, wondering again how someone so tiny could be so much work. And so loud. And so hungry. And so messy. He groaned, covering his face with his arm to block out the light. *Screw propriety*, he thought, letting his body relax into the sofa, intending to drift off to sleep while his son napped.

"Draco, don't be pathetic, darling," Pansy drawled, forcing Draco out of his state of near-sleep. He growled angrily, becoming even more annoyed when she had the nerve to laugh in response. "Go take a nap. You too, Harry. Theo and I will watch Corey."

"Damn it, not you, too," Draco groaned. Harry had taken to calling their son by that ghastly nickname, and everyone else seemed to be picking it up, too. "Corvus. Cor – vus," he enunciated, his grey eyes too tired to glare.

"Get stuffed, Draco," Harry answered, forcing himself into a standing position. He yawned, not even bothering to cover his mouth. "Are you sure you guys can handle Corey for an hour or so? He'll probably sleep most of that time, but he'll wake up hungry –"

"Potter," Theo snapped, rolling his eyes. "I'm a Healer. Hell, I'm *his* Healer. I'm the one *you* Fire-call with questions. Just go."

"Tizzy will check in soon, so tell her –"

"Now you're even annoying *me,*" Draco hissed, pushing his fiancé out of the room. A nap sounded wonderful. Or maybe a long, hot shower. No, a nap.

Harry paused to take one last look at his sleeping son, sighing when Draco grabbed him by the shoulders and forcibly marched him toward the door.

"One more -"

Harry wasn't sure who hit him with the Silencing spell. It was unlikely it was Draco, since his hands were on his shoulders. He set his mouth in a grim line, narrowing his eyes and stalking toward their bedroom. He could have broken through the spell if he wanted to, but he realized Theo was right – he was being over-protective. They'd yet to leave Corey in anyone's care for more than a few minutes, and they were suffering for it. They hadn't slept or taken a decent shower – let alone had more than a quick hand-job between Corey's feedings – in weeks. *I suppose we could have Tizzy take him a few nights a week*, he thought reluctantly, feeling like a bad father for admitting – even in his mind – how fabulous a break sounded.

The two exhausted men paused only to take off their shoes, falling into their soft bed without bothering to divest themselves of their clothes. Opportunities like this didn't come around often, especially since Hermione was spending so much time at the stadium with Viktor and Pansy and Theo were house hunting. Narcissa was always willing to watch Corvus, as was Tizzy, but Harry hated to take advantage of that.

They were both asleep within minutes, sprawled haphazardly on top of the duvet, their bodies not touching but for their joined hands.

The room was dark when Harry woke. He instinctively rose, heading through the short connecting corridor to Corvus' room. The crib was empty, and Harry's heart lurched for a moment, his pulse racing until his sleep-soaked mind remembered he'd left the baby with Theo and Pansy.

A quick look at the clock confirmed three hours has passed since he and Draco had retired to their room. He wandered back into their suite, surprised to see Draco missing from the bed. He hadn't even noticed his absence when he woke, too intent on checking on their child.

Theo's definitely right, he thought with a grimace. *The day I don't notice Draco missing from my bed is the day I admit we need a little help.*

He splashed some water on his face and grabbed his glasses, hurrying toward the drawing room, which was the last place he'd seen Corey. The chuckle of deep laughter and a baby's soft coos stopped him, though, and he followed the sounds. The door to Lucius' study was cracked, and Harry leaned into it, letting it slide open enough for him to peek inside. The sight brought a huge smile to his face. The usually staid and proper Lucius Malfoy was lying on his side on the expensive rug, looking down at the tiny baby. Corvus cooed and squirmed as Lucius raised a large hand and tickled his stomach, making nonsensical noises as he did. His curtain of blond hair blocked Harry's view as the man leaned down, pushing Corvus' jumper out of the way to blow raspberries against the exposed flesh of his soft tummy. The baby gurgled again, his small arms and legs flailing as Lucius peppered him with wet, smacking kisses.

Harry pushed the door open a bit further, stepping into the overly warm study. Lucius had added a blanket of Warming charms to the room, adding to the heat emanating from the roaring fire. Corvus' blankets and heavy wrappings lay discarded on the sofa, and Harry's lips twitched at the thought of Lucius raising the heat so he could undress his grandson and play with his chubby arms and legs.

A shock of blond hair under a blanket in the corner alerted Harry to Draco's presence, too. His fiancé was curled up under a cashmere throw, his legs drawn up underneath himself so he could comfortably fit in the wingback chair furthest from the fire.

"He woke up worried," Lucius whispered, sensing Harry's presence. His eyes didn't leave his grandson, who was now squirming as Lucius tickled his fat little feet. "Theodore and Pansy are in the dining room. I offered to sit with Corvus while they ate."

"He came looking for Corey?" Harry asked, easing himself down on the floor opposite Lucius so he could kiss his son's small face.

"He was frantic," Lucius snickered, his lips pursed at the memory of how Draco's usual deportment had fled when he woke from his nap and couldn't find his son. "He had Tizzy near tears when he summoned her to the drawing room, demanding to know where Corvus was. She brought him here," he said, nodding toward the chair.

Harry grinned, happy that Draco wasn't as blasé about Corvus' health and welfare as he seemed. He knew Draco loved the baby – that much was unquestionably obvious – but he'd worried that the blond resented the disruption of their lives Corvus had caused. He felt his earlier fears slide away at the thought of Draco waking as frantic as he had.

"Yes, well." Harry stammered, not sure about what he should say. Lucius was Draco's father – it wasn't appropriate to share his concerns with him.

"Malfoy men are not supposed to be involved in the day-to-day care of their heirs, Harry," Lucius said, but his voice carried none of the sting the words implied. He stroked Corvus' soft skin with a finger, his grey eyes shining with love and adoration. "It's rubbish, of course. Don't let him hide behind nannies and tutors that way. I wish I hadn't."

