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Name: Veela Struck
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Chapter 1 to 34

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Chapter: 1

Title: Veela-Struck

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

Pairings: Harry/Draco (past Harry/OMC)

Rating: R

Warnings: Rape (past, but described and depicted in flashbacks), violence, creature!fic (Veela Draco), profanity, sex, deep angst. This assumes the epilogue does not exist.

Summary: Veela don't have destined mates, and thank Merlin for that. Draco wants to date Harry Potter because Harry is one of the few people in the wizarding world who treats him decently. But when Harry refuses, with his refusal focused on Draco's creature blood, Draco sets out on a different journey than he ever expected.

Author's Notes: This story is very angsty, and deals with issues of consent. Please think carefully before reading it.

Veela-Struck

Chapter One—Stunned

Draco halted outside the door to Potter's office. He considered the state of his robes critically, although they had been immaculate when he left the Manor. Still, travel through Floo could crumple and disorder the clothes of the best and most experienced wizards. Draco found a grain of soot resting in one lacy cuff and disposed of it with a small twitch of his fingers.

Then he realized his fingers were shaking, and clasped his hands together with a frown.

You don't need to do this, he told himself for the hundredth time. *If he rejects you, that doesn't matter. There are plenty of people out there who would be delighted to date you, for your Veela blood if no other reason.*

Draco sighed. That was the problem, though. His blood was the *only* reason that most people would be proud to be seen in public with him. Lovers weren't exactly lining up for someone who had a Dark Mark on his arm and a tainted name in the public papers. Six years since the war, and "Malfoy" still invoked a sneer from anyone who heard it. Draco still had to be careful when he went to Diagon Alley, Hosgmeade, or anywhere else that the allies of the "Light" were likely to be out in force.

The Ministry was different, and not just because he had his own political contacts here. Harry Potter had made it clear that anyone foolish enough to threaten Draco, or one of his parents, would answer to him.

Not the only choice, but my best one, Draco thought as he raised his hand and knocked.

"Come in," Potter's resonant voice said, and Draco twisted the handle, suddenly much calmer. Foolish decision or not, he had made it, and there was no putting it off now. Potter's damnable curiosity would make him pursue the matter if Draco stuck his head in, apologized for disturbing him, and tried to leave.

Potter sat at the desk in the middle of the spacious office, bent over what looked like a long report. Draco shut the door quietly behind him and looked around. He hadn't been in the office in a few months, and he wanted to see what changes Potter had made.

Different photographs hung on the walls, of course. Potter changed them regularly as he took new cases and brought some old ones to a close. Dark wizards menaced and snarled at Draco, or took a wary step back and tried to blend into the shadows, depending on their individual temperament. Near the end of the line, Rabastan Lestrange pointed his wand directly at him and muttered a spell that, luckily, failed to take effect. Draco swallowed and looked away. It gave him a queasy feeling in his stomach to think about how long that particular photograph had been there.

The enchanted window poured sunshine on the empty desk next to Potter; Weasley was home with his wife, who was expecting their first child. Draco resolutely struggled not to think about that, because it might lead to thinking about what Weasley and Granger had done when they engendered the child. The floor was covered with a kind of artificial grass rather than carpet, and Draco wriggled his toes through it, though the leather of his boots prevented much coolness or relaxation from reaching him.

His sigh finally made Potter look up. He smiled and put aside the report, leaning forwards to fold his hands on the desk. "What can I do for you, Malfoy?"

Draco looked at him for a long time before replying. Potter was much handsomer than he had been only a few years ago. When he had come out of the Auror training program, Draco still remembered him as irresistibly gawky and bright-eyed, tumbling around the Ministry as though no one had ever arrested Dark wizards before. He had just announced to the world in general that he was bent, too, and had *also* acted as though no one had ever fucked men before. Though Draco was grateful for the way he had spoken up at the Death Eater trials, he could no more have been attracted to Potter in those days than he could have Summoned the moon with an *Accio.*

But things had changed, almost overnight. After some private trouble that he still wouldn't talk about, Potter had applied himself to his job, ceased his bragging and his robe-chasing, and become sober and respectable and frighteningly intelligent. And he had started calling at Malfoy Manor for other reasons than because he had to inspect the cellars for any sign of Dark artifacts, and actually listened and been able to contribute questions when Draco spoke about making potions.

Draco wasn't in love yet, a good thing when he had no idea if Potter would agree to date him. But he could be.

"Is something wrong?" Potter rose to his feet and came towards Draco with a long stride. When he halted in front of Draco, Draco shivered involuntarily. Potter carried so much power along with him, and watching him move was like watching a storm move, which made his abrupt stops seem unnatural. "Has someone threatened your family again?"

Potter's voice was low and calm, but his fingers crept to his wand and clenched down. Draco felt a stir of admiration and lust, and hoped that neither emotion was as hopeless as it seemed. It was an effort to clear his throat and speak casually.

"No. I had—something personal to talk to you about. I hoped you wouldn't mind me coming by the office like this."

Potter bent sharp eyes on Draco, as though afraid that he was trying to hide his concern behind a strong façade for some reason. Then he seemed reassured, and relaxed with a smile. His smile was far more attractive than his scowl, if less redolent of power. Draco felt his back flex, though it was far from the season when his wings would manifest.

"Not at all. Though I don't know if I'm qualified to give advice in matters of the heart." Potter cocked his head and seemed to wait for Draco to go on.

Draco nodded, coughed, and stepped past Potter to sit down in a chair that stood in front of his desk. Potter prowled over and sat behind the desk in turn. Draco's throat and lungs, his chest and groin and nipples, tightened. God, the man must have no idea of how he looked. But his obliviousness was easier to understand than the obliviousness of others. Draco wondered why someone hadn't snapped him up long ago.

Under Potter's focused eyes, simplicity seemed the best route to take. Draco only had to clear his throat once more before he managed. "I wondered if you would date me."

There. It was out and done now, and no matter what the reaction, Draco didn't have to feel the intense fear that he did when he hadn't spoken. He settled back and awaited Potter's reaction, which he desperately hoped would be positive.

He had been prepared for rejection, or so he told himself. He hadn't been prepared for Potter to shove himself back from the desk as though it were afire, stare at Draco with his mouth slightly open, and then shake his head furiously and say, "Not if you were the last wizard alive."

Draco felt his mouth sag slightly open. "What did I do?" he asked, too astonished to be hurt. "What—"

"It has nothing to do with you as a person," Potter said, looking away, though from the tense jerks his shoulders gave, Draco was certain it *did*. "It has everything to do with blood. I don't date Veela."

Draco blinked and touched one hand to his face, half-wondering if feathers had poked through his skin and revealed his heritage. Then he remembered that he had told Potter about it himself, one drunken night in the Leaky Cauldron.

Potter was staring at him now, but he looked away when Draco tried to catch his eye. The corner of his mouth was twisted in what looked like loathing. Draco stood slowly. That was it, then. Nothing he could say, nothing he could change.

"Thanks for letting me know," he said.

Potter didn't respond. Draco turned and trekked to the door, which now seemed considerably further away than it had when he first entered the office.

He had reached the door and actually laid his hand on the knob before the wrongness of what he had heard swung him back around. Potter stood up for the rights of vampires and werewolves; his most notorious incident in the last year had involved him invading a "secret" meeting of the Wizengamot to abolish centaur preserves, backed up the centaurs themselves. There was no way that he would refuse to date a Veela without a bloody good reason.

Draco turned back. Potter had started rearranging the papers on his desk, but he glanced up when he heard Draco stop, his face blank. "What is it, Malfoy?" he asked, his tone more distant than it had been even those last years at Hogwarts. "As you can see, I'm rather busy."

Draco shook his head. "I don't accept that," he said.

"Don't accept that I'm busy?" Potter picked up a stack of reports and turned it over so Draco could see how closely written they were. "I think the evidence speaks for itself."

"I don't buy that you won't date Veela just because you dislike them." Draco moved closer. Potter dropped the reports and braced his hands on the desk, breathing deeply. Draco watched the effort it took him to keep from reaching for his wand and shook his head. "Why don't you tell me the real reason?"

"Because the real reason is, quite frankly, none of your business," Potter said, with the faintest suggestion of a bark in his voice. Draco would bet it sent the junior Aurors running, but he wasn't a junior Auror, and he wanted an answer, damn it. "I'll date who I like. Get *out* of my office."

"No." Draco moved a step closer. He had the upper hand now, and sheer stubborn curiosity, nothing like the subtle diplomatic instincts he had assumed he would need, was driving him on. "Tell me. It's not like you to be prejudiced."

"Someone can think a werewolf deserves to be treated like a human being and still not want him around during the full moon." Potter's brow had broken out in sweat.

Draco moved one step nearer again.

Potter leaped over the desk and stood there with his wand digging into Draco's throat. His eyes were wild, but very focused. Draco knew he could fight, though the wildness suggested he might not be in control of his actions.

"I told you," Potter whispered. "I bloody *told* you. Why can't you get the fuck out of here and just take it without explanations, the way I gave it to you?"

Draco swallowed, which made the edge of his throat hit the wand. He raised his hands with exquisite slowness. Potter stared at them, but made no move, and Draco thought that was a good sign.

Sure enough, he shut his eyes, dropped his wand, shoved it into his robe pocket, and turned his back. Draco knew from the motion of his arms that he'd brought his hands over his face. He was shaking.

"I had a fucking Veela in my bed once," Potter whispered. "Against my will. That was more than enough."

Draco stiffened. He could never have guessed that this was the reason, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to press further. But it seemed his silence goaded Potter as effectively as a question would have. Perhaps he should have walked out the door when he had the chance.

"I could resist the allure," Potter whispered, in a voice that simply continued, running over itself, like grains of sand dribbling from a bag. "He hated that. When the Blazing Season came, he supposedly needed to control me for the sake of his Veela side, and he couldn't. He went further,

and made sure I was struck. I woke up after a few days and arrested him. But that was the end of any chance that I would date someone who could control me that way."

He turned around, and his eyes were weary, but he managed to smile at Draco. "I never thought I would have to tell someone who didn't already know. I never thought the chance to sleep with another Veela would show up." He shrugged. "So now you know. I might like to date you if not for that. I know you better now. But there's no way it can happen. Sorry."

Draco was struggling wildly to control his emotions. His back flexed again, and he knew the reason. The wings were meant as powerful shields for a Veela's chosen. Draco wanted to seize Harry and shelter him behind ramparts of silver feathers that would part for nothing, not even another Veela's allure.

But Harry would only react badly if he did that, and Draco had to suppress his instinct.

He was fighting with his horror, too. Most of the time, the allure was enough. But people like Harry, who could resist the Imperius Curse, could also resist that. And so a Veela *could* go further and make a person like that Veela-struck, force the knowledge of the Veela's pleasure and control into the resistant wizard's mind and body. They would become little more than a sexual toy, capable of being destroyed and loving every moment.

No one ethical would do such a thing. But there were Veela who were perverse enough to do so, just as there were wizards who displayed the trophies of a Veela's wings on their walls.

Draco could not have anticipated that Harry would suffer such a thing. At the moment, though, it felt as though he should have, should have held back and never troubled Harry with his presence again.

Now that he thought about it, he could remember a flinch that had run through Harry's body when Draco confessed the secret of his blood. But that could have meant so many things, and the haze in his head from the drink had made it easy to dismiss the memory.

Draco returned to himself to find Harry backing away from him again. Draco blinked. He didn't think his wings were spread; they still rippled as they only did when they were beneath their blanket of skin.

Then he realized that he was making a soft, high-pitched crooning sound, intended to reassure traumatized children and others who had suffered. Harry's reaction made him think about how Harry's faithless Veela lover might have used it.

The sickness that rose up in his throat effectively stopped the croon. Harry straightened back up, his face yellow, and shook his head.

"I can't do it," he whispered. "I know that you don't have to date me, that Veela aren't bound to one person alone. Find someone else."

Draco stared at him with sadness and wonder and a longing that had only intensified. Then he swallowed and said, "I want to help you. I want to heal you."

Harry flashed him a murderous glance, a look that Draco hadn't known he was capable of. "I'm as healed as I'm ever going to get. And I don't need a pity fuck."

"I wasn't offering that!" Draco exclaimed, though he could feel the pity rising up in his throat like tears. "I meant—I want to offer you something that will make up for what he did to you. Something warm and large and encompassing. Something that will give you back some of what you lost." He knew he was babbling, but he didn't think he could stop.

Harry stood still, looking patient and tolerant, until Draco finished. If not for the way his fingers dug into his desk, Draco might even have believed his presentation of unbending calm. "It's not something you need to make up for," Harry said at last. "You didn't know him. You couldn't have prevented—what he did." His body shuddered for a moment as if it was on the rack, then stilled again. "It's done, and I'm living with it. You can't undo it by offering me—what? Sex?" He laughed, but it was a dry laugh, like the rustling of ashes.

"Then I'm offering this for me," Draco said. "Because *I* want to heal you, date you, do what I can to help you."

Harry paused, head tilted to the side as if he were listening to an undertone that would tell him the difference between the words Draco said and the ones he meant, and then nodded. "That makes more sense," he said. "But that doesn't mean you *can*. It doesn't mean that I have to let you."

Draco shook his head. His wings were close to bursting out again. He had held only one person in them before—Pansy, whom he had once dated and had believed would be the one for him—but he knew the lore well enough, and had no doubt of their effect. He wanted to help Harry, and this was the best way.

Well, for an ordinary person, it was. But Harry's eyes darted over his whole body, fixing on his shoulder blades, his arms, his hands, his legs, in a way that Draco hadn't noticed until he started paying attention. Harry was looking for signs of non-human body features, and Draco had the feeling he would run if he saw them.

"Let me help you," Draco whispered, the only thing he could say.

Harry snorted. "I don't see why it matters. Like I said, I'm dealing with it, and you can't expect someone who's been—raped—to pick himself up and go on as if it never happened." He said that one particular word between gritted teeth, so that Draco wondered how long it had taken him to teach himself to say it. "I'm doing—well enough. I'll handle this. I don't *need* to lose my fear of sleeping with a Veela. It's not important to my life, my friends, my job, or anything else."

"It's important to me," Draco said. There were other words, he knew there had been, but they had dried up and blown away.

Harry raised his eyebrows slightly, and his mouth almost, but not quite, smiled. "But we can be friends without me sleeping with you."
"I want you," Draco said, helpless, raw. The words had come back now, but they still weren't the powerful, eloquent ones he had hoped would persuade Harry. "And I want you more now than before I knew."

Harry's smile froze. "Why?" he asked, through the glittering ice of it. "Because you like sloppy seconds? Because the challenge of subduing someone another Veela couldn't subdue is what you adore?"

Draco shook his head. He didn't know the words. He didn't know the touches. He could have used his wings on someone else, merely to hold them still and keep them tranquil while he searched for the words, but that wasn't an option here. He didn't even want to come closer, because of the distrust in Harry's eyes and the way he flinched.

He had to use the words he didn't know, but which pressed on the inside of his mouth, his tongue, his cheeks, instead.

"I want you," he said, "because I know more about you. I wanted you before because I liked you. You were powerful, handsome, someone who stood up for me. Those made you a good candidate for dating."

Harry glanced aside, trying to force his tone into a horrid lightness. "Then go proposition that Auror who just won the Inter-Departmental Games. I've seen him looking at you in a way that suggests he fancies you, anyway."

Draco shook his head. He felt almost dreamy, held back, isolated, from the emotions that had poured through him before. He felt the way he did when he was flying.

"I want you because I want to help and heal you," he whispered. "Because it's *wrong*, what happened to you, and you deserve to live a full life. Because I want to see you smile and walk without fear of anything."