Harry looked up, his eyes wide with astonishment. He'd assumed Lucius and Narcissa didn't approve of the role Harry had chosen to take in Corvus' life. After all, it wasn't the norm in wealthy pure-blood families.

"Don't look so surprised," Lucius chided, pressing a soft kiss to the back of Corvus' tiny hand when it flailed close to his lips. "Not only is it impolite, it's unbecoming."

Harry snorted, amused to see how quickly Lucius fled back behind the Malfoy mask of aloofness. He rested a hand on Lucius' shoulder, squeezing it.

"Don't go back to Greece," Harry said, knowing the elder Malfoys were planning to return to their home in the Greek Isles soon. "Stay. It's a chance to try again. Be involved with Corey's life. Change a few nappies. Take him out for walks through the gardens."

Lucius' hand stilled, his fingers resting lightly against Corvus' cheek. He looked over at Draco, and Harry's heart clenched at the longing in the grey eyes as Lucius watched his sleeping son. The emotion was gone when he turned his gaze back to Harry, but Harry felt privileged that the man felt comfortable enough around him to let his guard slip even that much.

"Thank you for your offer, Harry, but Cissa and I don't want to interfere. You two will do a fine job of raising our grandson."

"Harry and I would be honored if you stayed," Draco said, his eyes opening as he emerged from his cashmere cocoon. "I'm sure Corvus would benefit, as well."

Draco grinned at Harry, who wondered how long the blond had been awake and listening to their conversation. He blushed, since he and Draco had never actually discussed asking the elder Malfoys to stay. It had been a spur-of-the-moment comment – the kind Draco usually chastised Harry for blurting out before thinking.

"Traditionally –"

Draco laughed, twining his hand with Harry's as he sat behind him. He leaned forward, stroking Corvus' messy black hair.

"Traditionally, Father?" he asked, his grey eyes warm when he looked at Lucius. "Traditionally, you and mother would retire to one of our properties when I settled down with a well-bred witch, likely as part of an arranged marriage."

Lucius quirked his eyebrows, and Harry chuckled.

"I'm not well-bred *or* a witch, Lucius," he said, sounding scandalized. "I suppose we should throw tradition out the window, then."

Lucius capitulated, his features softening as he looked down at his grandson, who had fallen asleep at some point during their quiet exchange. His tiny rosebud mouth was puckered, his cheeks tinted by a healthy flush of color. Lucius drew the baby's soft jumper down, his elegant fingers looking impossibly large as he fastened the row of diminutive buttons that secured the cloth and hid Corvus' silky skin from view.

"Your mother will be well pleased," he said formally, and Harry and Draco both smirked, knowing Lucius would be just as happy as Narcissa with the arrangement. They were both completely smitten with their grandson. "I'll speak to her tonight."

Draco placed the sleeping baby in his crib, careful not to jostle him. He and Harry had been at the Ministry all day, finalizing the paperwork that made Corvus officially his. His pale fingers ghosted over his son's more golden skin, and a small smile played over Draco's lips. He was relieved beyond measure that Corvus took after his father, rather than his mother. He attempted to pat the wild black hair into place, his smile growing when, just like his father's, Corvus' hair sprang back into a spiky mess.

Warm arms slid around Draco's waist, and he felt Harry's hot breath against his neck as they both watched their son sleep.

"Gorgeous," Harry whispered, the word barely audible.

"He is," Draco agreed, running a finger down the baby's downy cheek.

Harry chuckled, and Draco felt a stirring in his belly. Harry hadn't made a sound like that since Corvus had been born. Desire shot through Draco's groin, and he twisted in Harry's loose embrace, gratified to find a matching hardness in Harry's trousers.

"I meant you," Harry whispered, ducking his head to kiss Draco's neck. "I never thought watching you with our son would be such a turn-on."

Draco laughed, the sound muffled as he buried his head in Harry's jumper, not wanting to wake the sleeping baby. He wound his arm around Harry's waist, pulling the dark-haired man out of the nursery. Harry paused in the doorway, casting a series of unfamiliar spells with a wave of his hand.

"What were those?" Draco asked, drawing Harry down the corridor toward their suite.

"Monitoring spells," Harry answered, his voice still muted. "So we don't have to jump out of bed at every little sound. We'll know if he's crying, or if he needs anything."

He pulled Draco in for a kiss, pinning him against their closed door. They hadn't slept with the door closed since Corvus was born – half the time, Harry slept in a chair in the nursery, unwilling to be too far away.

"Where did you learn the spells?" Draco asked, pulling back so he could look at Harry. This was an abrupt change from Harry's previous attitude, and Draco wanted to know what had caused it. Had Theo talked with him again?

"My father," Harry whispered, a smile stealing across his face at Draco's gobsmacked expression. "I saw him use them while I was – incapacitated," he said, still not sure what label to give his illness. "I had memories of him leaving me in my crib, just like we've left Corey, confident that those spells would alert him if I needed him."

He leaned in, kissing Draco's slightly parted lips. He moved to the corner of Draco's mouth,

kissing a trail down to his jaw. He knew it drove Draco crazy, and he wanted his fiancé to feel as aroused and desperate as he did.

"Harry, what –"

"I realized something yesterday," Harry answered, his lips still teasing Draco's neck. "You're just as concerned about Corey's welfare as I am, which I always knew. But I also realized that you're balancing that concern with concern about *us*, too."

Draco moaned softly when Harry's tongue laved his collarbone, his cock hardening painfully at the familiar sensation.

"We need to be healthy and happy to ensure *Corey* is healthy and happy," Harry said, his husky voice sending shivers down Draco's spine that had little to do with his words. "And we haven't been happy, have we, Dray?"