"I have fears," Harry said. "All the time." He was tapping his fingers on the desk in a quick, nervous rhythm now, head turned so that he could keep a watch on Draco from the corner of one eye. "Of Dark wizards. Of spells that could kill me. Of one of my best friends dying suddenly. You can't keep me from that."

"But I can help you with a fear and a wound that should never have been inflicted on you," Draco said.

"You can't," Harry said, so sharp that Draco felt the words cut into his body like throwing knives.

"You're a Veela. He was a Veela. Maybe I could put up with you for most of the year, if I didn't know what you were, but the Blazing Season? No."

Draco lowered his eyes. Veela had a kinship to birds, and the Blazing Season were the few weeks out of every spring when they demonstrated as male birds courted the females: grew dazzling plumage, soared on spread wings, brought food and care to their partners.

None of those things were what Harry was objecting to, though. The Blazing Season made Veela bold, presumptuous. Dominant. They *had* to take care of those under their protection. They grew violently jealous, and they resented any attempt their partners made to stand on their own two feet. If they had sex, the Veela was in control, always.

It was only for a few weeks. But Draco already knew, without asking, that Harry had become Veela-struck during the Blazing Season. There was no way he would be able to put up with Draco during it.

But Draco still *wanted*.

"Will you give me a chance?" he asked, since it was the only thing he could think of. "Just to help you? It would be up to you whether you wanted to go further than that. Completely up to you, I promise." He looked up and caught Harry's eyes, trying to stare sincerity into them. "You wouldn't have to date me in the way you're thinking of. You wouldn't have to let me touch you, unless that was something you thought would help. But I want you to be able to get over this fear." He smiled, though it cracked his lips, they had gone so dry. "I want you to be able to walk beside me without constantly looking over your shoulder."

Harry stood so still that Draco could feel his own heartbeat shuddering through his skin. Then Harry looked up and shook his head. "Why would you want to?" he asked. "Why does this matter?"

"Because you're unhappy," Draco said, his voice charged with all those emotions again, but under reasonable control, this time. "And that matters to me."

Harry stood still again, but this time with a more natural relaxation; Draco could make out the shrug of his shoulders and the way his eyes shifted. Then he said, "I'll think about it. Don't press me right now."

Draco nodded, said, "I hope you feel better, and I'm sorry for pressing you so far," and left the office. It was the best thing for both of them right then—or at least for Harry. Draco would have liked to stay.

They were in November, months from the Blazing Season. Draco should be able to keep himself nicely in check, gentle, the way Harry needed him to be.

The wings burned under his shoulder blades. The croon burned in his throat. Every muscle ached

as if tipped with fire.

Easier said than done. But I will do it.

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Chapter: 2

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Two—Changed

Harry shut his door behind him and looked around his house with weary eyes. The furniture seemed bigger than normal, the shadows deeper.

Harry snorted and touched his forehead with two fingers, hoping to stifle the beginnings of a headache, then stumbled towards the kitchen. Dashing around after a criminal for three days straight—especially one who wasn't good at concealing his crimes but *excellent* at running away—would do that to him.

But now Alfred Orson was in a holding cell, and wouldn't trouble anyone else with his brilliant cons to grab their money that always fell apart at the last minute. Harry yawned and began to make himself a pot of tea, thinking longingly of his bed and the fact that he had two straight days off. Kingsley would have extended it to a week if he could, but that only resulted in Harry coming back to the office "unofficially" before he was supposed to and making himself deeply annoying.

He finally collapsed into the chair before his fireplace with his cup of tea, lit the flames with a wave of his wand, and began to sip. For long moments there was nothing in the world but the heat beating at him from inside and outside. Harry sighed and allowed himself to relax.

Then the fire flared green with the sign of an incoming firecall. Harry growled and sat up. "I swear to Merlin," he muttered, "if this is another case, I'm going to kick Kingsley in the arse."

"What was that, Harry?"

All Harry's tendons seemed to stretch and tighten at once. He nearly dropped his cup. Turning, he managed to set it on the table closest to the chair and face the fire again, stretching his fingers out and popping his knuckles so that he could release some of his nervousness.

"Hullo, Draco," he said.

He had almost forgotten that he had given Draco his Floo address several years ago, so that he would have a quick escape if someone vindictive ever passed his wards. Harry wished his smile was more welcoming now, but there was no way he could make it so.

If Draco's really my friend, he'll understand, he told himself, and clung to that as the truth.

"Harry." Draco's voice was deep and soft, and his eyes studied Harry out of the flames with a different kind of softness. Harry swallowed. His throat felt thick with strings of saliva. "I wanted to know if you had given any more thought to what I said."

Harry shook his head. "I spent the last three days on a case," he said with perfect truth. "I didn't have time."

And I didn't want to think about it, he added in his mind, with more than perfect truth.

"Oh." Draco's disappointment was evident. "Can I still come through?"

"Still?" Harry asked before he could stop himself, because he couldn't remember them setting up a meeting for tonight.

"I planned to." Draco watched him, then added, "Of course, if you would rather that I didn't…"

Harry sighed. Yes, he would prefer that Draco didn't, to be frank, but saying so would only give Harry another excuse to put off something he needed to face, at least as long as Draco was this persistent. "It's all right. Come through."

Draco smiled, and the next moment his dark, whirling shape appeared in the flames. When he climbed out, he stumbled over the low, wave-shaped ridge at the top of Harry's hearth, the way everyone did, and spent some moments swatting soot from his robes, without looking up to meet Harry's eyes.

Harry studied him in turn. Draco wore pale ivory robes, which hadn't survived the trip through the Floo as well as the darker colors that Harry preferred. His hair had been cut recently, and hung in his face until he raised his head, when it swished softly to the side. His eyes were wide and uncertain, gentler and dimmer than Harry would have said they could be a few years ago.

But that had been a few years ago, when he really didn't know Draco at all. "Come in and sit down," Harry said, waving at another chair that faced the fireplace. That much, he could say normally, since it was such a normal thing to say.

Draco did, but he dragged the chair around so that he could see Harry more easily. Harry could hardly blame him for that, and yet he did feel his back swelling with defensiveness. He coughed and looked away.

"Will you think about it?" Draco asked, when a few minutes had dragged past in uncomfortable

silence.

Harry spent another minute thinking about what he should say, and then decided that honesty—if polite honesty—would serve him better than any amount of diplomacy, which might give Draco false hope. He turned back, and stopped disguising how much effort it took him to keep from flinching just with a Veela in the house. Draco blinked, then stared at the floor.

"I don't think it's a good idea," Harry said quietly. "I still struggle with my recovery." *Flashes of his arms thrown above his head, pinned down by other arms, hips thrusting until they slammed into his own, his joyful cries at the sensation of being so full—and all of it a lie…*

Harry gagged and threw the images from him before he could vomit up the tea. His memories tended to manifest themselves through making him get rid of food, for some reason. Maybe because Laurent hadn't let him eat during the days Harry had been under his control. Harry was glad now that he hadn't had time to eat before Draco appeared in the fire. He held Draco's eyes and shook his head. "I don't see what dating another Veela would accomplish except to set back that recovery."

Draco's eyes were filled with the light of the fire, they were so clear. "Can you think of me as just a friend, then?" he asked, softly, urgently. "Someone who wants to help you, not a Veela?"

"How can I?" Harry asked in return. "I would always be thinking that you wanted to get me healthy because you wanted to date me. And come spring…"

He shuddered and looked away. Come spring, it would be the Blazing Season, the time when Veela "needed" to be dominant, the time when Laurent had raped him. There was no way that Harry could go through that again. If he dated Draco, he would spend those weeks flinching away from every slight touch and locking himself in his bedroom at night. Fuck, he'd done that already the first year, and last year he had survived by burying himself in paperwork and casework so intense that the Blazing Season was over by the time he noticed the calendar again.

"I swear I won't."

Harry lifted his head. Draco had leaned forwards and extended a hand, but it hovered well short of touching him, short enough that Harry could judge the distance rationally. He nodded for Draco to go on, though he could only look at his hand and not his face.