Draco's answer was lost in a groan as Harry's hand closed over his straining erection, palming it through the thin cloth of his trousers. He thrust into the heat of Harry's hand, his breath quickening at the pleasure the contact brought.

"We have Tizzy, and Hermione, and your parents at our disposal," Harry murmured, unbuttoning Draco's trousers and easing his cock out. Draco hissed as the slightly callused skin of Harry's palm slid up and down his naked cock, the sensation a hundred times better than it had been with the cloth barrier between them. "We should let them help."

"I've been –" Draco gasped as Harry's strokes quickened, " – telling you that."

Harry smiled darkly, his expression promising untold pleasure. Draco shuddered at the heat in Harry's green eyes, feeling like Harry was devouring him with his gaze.

"I know," Harry whispered, easing Draco's trousers down until they pooled at his feet. Harry dropped lightly to his knees, and Draco whimpered in anticipation. "And I'm going to make it up to you now."

Rational thought fled as Harry's mouth closed around Draco's aching erection, the sensation almost too much after nearly two months with hardly any sexual contact. Draco felt his balls tighten, and his hand joined Harry's mouth on his cock, squeezing it hard around the base to stave off his release.

"You're not getting off that easily," Draco said, laughing as he realized what he'd said. "Or *I'm* not, I suppose."

Harry grinned, his nimble fingers unbuttoning his clothing so he could shrug out of it. He was fairly certain what Draco had in mind, and he wanted to be completely naked for it.

"Oh?" Harry asked, reclining on the soft carpet near their bed.

"Yes," Draco growled, his grey eyes darkening with arousal at the sight of Harry spread out before him, naked and willing. He'd envisioned Harry in this exact position nearly every time he'd wanked over the last few weeks, unsatisfactory and hurried sessions when Harry was busy with Corvus and Draco had been left alone and desperate for any kind of release.

Harry grinned, and Draco's cock jumped at his expression. The dark-haired wizard held his hand out, and a pool of lube appeared in it instantly. Draco's mouth watered at the careless display of extraordinary magic, his magical core thrumming with excitement. There was no part of Draco that wasn't completely in awe of the gorgeous man in front of him.

His eyes widened when he saw Harry slip a long, slick finger inside himself, green eyes disappearing as his lids drifted shut, lost in the sensation of finger-fucking himself. Draco gasped along with Harry when the finger slid over his prostate, and Draco shivered as the pleasure he knew Harry was feeling echoed through him. *So fucking hot*, he thought, his body trembling with need as he watched Harry add a second – and then a third – finger, stretching himself for Draco. Teeth gleamed as Harry bit his lip, the white a delicious contrast against the plump, red skin. Draco mirrored the motion to keep from groaning himself.

When Harry deemed himself ready – and Draco adequately tortured – he drew his legs up, his eyes opening in a sultry invitation for Draco to fuck him.

"Merlin, Harry," Draco groaned, not at all sure he'd even make it all the way inside the dark-haired man before coming.

Wet red lips quirked in the endearing smile Draco loved, and he crawled forward, grabbing Harry's ankles and resting them on his shoulders. Harry Summoned a pillow from the bed, arching up so Draco could stuff it under his hips. Draco bit his lip harder when he positioned himself at Harry's loosened entrance, his eyes flashing with arousal as he watched the thick head of his cock push past the puckered ring of muscle and disappear into Harry's tight channel.

"Fuck," Harry gasped, forcing himself to relax at the intrusion. He shuddered when Draco was fully sheathed, struggling to keep himself from thrusting against the blond. He smirked at Draco's closed eyes, knowing the man was probably hovering on the brink. He knew *he* was.

"Move, Draco," he growled, snapping his own hips to get the friction he desired.

Draco lost all control, thrusting hard into Harry, just as requested. He rested one hand on one of Harry's ankles, the other anchored against Harry's hip, giving him the leverage he needed. Harry's own hand was busy fisting his cock, a constant stream of gasps and moans escaping his lips as he neared his own orgasm.

Draco came first, burying himself balls-deep in Harry's arse and tensing violently, holding his breath as the force of his orgasm rocked through him. Harry watched Draco's beautiful features

contort with pleasure, a sense of satisfaction stealing through him that *he* had been the one to put that completely candid and open expression on Draco's usually reserved face. He gave in to his own release when he felt the heat pool in his stomach, spurting thick ropes of come over his own fist.

They both froze when the sound of rustling filled the room – Corvus restlessly moving in his crib, magnified by the Monitoring spell. Their muscles tensed as they waited a beat, wondering if the baby would settle himself or begin to wail. When a minute passed with no other noises, they both relaxed, laughing at the serious expressions on each others' faces.

"See? Balance, Potter," Draco said, wrinkling his nose as Harry cast a Cleaning spell over their sweaty, sticky bodies. "Parenthood is easy. It's all about balance."

The room was empty, save for dozens upon dozens of bouquets of flowers. The stalks were tall and leafy, a profusion of flowers with soft, rounded petals. Harry had never seen anything like them – the room was an explosion of color, with white, violet and fuchsia petals covering every flat surface. Pots of the flowers were also scattered around the floor, their woody stalks reaching nearly as tall as him.

"Oh," Narcissa said, stooping to pick up one of the bouquets on the dresser. She touched her fingers briefly to the soft, fragrant petals, smiling as she returned the bouquet to its resting place, backing out of the room.

"Was she there?" Draco asked, shifting the baby on his hip as his body filled the suite's doorway.

"No," Harry said, perplexed. Hermione knew they were leaving for the day, and it wasn't like her to just disappear without saying something. They always brought Corvus to see her before they left. "But there her room is full of hundreds of flowers."

Draco narrowed his eyes, peering around his mother through the open door to Hermione's bedroom.