Draco seemed to realize what the problem was a minute later and pulled his hand back to rest in his lap. "You're the one who has to make that decision," he said. "I *promise*. I won't press you. I won't ask. I'll stay away from you during the Blazing Season so that you don't have to deal with my jealousy, or—any of the rest of it." His voice changed, becoming higher and sweeter, but luckily not ascending to the croon. Harry closed his eyes. *Laurent had given all his orders in a croon, as if that would make what he was doing right.* "The only thing I ask is that you let me know if you date anyone else. I want to have time to prepare."

Harry struggled to smile, because he badly thought he needed to. "Not bloody likely," he murmured. "I haven't dated anyone since—him."

"Another reason to accept my help, then." Draco's voice sounded normal again. "You should have the ability to enjoy sex again, Harry. He took that from you. Do you know if you'll get it back, without help?"

It was a respectful question, not a demanding one, which was the only reason Harry gritted his teeth and considered it. "I don't know," he said at last.

"Then—"

Draco sounded too assured this time, as though it was a given that Harry would want to have sex so much he'd let another Veela into his life. "That's not the *point*!" Harry said, and slammed his hand into the chair arm. "Don't you understand? I don't care if I ever have sex again, as long as I have what he stole from me!"

Draco's eyelashes lifted high, making his eyes appear wider and more startled than Harry had known they could go. Of course, he hadn't had to consider things like that before, before Draco *made* him think about things like attractiveness and sex instead of friendship.

Harry leaped to his feet. He still didn't want to strike out against Draco, but he had to do something to release the restless, nervous energy burning through him. He paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, digging his fingers into his hair. His scalp hurt where his nails scratched it. He didn't care.

"What was it he stole from you?" Draco asked at last. It sounded as though a cloud constricted his voice. *Good,* Harry thought, turning around to stare at him again. *Let him always be a little off-balance, a little uncertain. No Veela will ever be perfectly sure that he's my master ever again.*

"Control," Harry said. "And so I'm a bit crazy now—crazy in ways that you really wouldn't like, Malfoy." He laughed without humor, because Draco was still looking at him with pity and longing, and he didn't *understand*. "I want to make my own food, because he wouldn't let me eat while he had me. I can't stand being immobilized even when I'm injured, as the staff of St. Mungo's learned last year at the cost of two rooms when my magic exploded. I have to take care of myself, no matter how difficult it is or how stupid it seems. That makes me hardly an ideal lover for everyone, let alone a Veela."

Draco was still looking at him, but it seemed difficult for him. His eyes kept shutting. His fingers were spread open on the arm of his chair, and Harry thought he wanted to claw the wood apart.

"I didn't realize," he said at last.

"No one has," Harry said triumphantly. *He ought to go away now. He can't want me through this.*

"That's because no one has been fool enough to try and date me since I put Laurent in prison."

Draco's manner changed in the flick of an eyelid. He leaned forwards, and his lips parted, his gaze drawing down and in. "Laurent? Is that his name?"

Harry laughed. Well, he thought he did. There was no cold dry sound the way he had envisioned. His throat strained and produced nothing.

He had exploded from his Veela-struck state so suddenly that there was no way Laurent could have anticipated it or held him back. Harry's mind flipped; his protesting side was on top now and his urge to obey and give Laurent what he wanted on the bottom.

And within him was a black rage and an urge to kill so intense that it made all the times he'd wished for the death of Voldemort seem like vindictive daydreams.

His wand was on the table. Laurent always kept it near, because he enjoyed showing the power he had over Harry; he could break the bond between a wand and its wizard. Harry snatched it and whirled around.

Laurent was still raising himself on one elbow, skin pale and perfect, shining with an inner light that no human could ever imitate. His wide, pale blue eyes were open, one arm lifted in a curve that mimicked the curve of his wing. White, his wings, and white, his hair, and white, the shine around him, and white, the stars in Harry's vision.

He could picture the explosion of red that would follow in answer to his wishes, if he only cast the right curse. The blood in Laurent's veins would speed out of them and coat the white sheets and white walls and white pillows. It would match the red, sore mess Harry was sure his arse was, because even in his "safe" Veela-struck state there was no way that Laurent would let Harry top during the Blazing Season, of course not, a Veela "had" to have control.

Harry could do it. He could have. He could have settled everything that way, and after seeing his Pensieve memory and hearing his Veritaserum testimony, no one would have blamed him.

But he dug deep down, beneath black and white and red, and found the intense life that he had felt when he was walking through the Forbidden Forest, on his way to sacrifice himself to Voldemort for the good of other people. It was a crazy plan that no one could have expected him to go through with.

Because no one expected it did not make refusing it the right thing to do.

Because no one would blame him did not make murder right.

The spell Harry cast was Incarcerous, *and he chanted the litany that criminals, no matter how horrible, had the right to hear, keeping his eyes averted from Laurent. "The Ministry arrests you now for the crime of..." He couldn't say the word the first time, but he skipped it and continued*

the chant. "You have the right to personal safety until your time of trial. You will be conducted to a holding cell and given over to the proper authorities. If you wish to offer a confession, you will be given the chance to do so…"

He said so, and it was so.

Not even Laurent had the power to take from Harry what he was. If he had exploded in murderous magic, if he had given in to the emotions Laurent stirred, then he would have been a slave all his life, desperately chasing his lost freedom.

Instead, he seized control of his life and his fate in the same moment, and he became what he was. He was still an Auror. He was still a Light wizard, not a Dark one. He still did the right thing, no matter the cost to himself.

No one could change that. No one would ever take his control, his independence, his choice, from him again.

He was free, and would remain so.

Draco watched Harry with as much stillness as he could command, considering how upset he was. The croon was right behind his lips, the wings right behind his shoulders, and the allure leaking out of the corners of his eyes. All the things that would keep a chosen one safe, and he *wasn't allowed to use them.*

The conflict between human and Veela instincts made Draco writhe as he sat in his seat, but he didn't rise.

Harry opened his eyes at last and turned to Draco with a fragile glaze stretching across them. Draco had never been in the presence of such pain. His joints ached with it. He waited.

"I arrested him," Harry said. "He was tried and found guilty by the Wizengamot in seclusion, so that the rest of the wizarding world didn't have to learn about what happened to me, and put in Azkaban under a false name." His voice was gaining strength now. "And he's there still. He's suffering, the way they all suffer, but he's *alive*. I didn't kill him."

He stepped towards Draco, his wand held in front of him like an extension of his arm. Draco kept still now for different reasons.

"And if I didn't kill him," Harry whispered, "there's no way in any world that *you'll* get to."

Draco spread his hands. He knew what was required, now, though it was not what he wanted to give. But nothing since he had decided to approach Harry had been about what he wanted; it had been about what Harry needed, instead.

"I understand, Harry," he said in a level, quiet voice. "I wouldn't want to, not if you've decided

that's what's best."

Harry stared at him, and his eyes narrowed. "But Veela want to protect their partners," he said. "I know that. *He* told me." A flash of teeth, gone so suddenly that the quickness was more frightening to Draco than the fact that it had appeared in the first place. "How can you hear about what happened to me and not decide that you have to rip him apart?"

"First," Draco said, "because we're not partners yet." *And might never be,* he had to remind himself, although parts of his body that weren't even present throbbed with the desire to be. "Second, because you made the decision, and I'll respect that. No matter how hard it might be for me to do so." He smiled, and hoped that Harry was aware enough to see the mockery in the smile as well as the wistfulness.

Harry lowered his wand, which relaxed Draco more than he liked to think about, and bit his lip, shutting his eyes. Draco waited. All he could do was respond when Harry made a move. Anticipating what Harry would do would hurt them both. He was not in control here.

Draco shifted his shoulders, trying to keep his wings from spreading in response to that suggestion.

"Veela have to be dominant," Harry said. "I know that. The books I read when I was trying to understand *him* said so, and so did *he*."

Draco knew why Harry was doing it, but he could wish Harry would speak of the rapist by name instead of in that low, charged tone, equal parts hatred and fear. It was the way Draco had been used to hearing his father refer to the dark Lord.