"Spider flowers," he said, grinning. "It's about damn time."

"Draco!" his mother chided, nodding toward the baby.

The blond rolled his eyes, shrugging.

"It's fine, mother," he said, hitching the baby further up on his hip. "He's only three months old. He doesn't understand anything we're saying."

"Neither do I!" Harry said, his face concerned. "About time for what? What are spider flowers?"

"Remember when we talked about the language of flowers, Harry?" Draco asked, handing the baby to Narcissa. "Well, I have a pretty good idea of where Hermione is. Those flowers are the

pure-blood equivalent of asking someone to elope with you. I think they've gone to get married."

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Chapter: 36

See disclaimer in Chapter 1. If you haven't figured out I'm not JKR by now, you're not reading closely enough!

"Stop fidgeting!"

Harry laughed, placing a restraining hand on Corvus' belly so Draco could secure the nappy.

"He doesn't understand words like 'fidgeting'," Harry said, leaning down to nuzzle the baby with his nose. "Do you, Corey? No, tell your father you don't know what that big word means."

The baby cooed, reaching out to grab Harry's glasses. He winced when the wire frames caught in his hair. He'd long-since learned to spell his glasses with Impervious and Unbreakable charms around his son. Drool-covered fingers slid over the lenses, leaving no mark behind.

"Daddy's getting the hang of this, isn't he, Corey," Harry cooed, capturing the wet hand and pretending to eat the small fingers, much to the baby's delight.

Tizzy hurried into the room, a tiny suit for Corvus in her hands. Draco rolled his eyes, hefting Corvus and handing the child to her after making sure the nappy was on tightly.

"I still don't understand why you wanted your birthday dinner to be a black-tie affair, Harry," he said, his frown turning into a grin as he watched the house-elf struggle to get Corvus into a pair of wool trousers. "Not that I'm complaining, of course."

Harry hid a grin by turning his head, shrugging indifferently.

"I suppose some of your class and composure has rubbed off on me over the last fifteen years, Malfoy," he drawled in a respectable imitation of Draco's most condescending tone.

"Has it been that long, really?" Draco asked, counting back to their first year at Hogwarts in his head. "Merlin, I suppose it has."

He smiled and pulled Harry close, kissing him softly.

"Fifteen years ago I was convinced you were a speccy, attention-seeking, idiotic prat," he said, kissing Harry again.

Harry laughed, pulling away and leading Draco back to their suite so they could get dressed, too. Tizzy had successfully clothed the squirming baby and was now taking him off to stay with Narcissa while the men got ready for the party.

"And now?"

Draco swept past him into his closet, his nose in the air.

"I concede that you aren't deliberately attention-seeking."

Harry swatted at him as he passed, his lips twitching as he tried to suppress a smile. "Idiot."

"Is everything ready?" Harry asked Hermione, who was busy casting spells to decorate the large round tables that had been set up in the gardens.

After a complicated wave of her wand, names shimmered in the air above the backs of the chairs. *Normal place cards weren't enough of a challenge, I suppose*, Harry thought wryly, nodding in approval when the witch turned to him with a flourish.

"I saw Corey earlier," she gushed, her shoulders scrunching slightly in delight. "He looked *adorable*."

"Narcissa bought the suit," Harry said, grinning. He'd insisted everyone wear Muggle clothing, since he loved the way Draco looked in a tuxedo.

He grabbed Hermione's hand, twirling her around in a tight circle in front of him. The leafy trees glittered with thousands of fairy lights, giving the darkening grounds an ethereal look. Her silk sheath billowed slightly at the motion, the pearly grey color glowing in the low light.

"You look rather nice yourself, Mrs. Krum," he teased, earning himself a swat on the shoulder.

"Mrs. Hermione Krum," she said in a dreamy voice, kicking a foot out behind her as she leaned in to kiss Harry's cheek. She'd decided to take Krum's name without adding her own, wanting this marriage to bear no resemblance to her previous one.

"I'm glad you know your name, but I must ask why you are kissing another man, Mrs. Krum," Viktor growled from behind them, placing a possessive arm around Hermione's waist.

She giggled, leaning back into her husband's solid chest. *He looks smashing as well*, Harry thought, admiring the tailored fit of the dark charcoal suit, obviously chosen to complement Hermione's gown.

"Kingsley's just arrived, Harry," Viktor said, winking at the dark-haired wizard. Harry patted the pockets of his black tuxedo cautiously, relaxing slightly when he felt the weight he sought in his

inner pocket. "He's waiting in the tent."

Harry nodded his thanks, hurrying across the perfectly manicured lawn toward the statuesque white tent Draco had ordered. He'd insisted on having a back-up plan in case of rain, since Harry had been equally insistent that his birthday dinner be held outside in the Manor's formal gardens. Though the skies were perfectly clear, Harry sent a silent word of thanks to the blond for forcing the issue – it gave Harry a convenient spot to slip away to discuss a few last-minute things with the Minister before the guests arrived.

He slid the flap aside, the whisper of canvas alerting Kingsley to his presence. The bigger man turned, looking absolutely stunning in a Muggle tuxedo. His wizarding dress robes were slung over his arm, embroidered with the official Minister's seal and other symbols of his rank.

"I know you wanted to do this the Muggle way," he said, gesturing with the robes, "but I thought Mr. Malfoy would appreciate it."

Harry made a sound of assent, bending to inspect the parchment Kingsley had laid out on a table nearby. Everything looked to be in order. He quickly Conjured a pen, signing his name.

"Doing it out of order like this – that's alright?" he asked apprehensively, worried he was breaking some important rule.

"A technicality," Kingsley assured him, clapping him on the back with a heavy hand. He folded the parchment, tucking it into a pocket of the robes on his arm.