"We don't have to be," Draco said softly. "It depends on the—time of year—" He spoke those words carefully, knowing that he risked an explosion, but Harry only jerked his head, as if to say that he knew that and Draco should go on. Draco did, thankful. "And the Veela's individual personality. Some of us take it too far, yes. I know Veela who try to use their 'animal nature' to excuse every impolite gesture they make. Bollocks. Except for those certain times of the year, and a few extra abilities that we can use if we want to, we're as human as anyone else."

The tone and words had soothed Harry, as Draco had meant them to. Harry frowned, though, and folded his arms in such a way that he could aim his wand at Draco again in an instant. "Then why did all the books put their emphasis on the dominance?" He didn't ask why his rapist had. He could see the answer, and so could Draco.

The answer made Draco want to rip out the rapist's throat, mind, but that wasn't the point.

"Because the books are mostly written by wizards who are fascinated by anyone who's not human," Draco said, rolling his eyes, "and apt to place too much importance on the minor differences. Also, some people have had Veela lovers who are arseholes seeking to use their magic to excuse their behavior, as I said. They take those honest impressions of certain Veela and

write them down as if they encompassed the whole species."

Harry nodded agreement, but he tensed in the next moment and leaned forwards, his eyes as fierce as a wolf's. "But it's not a lie that all Veela have the allure and you can control someone if you want to."

Draco nodded back, not sure what he should say. Harry probably wouldn't believe a reassurance that Draco wouldn't ever do that, and he wouldn't appreciate a reminder that he was resistant to the allure, given that that was what had made his rapist decide to make him Veela-struck instead.

Harry stared at him, then turned and started pacing again. Draco wished he knew what the fuck to do. Harry's reactions were too changeable, that was the problem. Just as Draco decided on one coherent course of action, Harry did something else, and he had to try and decide on another.

And can you blame him for being changeable, given what's happened to him?

Draco winced and felt like a heel. It wasn't that hard, after all, to wait and see what Harry wanted to do or say. If he had this much trouble waiting, perhaps he should leave now and spare Harry a lot of worry.

"I want to be in control of my life," Harry said, whipping around again and nearly startling Draco into rising out of his chair in self-defense. "*All* of it. That includes decisions about whether or not have to sex, and it means getting better defenses against these bloody memories that rise out of the depths of my mind whenever I don't watch out." He rubbed the back of his neck, frowning.

Draco's cheer caught in the back of his throat. Harry hadn't said that he needed or wanted Draco's help to achieve that goal yet. "If you can replace the unpleasant memories with new ones, that would certainly help," he said, neutrally.

"And you're the only one who's offered," Harry said, as if continuing a line of conversation that Draco didn't know they'd started. "You're kind, patient, a friend, not a stranger. And you're not one of those Mind-Healers who thinks that I need to thresh out every little detail." He rolled his eyes and scowled at someone invisible for a moment.

I could be in love with you, eventually, Draco thought hopefully. *That's another advantage.*

"But." Harry stalked towards him, until he loomed over Draco and Draco had to lean back to see his face. "You still have the allure. You could control me any time you wanted."

"I wouldn't do that," Draco said, the only protest he could make before Harry snarled and whirled away again.

"But you *could*. That's the point." Harry's hands both raked through his hair at once, rendering it an inescapable mess. "How can I trust you? How can I lie down with someone who might want to—to take me at any moment?"

"I have no problem with bottoming," Draco said, glad that he had followed the instinct to be blunt when Harry stared at him with his mouth slightly parted. "Or with blowjobs or wanking, or anything else that you might want."

"What if I said that it would be a long time before I wanted anything like that?" Harry was sneering, body braced for rejection.

"Then I would wait a long time," Draco said. "I'm sure there are plenty of ways that we could replace the unpleasant memories with pleasant ones that don't involve sex."

Harry shook his head slightly. "What if I never wanted that with you? What if I decided that I wanted to be with someone else?"

Draco felt sick to his stomach with jealousy, but he reminded himself of the revulsion he'd felt four days ago when he learned the truth about Harry's rape, and answered calmly on the strength of that. "Then I only ask that you tell me before you start dating that person, that's all."

Harry clenched his hands. "That's not what *he* would have said."

"I'm not him." Draco reached out a pleading hand, knowing it might not be the best move, but unable to stop himself. "My goal is to help you heal, not have sex."

Harry froze, head cocked as if listening to a horn that Draco couldn't hear, calling from far away. Then he said, "I couldn't—I wouldn't have to make a decision. I could keep you dangling."

"You could," Draco said. "But I think you're kinder than that."

"Despite what I did to him?" Harry curled his lip.

"What you *did* to him?" Draco echoed, stunned into more honesty than he would have used otherwise. "I'm awed that you managed to hold back far enough to arrest him. I would have killed him."

Harry turned away again and walked slowly to the other side of the room. Draco wanted to go after him, pull him back to the fire, and shelter him in his wings, but Harry would hate that. Draco imagined that he might consider even a hand on his arm an unfair restraint. He would have to remember that.

"Come back in a few days," Harry whispered. "I'll tell you whether I want your help then."

Draco stood up at once. "Thank you, Harry," he said gravely, to disguise the soaring joy that leaped and screamed inside him. "It means a lot to me."

He stepped to the fireplace, tossed in a pinch of Floo powder, and spoke the name of Malfoy

Manor, not daring to look back, for fear the longing would show in his face more clearly than the happiness.

Harry shut his eyes when he was alone. He had to absorb the warmth of the fire mindlessly for a long moment before he could question himself.

Am I sure I want to do this? Given—everything?

But the implacable resolve that had been born when Laurent raped him and that had reduced Hermione to tears the last time he was wounded, since he insisted on doing everything for himself, answered back.

I need to be in control of everything, and right now I'm not. This is an advance on control.

Harry opened his eyes and nodded sternly, though there was no one there to see him, not even the mirror that had once stood in the room. Harry had smashed all the mirrors in his house the day after Laurent went to Azkaban.

I will *be master of myself, no matter the consequences.*

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Chapter: 3

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Three—Thought-Through

"How are you, Hermione?" Harry smiled down at his friend and took Ron's place beside her bed. Ron had gone out of the room to deal with a firecall from his mother, who seemed unsatisfied unless she had an update on Hermione's condition four times a day.

Hermione gave him a tired smile and reached out to catch his hand. Harry squeezed her wrist and looked with a certain amount of awe at her belly. Hermione had been pregnant for months and he'd got used to the sight, but now she really did look—well, *swollen,* as if she was an egg that might burst if it didn't hatch at the right moment.

"Oh, not you, too," Hermione said, drawing Harry's eyes right back to her face. "Ron's looked at me like I'm a dragon who might eat him if I'm not propitiated, and you're starting. The dragon is hungry and tried and not up to eating *anyone* right now."

"I know," Harry said. "Have the Healers—"

"Oh, they say the same thing they've said for the past week." Hermione made an impatient little gesture with the hand that wasn't holding Harry's. "It's close, but not time yet. Birthing a child who's waited this long is very delicate, Mrs. Weasley. She has powerful magic, and you wouldn't want her born without it." Hermione slapped at his arm, not because she was irritated with him, Harry knew, but because she was irritated with the situation in general. "I want her born *healthy*. I don't care if she's a Squib or a witch. She's my daughter."

Harry smiled at her. "They won't let you use spells to make her be born earlier?" he asked. "Ginny's talked about doing that, when she and Neville have their first."

Hermione sighed, a sound that seemed to rattle around her throat for long minutes before it came out her nose. "I had the misfortune to be placed under the care of Healer Miriam Madder," she said. "And I'm sure she's skilled. She was probably the best Healer in Britain—twenty years ago. The thought of using spells to hasten a birth is bar*bar*ic to her." Hermione's voice rose in the middle of the word, in a way that Harry was sure was an imitation of the Healer. He snickered. "But with the second," Hermione added, "which I'm going to make sure only comes along when Madam Madder is in her grave, I'm using the spells at the beginning of the ninth month, and no one's going to stop me."

Harry nodded and rubbed her shoulder soothingly. In the drawing room, he could hear Ron going through the same patient litany with his mother that he always did. They were through the first twenty or so of the hundred questions, Harry thought.

"What's happened to you?"

Harry blinked and looked over at Hermione; the question was so much like the one he normally asked her when he came to visit that he actually thought he had asked it for a moment. Then he realized her eyes were fastened on him, and that her companionable hold of his hand had changed to a worried clutch.

Her eyes—

Her eyes had the look that Harry had come to call the *oh-no-my-best-friend-has-been-raped* look. He turned sharply away and said, "I'm fine."

"No, you're not, or you wouldn't look like that," Hermione said quietly. "Come on, Harry. What is it?" Her fingers closed down so hard Harry felt the circulation cut off, and he tugged to get his hand free. "Did they decide that they should end Laurent's sentence early after all?"

Harry shook his head. Some members of the Wizengamot had argued that Laurent didn't deserve fifty years in Azkaban, because he had been following the call of his instincts, no matter how repugnant those instincts were. The lawyer handling the case had promptly pointed out that, in that case, Laurent would have had to register with the Ministry as a dangerous magical creature and undergo regular check-ins, as happened with vampires and the werewolves on the Wolfsbane

Potion. Because he hadn't, he was considered capable of controlling himself and had to be treated like an ordinary wizard. Harry would have heard if the sentence had been challenged or changed.

"Then what?" Hermione asked.

Harry hesitated, but given the decision he had already three-quarters made, his friends would have to know about Draco sooner or later, and he would rather tell Hermione first than Ron. "Draco wants to date me," he said.

"Why is that a problem?" Hermione looked over Harry's shoulder as if she expected to see Laurent's angry shadow hovering there. "Unless…was there another curse?"

Harry winced. During the trial, the wizards scanning Harry's body had found several spells that Laurent had cast on him, including a Hopeless Fidelity Curse. Harry would have remained desperately in love with the bastard and incapable of being unfaithful to him even if Laurent had found someone else and moved on.

Hermione had blamed herself for not noticing the spells and deciding that Laurent was evil long before that particular Blazing Season. Harry had tried rational argument, yelling, and kicking the bed to make her stop thinking that way. Nothing worked.

"No," Harry said. "Nothing like that." His throat was thick again, and he had to struggle against the taste of vomit for a minute before he could tell her. Hermione waited patiently, her hand stroking his now. "Draco has Veela blood."

Hermione's face clouded at once. "Does he know about this?" she asked, not loudly. She hadn't spoken loudly when she tried to cast the Castration Curse on Laurent, either. "And he insists on forcing his way into your life anyway?"

"He didn't know," Harry said. "He proposed dating me. I told him I didn't date Veela, he asked me why, and this came out." He was shaking, he realized, and he had to stand up and walk swiftly around the room, reminding himself that he could. The instant he escaped Hermione's tight hold, he relaxed.

This is stupid. How in the world could I ever be Draco's lover? Or anyone's lover? The minute they tried to hold onto me, I would need to be free.

Harry shook his head. He hadn't decided to be Draco's lover. Accepting Draco's offer of help was a long way from that.

"Then why are you angry now?" Hermione asked. "Did he say that you *had* to give him what he wanted even after he knew the truth?"

"He said that he wanted to help me heal," Harry said. He stopped pacing and looked at Hermione, trying to gauge what she thought from the expression on her face. "That he didn't care

if we never dated, but that I wasn't over it yet, and he thought he could help me regain control of my life."

He had expected disapproval. It would be a relief, he had to admit. Despite the decision he was coming to, he had his doubts, and to have someone else express them would give him something to argue against.

Instead, Hermione's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Harry, and you're going to let him," she whispered. "I'm so glad. You deserve to have so much more than you've allowed yourself."

Harry blinked. "What the—Hermione, you know that I've done well. I've got over the memories that the Healers said I had to conquer. I can talk about *him* without flinching. I can bear for someone to touch me, and I can do my job, and I don't need to lock myself up at night anymore. Why would you think I needed more help?"

"You're doing well, Harry," Hermione said earnestly. "Better than anyone could have expected." She hesitated, then continued, "But you still don't like being held." She nodded to Harry's wrist, and he realized he was rubbing the place where she'd touched him. "You don't date anyone. It hurts my heart to see the wary way you study people."

"Oh, you want the *normal* Harry Potter back?" Harry spat, one of the random rage-storms that still swept him sometimes building like clouds in the back of his mind. His head pounded, and his fingernails drove into his palm. "The unstained one, the one who could defend himself?"

"Harry, *stop*." Hermione shook her head desperately, while tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes. "It's not any such thing!"

At the deepest level, he knew that, and Harry managed to grit his teeth and ride out the rage in silence, reminding himself all the time, *He's in prison. Let him suffer in the middle of stone walls, in a cell where he can't even spread his wings fully. Let him go through each Blazing Season without the one he most wanted.*

It wasn't enough, but then, nothing would have been enough except for the rape not to have happened in the first place, and Harry had given up on thinking that he could change the past. He raked his fingers through his hair several times, then faced Hermione and nodded.

"He could be good for you," Hermione said gently. "And yes, I never thought I would say that about Malfoy, but I've suspected for a while that he wanted you. I've seen the way he turns his head when you enter a room, the way he gets irritated when someone blocks his line of vision." She smiled. "That's the only time I've ever seen him make an abrupt movement, when he wanted to see you and had to look around someone else."

"He probably does that when someone blocks his way to his favorite wine, too," Harry muttered, but there was no spite in it.

"Are you going to try?" Hermione asked.

Harry sat down beside her again and let his hand rest on her arm. That was one of the things he loved about Hermione. She understood, in a way that other people didn't, why demands bothered him, since Laurent. She would ask questions instead and leave the choice up to Harry, something Ron still had trouble doing.

"I don't know," Harry said. "I sort of want to, but with his blood, it might cause more trouble than it's worth. Or at least set Draco up for disappointment. If he struggles along and then discovers that I can't let him have me—"

"He deserves the disappointment, if he's only doing this to have you," Hermione said firmly. "You've been as honest as you can with him. He'll take risks as well as you if you decide to start this."

Harry stared at the far wall while he thought about things. He wanted control of his life back, and Draco might be able to give him that. And he knew that he wasn't completely healed, at least not in the eyes of people who watched him, like his best friends, and saw things about himself that Harry didn't know existed.

At the same time, he thought he was doing pretty good for someone who'd been raped. He was productive at work. He still went out and laughed with his friends and didn't obsess over what had happened to him every night of the week. He could cope with the memories. He was used to being touched. Did he want to risk that—all the poise, all the calm he'd fought so hard to win—for the mere *hope* of something more?

"Do you really think I need to heal more?" he asked impulsively, turning to Hermione.

Hermione's voice was so low when she answered that it seemed to mingle with the crackle of the flames in the fireplace, and Harry had to strain his senses to hear her.

"I know that you still flinch," she said. "You're changed from what you were, and no one could blame you for that, but you hold yourself too stiffly, you look around with wide eyes in a way I hate to see you have to endure, and you're deprived of things no one had any right to take from you. Yes, I think you need healing."

"Thanks," Harry said, and then Ron came back in, flushed from his mother's endless interrogation and ready to complain, and Harry was glad for it. They had talked enough about him for one evening.

That was another objection, the last one, that niggled at him as he walked home from the Apparition point. (He didn't often Apparate close to his own house anymore, because he might carry someone inside the wards with him).

If I date Draco, or just be with him, then I'll have to talk about myself all the time. Do I want to

do that? It sounds so selfish. Draco's not a Healer, to be paid to listen to me whinge.

Well, Harry decided at last as he shut the door behind him and cast the locking spells again, he would tell Draco his worries and let him decide.

Yes, I'm going to do this.

"Welcome, dearest."