He led Harry back toward the tables, waving at several of the guests who had arrived early. Harry could just barely make out Draco's lean figure walking out of the Manor, Narcissa on his arm, her ice-blue gown falling in graceful waves around her.

"Excuse me, Kingsley," Harry said, and the older man laughed, following Harry's gaze. He patted Harry on the shoulder as the dark-haired man sped off toward Draco.

"It's wonderful, isn't it?" Hermione said softly, linking arms with the Minister as she led him toward a table near the fountains.

"That it is," Kingsley said, turning to Hermione and winking. "It's not every day a gentleman turns 26."

She laughed, a carefree sound that wouldn't have been possible just a year ago. Harry had a lot more to celebrate this birthday, too. She glanced toward the house, her smile growing as she thought about the gorgeous baby boy inside. Tizzy had instructions to bring him out later, right before the meal was served.

Narcissa straightened Draco's bow tie, moving on to fiddle with Harry's next. The blond scowled, his hands immediately rising to undo whatever adjustment his mother had made to the Muggle

tie.

"Honestly, Mother," he sighed, smoothing his hands over his coat and sticking them in his trouser pockets, earning a glare from Narcissa. "I've seen you less anxious over affairs of state! This is just Harry's birthday party."

Harry leaned in, pressing a kiss to Narcissa's cheek so Draco wouldn't see his smile. His eyes were dancing when he pulled back, grasping Narcissa's hands in his own.

"Really, Narcissa," he said conspiratorially, rolling his eyes dramatically. "My birthday hardly rates *this* kind of attention."

Narcissa laughed and pulled her hands free, tweaking Harry's cheek before turning away and making her way to see if Lucius' tuxedo needed any adjustments, her movements accompanied by the gentle rustle of silk.

"That sound always used to make me sad," Draco whispered, watching his mother glide across the lawn with a fond smile.

"What sound?" Harry asked, confused. He turned back and saw Narcissa pull Lucius into the house, probably to re-button or re-tie something. The man was quite stubborn in his dislike for Muggle attire.

"The sound Mother's gowns always made as she left my room after kissing me good night as a child," Draco said with a sigh. "They had parties or dinners nearly every night, and she'd come say good bye before leaving. Some days it was the only time I saw her."

Harry frowned, his gaze traveling appreciatively back toward Draco. The blond wore the Muggle tuxedo well, looking as comfortable in the suit as he did in wizarding dress robes.

"That's awful."

Draco shrugged, his broad shoulders looking even more impressive in the lightweight wool. Harry's hands itched to reach out and run his hands over Draco's lithe form, but he stopped himself, knowing they'd never start on time if he got distracted like that.

"It's normal." Draco's face suddenly lit up, his eyes shining as a brilliant smile stole across his face. *He's breathtaking*, Harry thought, his mouth going dry at the sight. "I'm so glad that's not how we're raising Corey."

Harry nearly choked on his own tongue at the nickname.

"Corey? Since when do *you* call him that?"

Draco laughed easily, shrugging again. The movement should have looked affected, but it didn't

– on Draco, it simply looked graceful.

"Everyone else does. Even Father, did you know that?" he asked, his brows rising. Harry shook his head. "I've decided to give in to the inevitable. Besides, Corvus *is* a bit stuffy. Don't expect me to call him Corey in public, but here, at home, I suppose it's alright."

Harry grinned, rolling his eyes. Never anything but the utmost propriety from the head of the Malfoy family.

"Let's go," he urged, grabbing Draco's hand and tugging him toward the crowd gathering by the fountains. "I think everyone is here."

The men made their way over to the more than one hundred friends and family who'd come to celebrate Harry's birthday. It was a much bigger crowd than any birthday party Harry had ever had, but then again, it was also different from any birthday party he'd ever had.

"Draco?" Harry murmured as they drew closer, stopping before anyone else could hear them.

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me?" Harry's voice had dropped, and the hoarse words were almost lost in the soft evening breeze.

Draco turned to face him, looking puzzled.

"Harry, you know I will. What is wrong with you? We're to be married next month in a –"

Draco gasped, his eyes widening as he glanced back to the group gathered in front of them. The pieces fell together quickly in his mind. The opulent flowers. The sophisticated menu. The small orchestra Harry had insisted he wanted, despite the fact that his musical taste was more Weird Sisters than Wagner. The formal clothing. His easy-going fiancé wanting a formal dinner instead of a night out at a pub, which was how he normally celebrated his birthday. His mother insisting on waiting to send out wedding invitations.

"Now? Will you marry me *now*?" Harry asked again, his lips quirking when he saw Draco's eyes narrow as he surveyed the scene.

The men strode toward Kingsley, arm-in-arm. Hermione hurried behind them, and Lucius slipped away from his wife's side, a few paces behind her.

Harry nodded at Kingsley, who winked at both of them.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Kingsley said, his deep voice catching everyone's attention without need of an amplification spell.

The crowd stilled, and everyone turned to watch the Minister. Pansy was the first to figure it out, squealing and clapping her hands in delight when she realized what was going on. Harry turned quickly and grinned at her.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate Harry's 26th birthday," Kingsley continued, motioning for the two men to come closer. "But we've also been blessed with the opportunity to witness as these two men exchange one of the most powerful vows we in the wizarding world have: a Marriage Bond."

Shocked gasps and catcalls rippled through the assembled crowd, and Draco blushed slightly as he recognized Blaise's voice making a suggestive comment about rushing the wedding to get to the honeymoon.

Harry turned toward Draco, both of their faces visible to their friends and family in profile. Lucius stood behind his son, and Hermione settled herself behind Harry, wiping away tears before the ceremony even started.

"Draco, love," he said, his soft voice carrying. "I know we planned to be married next month, but I wanted to do it today."