Draco smiled and leaned in to kiss his mother on the cheek. "How have you been this week, Mother?" He sat down in the chair next to her and turned it so that he could see her fully. Narcissa gave him the same mild reprimanding look she always did, as if to say that she would be there whether he gazed at her or out into the garden. Draco ignored it, the way he always did.

"Tolerably well," she said. "The house-elves burned the meal again the other night. Having them free is simply not the same as having them bound."

Draco made sympathetic clucking noises, while privately admitting that he remembered a few burned meals from the time he was a child. His parents had given up their house-elves and then hired the ones who wished to remain back as a public gesture of good-will and support for the winning side in the war. Draco doubted that it made much difference, except for adding a new subject they could complain about.

Narcissa talked on about the garden and the social visit she had received from Emily Parkinson, a litany Draco knew so well that he could nod and say the right things in all the right places. Meanwhile, Draco let his eyes study her face, something he did often now. The attack on her had occurred more than a year ago, but Draco didn't see his parents every day, and still had to let his eyes adjust each time he visited.

A long, heavy scar cut from Narcissa's chin across to the right side of her face, bending up like a curlicue around her cheekbone. It was a deep purple and the first thing you noticed about her. It would always be the first thing anyone noticed about her now, Draco knew, and that fact touched his proud mother as deeply as she would allow herself to be touched.

A thump behind him alerted him, and Draco made sure he had the proper, bland, smiling mask on his face as he stood. "Father."

Lucius, leaning heavily on the cane he had walked with as a toy for so long, reached out one long, thin arm. Draco embraced him, and told himself it was his imagination his father had lost weight since the last time he came here. The attack had scarred Narcissa and injured Lucius's right leg, but thanks to Harry's furiously roping in every Healer he could find and paying them with his own Galleons, it was certain that no lingering curses contaminated his parents' bodies. They had suffered, that was all, and there was no dispelling certain of the effects of suffering.

Of course, by that point a vindictive witch, by waiting a crucial few minutes too long, had

ensured that Narcissa would always bear a scar. But Harry had descended like an avenging angel and used a combination of bribery and threats of the Chosen One's displeasure to make sure that was the worst consequence the Malfoys would endure.

He wonders why I want him, Draco thought, remembering the way Harry's face had blazed as he stood there, yelling at a whole troop of cowed Healers. *I doubt he realizes what he did for us. Such rescues are everyday affairs for him.*

"What new project do you have in hand, Draco?" Lucius settled into his chair beside Narcissa. She reached out her hand for his, though she made the gesture seem so casual Draco thought it would have fooled most strangers. Lucius touched her hand with the same apparent lack of importance and studied his son critically. "I know that you have something going forwards. Nothing else lends such brilliance to your eyes. Or to your smirk," he added dryly.

"I think I've met someone I could trust to stay with me," Draco said carefully, "someone I could fall in love with."

He didn't appreciate the look his parents exchanged then. *Surely they should remember that it was Pansy who decided that she didn't want me, not the other way around.*

"An eligible match, we hope, Draco," Lucius said, his voice barely a murmur.

"We wish for your happiness first," Narcissa said, "always. But an eligible match will ultimately be necessary to satisfy you. Remember that you are human as well as Veela, and both have certain standards."

"I think he's going to last because I know him," Draco said. "But you might not think the same thing. And he might not, for all I know."

"He?" Lucius pitched his voice low, but Draco could still hear the relief. Evidently Lucius could think of more unsuitable female candidates than male ones. "Who is he, Draco? Enough with the mystery."

I barely had a chance to keep the truth from them, Draco thought, but it was the kind of objection he rarely made anymore, when he remembered how close he had come to not being able to exchange words with his parents at all. "It's Harry."

No matter how many men they might have known of that name—and there were not many—the tone in his voice would have told them the truth, Draco thought. There were so few people he spoke of like that. After a single startled flicker of glances, his father leaned forwards and said, "Eligible, indeed. We never hoped that you would aim so high, Draco."

"Because you didn't trust my taste, after Pansy." Draco rubbed the arm of the chair, though he would have liked to tear it to splinters. Indulging his Veela features was hard on the furniture as well as Harry's patience.

"Well, yes," his mother said tranquilly, as if she didn't know why Draco would find it hard to accuse himself of a lapse of taste there. "And we had reason. But Potter…he must have many suitors after him, but he hasn't chosen a one in the past two years. Are you sure that he's the right one for you, Draco?"

"He hasn't *agreed* to date me yet," Draco said. "And it turns out that he doesn't like a lover who has Veela blood." That was as close as he would come to revealing Harry's secret without his permission.

"Ridiculous," said Lucius at once. Draco envied the hand gesture he used to dismiss the whole complication of Harry's rape and fear of Veela, tossing it over his shoulder as if it was a handful of dust. "Veela make the best lovers, and they can protect their chosen ones against pain, fear, and suffering. Why should Potter hold back?"

"He's used to taking care of himself, to being the hero." And that was true, Draco told himself, and still not a betrayal. The trouble was, he hadn't thought of any comfortable lie to prepare the way; he had assumed that he would get either a rejection, in which case he would never mention to his parents that he had asked Harry to date him, or an acceptance, in which case he wouldn't *need* to hide anything.

"Tell him that heroes still need care," said Narcissa, with a private, soft smile that Draco knew he couldn't fully understand in his father's direction. Draco knew Lucius was the reason that his mother hadn't been hurt worse than she had in the attack on them—and the reason that his father limped—but he hadn't been able to draw all the details from them even in all the time since it happened. "Of course, Potter has never been married, or had a close family," his mother continued thoughtfully. "That will make it worse."

"I know," Draco said, grateful to seize this new subject of conversation. "Right now, I'm waiting for him to finish making up his mind."

"Why aren't you out there persuading him?" Lucius leaned in, eyes so bright with disbelief that Draco flushed and looked away.

How can I make them understand?

"Draco probably still has doubts himself," Narcissa said, frankly saving him. "Remember, Lucius, we do not manifest the Veela traits in the same way. Draco can have anyone he wants, of course, but he has chosen Potter. If he feels that he is truly a good choice, then he need not hurry himself. He can afford to wait."

Draco nodded enthusiastically. His parents both had traces of Veela blood from intermarriages so long ago that they no longer showed the signs automatically, the way that someone like Fleur Delacour or the other Veela girls of Beauxbatons had. Something about their combination of blood had made Draco show more traits, but again not as many as a full Veela. There was a part

at which chasing down fractions of heritage became unimportant even for pure-bloods, however, so Draco called himself "Veela" and had done with it.

For Harry's sake, he would have wished to be different.

And then he sat up and sucked in a deep breath. *No, not really. I could wish that my blood wasn't such a barrier between us, but I'm proud of what I am. If Harry doesn't choose me, I'll eventually find someone else. I'm not going to be dependent on his good opinion.*

And if Harry could accept Draco's help and heal somewhat, he might be as grateful for Draco's blood as Draco was himself. The wings could soothe Harry, if he could only adapt to the idea of another person sharing the responsibility for protecting him. The croon could give him dreamless sleep. Draco's embrace could heighten his sexual pleasure to the point that he would forget himself, the bad memories, and the world around him.

Laurent probably did the same thing to him.

Draco shifted jealously at the reminder of that, and hoped that he wouldn't always have to think about Harry's Veela rapist. Harry didn't seem inclined to mention him often, fortunately.

"Draco?"

Lucius spoke as if he had missed the most important part of the conversation. Draco sat up, radiating alertness, and his father and mother exchanged another glance before Lucius continued. "When you feel comfortable, bring Potter to the Manor. We would like to meet him. And he should eat at least one meal in truly luxurious surroundings, which your home could not provide."

Draco rolled his eyes, not caring that his parents saw and would see it as a breach of good manners. He had moved out of the Manor because he needed his own place, but he visited as much as he could, and his house was comfortable enough. He didn't need all the sprawling space that his parents did. He didn't yet have custody of the Manor heirlooms or house-elves. "Yes, Father. I will."

If he agrees, Draco thought when he took his leave. *If he does.*

Waiting for him at home was a brilliant white owl that shifted in place when it saw Draco and glared as if it knew about his hidden wings and that they were more beautiful than its own. Draco smiled soothingly at it and took the letter it bore.