Questions burned in Draco's eyes, but he remained silent, slipping his hands into Harry's when the dark-haired wizard reached out for them.

"It's a significant date for us," Harry continued, and Draco tried to remember why Harry's birthday would bear any meaning for them. "Fifteen years ago today, I made a very bad choice."

He felt Draco's hands tremble in his, and he could tell the blond wizard knew exactly what he was referring to. "Harry," Draco whispered, tears forming in his grey eyes. Harry smiled, his voice breaking slightly as he continued.

"Fifteen years ago today, a precocious blond-haired boy offered me his friendship in a dingy back room at Madam Malkin's," Harry explained, pivoting slightly so he could address the crowd. His hands tightened on Draco's. "I wasn't smart enough to take him up on it. We lost *years* because of it, and only through some miracle of fate and destiny did we ever rise above that animosity to get to where we are today. I wanted to marry Draco on this date, the anniversary of my disastrous decision, so I can right that wrong. I wanted July 31 to be the day we confirmed our commitment to each other, not the day I turned away the friendship of a man who would grow to become the love of my life, my best friend, and the father of my children."

Harry turned back to fully face Draco, nodding slightly at Kingsley, who had slipped his wizarding robes on. He drew his wand, placing it on top of their joined hands.

"As a sign of your love and devotion to one another, do you, Harry James Potter, hereby vow to share your resources – both magical and physical – with Draco Abraxas Malfoy, so long as you both shall live?"

"I do," Harry whispered, and a jet of yellow light shot out of Kinsley's wand, wrapping around Draco.

"As a sign of your love and devotion to one another, do you, Draco Abraxas Malfoy, hereby vow to share your resources – both magical and physical – with Harry James Potter, so long as you both shall live?"

"I do," Draco breathed, his eyes locked on Harry's.

Another jet of light shot out of Kingsley's wand, twining around Harry. The beams of buttery yellow light joined, twisting around the two wizards until the men were partially shielded from view by a wall of shimmery light.

Draco gasped, feeling the full power of Harry's magical core touch his. He felt like a part of him he'd never known was missing had been returned – complete, for the first time in his life. Their skin glowed with a golden hue, their joined hands emitting bright sparks wherever the skin touched.

"Draco," Harry gasped, watching their luminous skin with wide eyes.

"Harry," he answered, trembling at the force of the magic sweeping through them. His knees buckled slightly, and he slid forward into Harry, who was held up only by the force of the field of light surrounding them.

"How do you – it's so *much*," Draco breathed, his body burning with the scope of Harry's magic.

"All I am and all I have, I share it with you," Harry whispered, using the words that would complete their magical transfer and bond. He fumbled in his pocket for the rings, sliding one onto Draco's finger.

"All I am and all I have, I share it with you," Draco answered, his extremities tingling with the strong magic that now coursed through their joined magical cores. He slipped the remaining ring on Harry's outstretched finger, gasping when both rings glowed brightly for a moment before returning to normal.

They staggered under the weight of the newly formed bond, the magic whirring around them in giant swirls and eddies. The protective cocoon of yellow light remained until they could stand on their own, slowing disappearing when the bond was fully placed and their magical cores had settled.

Harry became aware of the awed silence around them gradually, first registering the disappearance of the buttery light and then the buzzing absence of sound. His gaze traveled around the crowd of their friends and family, surprised to see absolute shock on all of their faces.

"What?" he whispered, nudging Draco lightly.

"I don't know," the blond answered, shaking his head to try to quell his lingering dizziness.

"Gentlemen," Kingsley said, his voice more subdued than Harry had ever heard it, "I truly am privileged to have witnessed your bond. May the blessings of Merlin be with you," he said, using the formal greeting for a newly married couple.

Kingsley's speculative gaze lingered on them a moment longer before he clapped a hand on each of their shoulders, forcibly turning them to face the audience.

"I am proud to present Harry and Draco Malfoy," he said, grinning from ear to ear.

"It's amazing."

Harry twirled in a circle, laughing as he took in the crush of verdant trees and shrubs, his feet sinking into the warm sand. Corey gurgled happily in his arms, his face upturned toward the warm sun.

"One Malfoy safe house in Costa Rica, as ordered," Draco drawled from the doorway of the thatched hut along the shore.

"Mmm, I feel safe," Harry sighed, wiggling his toes.

Lucius laughed, plucking the baby out of Harry's arms.

"We," he said, waving Corey's arm at Harry and Draco, "will see you later."

He cuddled the baby to his chest, heading off down the beach. The home Draco bought a month earlier was actually an estate in the Caribbean coastal province Tortuguera. It had been beastly expensive, since it was so difficult to buy beach-front land in the region known for its abundance of nesting sea turtles. It appealed to Draco because the laws that protected the endangered animals kept intrusions of all kinds to a minimum in the area – they would be able to relax here, far from the prying eyes of locals or tourists. Better yet, there was no wizarding district in the tiny coastal town, meaning the likelihood of running into other witches or wizards was very low. The perfect place for a tropical hideaway.

Draco smiled as he remembered the look on the estate agent's face when he signed the paperwork promising to use no electricity during the turtles' nesting season – July through October – the reason the huge estate had been empty for so long. When he'd promised to go one step further and actually retrofit the entire place without any electricity at all, the man had been absolutely bewildered.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked, joining his husband at the entrance to the rough-hewn hut.

"Muggles," Draco said, shaking his head.

Harry watched him with an arched eyebrow, smiling and looking back out toward the small bay. He could hear the crash of waves against rocks in the distance, at the mouth of the small inlet just a short boat ride away. The scene was one of perfect tranquility. Harry sighed again as he took in the deep green palm trees and dense underbrush, traveling over the warm-hued sand to the bottle-green water of the bay. Further out, he knew, the water was crystal clear and blue. The water rippled gently against the shore, and a feeling of complete contentedness washed over him.

"You like it?"

Harry grinned, throwing his arms around Draco enthusiastically.

"I love it!" he cried as they tumbled to the sandy floor of the cabana. He raised his arm, Summoning several of the cushions that lined the wall to use with the beach chairs. He made a neat pile, scooting the two of them over so the soft pillows were between them and the sand.

"Don't you want to see the rest of the house?" Draco asked, laughing as Harry eagerly unbuttoned his shirt.

"No," Harry answered, trailing kisses over the skin as he revealed it.

"Well, I do," Draco said, pushing Harry's hands away when he'd nearly finished. "I want to show you the estate."

Harry pouted prettily, his lower lip extended, the corners of his mouth turned down. Draco shook his head, pulling them both to their feet.

"I'm immune to your puppy dog look, Potter," he said, giggling when he caught himself. "I mean, Malfoy."

Harry dropped his sulk, bounding after Draco up the beach. A colorful house built on stilts came into view, and Harry gasped. The home wasn't overly large, but it was gorgeous. A whitewashed porch wrapped around the entire first floor, which Harry could already tell would have fabulous views of the bay from its elevated vantage point. Another level had several private balconies that afforded views of the tropical forest and the sea, depending on which side of the house they perched on.

"Merlin, Draco," Harry said, catching up to the blond on the stairs. "It's amazing."

Draco crossed the porch – the floorboards were worn smooth with age and weather, and they felt satiny against Harry's bare feet – and opened the door, inviting Harry inside.

"You've already said that," he teased, wrapping and arm around Harry's waist. "You're going to have to learn some new adjectives if you're going to keep up with me. I plan to surprise you with

things like this all the time, husband."

Harry wrinkled his nose, sticking his tongue out at Draco. "I know loads of adjectives," he said, looking around. "It just happens to be the one that fits best."

Draco followed him as Harry trailed around the first floor, which featured an open floor plan and a minimum of walls. The back of the house was all glass, and Harry could see the seemingly never-ending expanse of tropical forest extending away from it, the leaves of the trees and plants glistening wetly in the sun, droplets of rain water shimmering against the green like diamonds.

The kitchen took up most of the back of the room, new appliances and countertops shining. The teak cupboards blended perfectly with the forest scene behind it, merging the inside and outside seamlessly. Harry glanced down, realizing the floor was the same burnished copper as the cabinetry.

The kitchen merged with a dining area, which was dominated by a large, comfortable-looking table, perfect for entertaining but not so nice that it would matter when Corvus threw a spoonful of peas at it whenever they began the adventure of solid food. *We'll spend a lot of time here,* Harry thought to himself, running a finger over the granite countertops. *Corey will be comfortable here, and so will I.*

A cozy sitting area boasted over-stuffed couches and chairs, all arranged around a large open area filled with toys and mats for Corvus to play on. Draco grabbed Harry's hand, leading him up the stairs.

"Our bedroom," he said, nudging the door at the end of the corridor open.

Harry stepped inside, blown away by the suite. It spanned the length of the house, giving them views of both the distant sea and the tropical forest, with balconies at both ends. The large room was decorated entirely in white, the only patches of color coming from vibrant local artwork in turquoises, greens, oranges, yellows and reds on the walls. Huge canvases hung in the gallery-like space, interspersed with smaller frames. Harry walked closer to inspect them, his heart skipping when he discovered they were all black-and-white photos of the two of them. The photos didn't move, which made them all the more alluring. Draco had managed to track down photos from their entire relationship – from their initial tentative truce at Hogwarts to present day. A large photo from their wedding – taken just hours before – hung above the fireplace, the two of them caught unaware, leaning in to kiss and holding Corvus between them. Draco smiled softly at the photo, making a mental note to send Hermione a thank-you card.

"It's amazing," Harry said again, not caring if Draco mocked him. He truly couldn't think of any other word to describe it.

"Mmm," Draco agreed, coming up behind Harry and resting his chin on his shoulder, wrapping his arms around his husband. "And you haven't even seen the bathroom, with its double-shower and oversized tub."

Harry chuckled, relaxing into Draco's embrace. "I don't need to see it."

"Or Corvus' room, which is down the hall," Draco continued, turning his head to press a kiss to Harry's neck.

"Or the guest house, which is where my parents have Corey right now."

"I don't need to see any of that," Harry repeated, tilting his head to give Draco better access to his throat.

"No?" Draco asked, his lips tickling Harry's throat as he spoke.

"No. It's all amazing."

Draco straightened, stepping around Harry so they were facing.

"You can't know that," he protested, smirking. "You haven't seen most of the house, or any of the property."

"Don't need to," Harry said, taking a running jump at the large bed with its pristine white duvet and fluffy white pillows. The gauzy white bed hangings fluttered, the delicate fabric rippling in the breeze of Harry's enthusiastic leap.

"And why not?"

"Because you're here. Anywhere you are is amazing," Harry said, reaching up to finish unbuttoning Draco's shirt when he pushed the bed hangings aside and joined him.

"A sap," Draco groaned, shrugging out of the garment when Harry pushed it over his shoulders. "I've married a sap."

"You're the one who bought me a house in Costa Rica just because I mentioned it might be nice to have one – once!"

"I'll always give you everything you want," Draco said, nuzzling Harry's neck as his hands slid down his torso to grip the bottom of his shirt, pulling it up over Harry's head.

"*You* are everything I want," Harry said huskily, fumbling with the zipper on Draco's trousers.

"Fuck," Draco gasped, suddenly desperate to have both of them naked.

They struggled with their remaining clothing for a moment before Harry stopped abruptly and snapped his fingers. They found themselves naked instantly, and Draco covered Harry's body with his own, straddling his hips. He pinned Harry's hands to the bed, claiming his mouth in a

scorching kiss that left them both gasping for air.

They were both still feeling the effects of joining their magical cores, suddenly desperate for release as the arousal they felt during the ceremony returned full-force.

"Is this normal?" Harry asked between kisses, his hands sliding down Draco's body until they found his cock.

"Nothing we do is *ever* normal," Draco gasped in response, his back arching when Harry's fist closed around him and stroked.

They'd made it through the ceremony and reception without ravishing each other – barely. The magical energy that buzzed around them had a distinctly sexual flavor, and they could both feel the bond urging them to consummate it as soon as possible. That, paired with the intense experience of joining two powerful magical cores, had them humming with awareness, making each little kiss or caress send jolts of desire through their bodies.

Draco refused to delay leaving for their honeymoon – even though they were starting it several weeks early – so they hadn't had a chance to find any respite from the sexual tension. Several hours of intense emotions and sensations had left them bursting with need. Harry's initial surprise at the location of their honeymoon – and the fact that Draco had purchased an estate for them – had supplanted the desire momentarily, but it flooded back in a rush the second Draco had climbed on top of Harry.

"Wait," Harry groaned, crawling toward the foot of the bed. Draco moved to join him, but Harry restrained him with a foot to the chest. "Stay."

He curved himself around Draco, angling his body so his erection brushed Draco's soft lips. That erotic contact alone made Harry's balls tighten, and he knew he'd made the right choice – there was no way either of them would last long enough to actually fuck each other. He opened his lips, resting them around the head of Draco's cock and running his tongue around it teasingly before plunging it lightly into the slit. His taste buds flared at the musky, salty flavor of his husband, and he eagerly opened wider to take more of Draco's cock in his mouth.

"Shit," Draco groaned, taking the hint when Harry's bobbing cock smacked his lips again. He pressed a hard kiss to the side of the shaft, covering his teeth with his lips and allowing Harry to thrust into his open mouth.

"Draco," Harry moaned, moving his hips to increase the delicious friction. He mirrored Draco's technique, shielding the sharp points of his teeth so Draco could thrust freely into his mouth.

A few more thrusts from both of them and they were careening over the edge, the world exploding in a kaleidoscope of brilliant, shimmering color. Harry felt like the world had quite simply slipped away, the only sensations he registered being those attached to his cock and his mouth. He could feel Draco's hard length sliding against his tongue, and the sensation of his cock

doing exactly the same thing in Draco's mouth sent him over the edge.

They came at the same moment, both of them shooting spurts of hot, bitter come down each other's throats, moaning each other's names and a string of colorful invectives. Draco swore he felt their magic twining around them, the same swirls and eddies from their Marriage Bond ceremony ghosting over their skin. He cracked open an eye, watching as the air shimmered around them with the force of their orgasms, their magic making the very air around them pulse.

"Fuck," he groaned, collapsing back on the bed when Harry's cock stopped twitching in his mouth.

"No kidding," Harry gasped, falling back as well.

"Married sex is brilliant," Draco panted, grinning when Harry found the energy to crawl up the bed and collapse in his waiting arms.

"It's amazing," Harry agreed, nestling into his husband's embrace as they both burst out laughing.

–The end –

Author's note: That's it, folks. That's all she wrote. It's been a great journey uncovering this story with you. Thanks for sticking with me to the end, and for all your brilliant words of encouragement.

I'm posting a glossary of the French and Bulgarian terms and phrases used in the fic as well, so you can see for yourself what Mlle. Vioget said in the trial and the barbs Draco and Viktor so liked to trade.

Thanks again for everyone who waded through this long story, especially those of you who took the time to review. And my heartfelt gratitude to Lady_Aubrey, who bravely tackled this mountain of a story as my beta. You rock! *waves*

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Chapter: 37

I don't speak Bulgarian, and odds are you don't either! That is, unless you're the fabulous Mira, who was kind enough to correct some of the mistakes I made in the Bulgarian dialogue in The Next Best Thing. The glossary has been revised to show these updates, as has the text. *Blagodaria*, Mira, for helping make TNBT a more accurate story!

There's also a glossary of the smattering of French I used as well, which follows the Bulgarian section.

Glossary of Bulgarian words and phrases:

As hareswarm balgarskiiat – I like Bulgarian

Balgarya e welikolepna strana – Bulgaria is a wonderful country

Balgarskiiat mi e losh – My Bulgarian is bad

Blagodaria – thank you

Bolen sam – I feel sick

Da - yes

Dva zaeka s edin korshum – literally, to kill two rabbits with one bullet. Bulgarian equivalent of the English idiom "kill two birds with one stone".

Haresva li ti? – do you like it?

Iskash li pomosht? – Do you need help?

Leka nosht – goodnight

Ne – no

Ne pravi taka – don't do that

Ne se trevoji – don't worry

Ne sega – not now

Ni plaschi – don't cry

Njama strashno – don't be afraid

Po kasno – later

Sega – now

Sladki sanishta – sweet dreams

Ti si moeto slunce –You are my sun

Ti si moyat jivot – You are my life

Tiho – be quiet

Tova e dobre – it's OK

Vreme e da si liagash – it is time to go to bed

Vnimavai – be careful

Shte te obicham zavinagi – I will love you forever

Glossary of French words and phrases:

Avec la faculté à maîtriser la volonté d'autre – with the ability to control the other's will

Bien sur – of course

Comment ce dit – how do you say

Grimoire – spell book

Les grimoires anciens – old spell books

Le Grimoire Complet du Mariage – The complete marriage spell book

Magie noire du sang – dark blood magic

Mais non – but of course not

Oui – yes

La Societé du Parrainage la Préservation de la Magie Ancienne – The Society for Supporting the Preservation of Ancient Magic

Top of Form

Bottom of Form