Yes, it said, in Harry's handwriting.

Draco was glad he was alone then. It would have been embarrassing for someone else to see his dance around the kitchen with his wings out and the trill breaking forth from his throat, and it *did* send the owl fleeing out the window with a reproachful hoot.

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Chapter: 4

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Four—Met

"Harry? Where are you going?" Ron sounded half-injured, and Harry knew why. It was the first day he'd been back to work in a week, since he'd reluctantly acknowledged that Hermione could give him *notice* when the baby was coming and didn't need him to hover around her bedside twenty-four hours a day. He'd assumed Harry would come out with him to a pub and they would get into a friendly argument over whatever philosophical topic Hermione had assigned him to think about this week.

"I've got someone to meet," Harry said, with a careless little shrug. He still hadn't told Ron about Draco, partially because Ron was more protective of him than even Hermione, but more because he had no idea what he was supposed to call this—thing between him and Draco. It wasn't a date, because Harry wouldn't let it be. Nor was it a therapy session or a simple night out with a friend, but it was closer to those things, Harry thought.

"You *do*?"

The tone in Ron's voice was utterly unexpected. Harry blinked at him. His friend was leaning towards him with brilliant eyes and cheeks that had actually flushed. Harry frowned, and then understood.

"*No*." He said it sharply, because the alternative was screaming the words of rejection like a banshee. "Nothing like that, Ron. Not a date."

Ron blinked in turn and sat down heavily behind the desk. There was silence between them for a minute, while Ron played with his quill and Harry kept his eyes stubbornly averted.

There was no reason to stand here and feel guilty, Harry argued with himself. It wasn't as though Ron had taken any particular interest in Harry's dates when Harry was still dating, or as though Harry was accountable to him for his love life. Ron's only stipulation was that he didn't want to hear any details of Harry's buggering, and that Harry was to tell him if he *ever* thought about dating one of Ron's brothers, so Ron would have time to get out of the room and find a basin.

But he felt guilty anyway, or at least enough to stand there, compelled to listen to what he knew Ron was about to say.

"It's been two years, mate." Ron's voice was gentle. "Almost three." Harry shuddered; he didn't need the reminder that the Blazing Season was only a few months away. "I think you should try."

"I don't *want* to try." Harry folded his arms and glared back at Ron. "I'm the only one who can say when I'm ready to have sex again, and trying to rush me is really, really not the answer." *And there's no reason for you to care, anyway, not about that one particular thing,* he added in the back of his mind. *Why do you care?* "I've tried so hard on everything else. Leave me alone about this."

Ron winced and lowered the hand that he'd lifted as if he wanted to reach towards Harry. "I know that." His voice was low. "I'm sorry, mate. But I think—you deserve to have everything. That's all."

And that's why he cares, Harry reminded himself, as he exhaled shakily. "I know," he said. "I *do* know, Ron, really," he repeated with a weak smile, when Ron looked at him doubtfully. "I just—there's no way that I can hurry this, and having other people tell me that I should feels like everyone just cares that I have sex, not who with or if I want to wait longer."

Ron nodded earnestly. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "I didn't mean that. But when I think about how eager to go on dates you used to be—"

"Things change." Harry kept his voice as light as he could. He knew that his friends didn't really want the "normal" Harry back, that they weren't criticizing him when they reflected on the way it used to be, but damn it, he felt as if they were, and there was no point discussing the subject when he couldn't be rational about it. "Anyway. I'm meeting this person, and there's not going to be a date involved. All right?"

Ron tilted his head in acceptance. "Sure. Who is it?"

Harry grinned then, taking some delight in saying, "Draco," and slipping out of the office before Ron could react one way or the other.

Draco glanced around with a baffled expression. He had thought that Harry might want to meet in his own home, or (but this was a dream and Draco hadn't spent much time indulging it) in Draco's. His second choice would have been Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade, big and bustling places where they would have plenty to do and no chance to talk intimately, the way Harry seemed to want to avoid doing.

But a Muggle park? More, a small Muggle park with unkempt, shaggy shrubs and leafless trees and dark, still ponds that looked like people committed suicide in them every day of the week?

Sometimes Draco thought he would never understand Harry.

But that's one of the reasons I'm here, he reminded himself, his hands reaching out automatically

when he saw Harry striding towards him through the trees.

Draco managed to make sure his arms fell back to his sides by the time Harry actually reached him. A Veela would have the right to embrace its partner, but he didn't have that right, not yet.

It was unexpectedly frustrating. Draco had never been in a situation where he had assumed that his chosen would not make the decision to choose Draco back. He had expected rejection at the beginning of the process, not in the middle.

It made him wince as though lactic acid had built up in his muscles, not to exercise his instincts. But he had accepted this, and he would give up only if the situation became really intolerable, rather than uncomfortable.

"Draco." Harry gave him the same kind of brisk smile he had used when Draco first came to him for help. "Thanks for agreeing to come here."

"Why here?" Draco asked before he could help himself. He had promised that he would go slowly, do what Harry needed, and not hurry him. But the park seemed to press more and more in on him the more he thought about it. There wasn't a single person about, at least not in direct line of sight. Draco thought he could hear dogs barking beyond the trees, but it was strangely muffled and quiet.

"I like it here," Harry said, pacing across the small clearing where Draco had stood, towards one of the paths that ran under the trees. Draco reluctantly followed him, coming up to walk by his side when he saw Harry's shoulders tense. Sure enough, Harry relaxed the minute he could see him. "There's privacy, in a way that there's not in most wizarding locations," Harry continued meditatively. "And, even better, no one can put eavesdropping spells on a place like this, with so many trees and so much natural magic to disrupt them."

"Natural magic?" Draco stared in several directions. He hadn't sensed any, but now that he thought about it, the foreboding feeling might well come from that. Ancient magic, born from the waters and the wild, didn't always play well with wizards.

Harry nodded, giving him the sort of half-smile that Draco wanted to see all the time. "Yeah. We had a suspect that ran here one day, apparently because he'd discovered it and assumed that it could protect him. It couldn't, but we *did* discover where it came from." Harry suddenly stooped at the foot of a tree that looked no different from any other to Draco and pulled back a pad of what Draco would have thought was ordinary grass and walked past without a second glance. "Here."

Draco stared, his mouth falling open. There were three stones piled on top of each other, in a way that *could* have been accidental but more than likely wasn't—especially considering the rune carved into the top stone.

"Danger," Draco whispered. Harry cocked an eyebrow, and Draco cleared his throat. "The rune

says danger."

Harry nodded and stood up. "We don't know what this was, though Hermione suspected that it might be the cairn over the last of a race of extinct magical beings when we told her about it. Wizards *definitely* carved that rune." He kicked the moss and grass back over the cairn, with seemingly casual movements that nevertheless hid it well. "The main feature of it is that it's meant to be unchanging. No matter what happens around it, Muggle cities or wizarding wars, it'll always be here."

He took a deep breath and looked over at Draco. "I wanted to show you that so you'll understand what I'm talking about when I say that's one of my ideals. Not to change, not to be—less than I am."

Draco licked his lips. He hated to disagree with Harry during one of their first intimate conversations, but he wouldn't be less than he was, either. "Everything changes, Harry."

"I said it was an ideal, didn't I?" Harry laughed, a light sound that made Draco ache.

Fuck, he hadn't realized how hard this would be. A Veela's magical powers were meant to defend the Veela, yes, but they were also meant to serve, protect, and defend the chosen one, one of the reasons that Veela were less tightly-regulated by the Ministry than other magical beings.

And to possess. Draco wanted to be the one who caused all Harry's laughter, who caused all his moans, who held and cherished and guided him.

And that wasn't going to be possible. Not for a long time.

"Realizing how hard it will be?"

Draco blinked and looked up. Harry had turned to face him, his face so serious that Draco automatically backed up a step. Harry had looked at him that way before shortly after he had driven away someone intent on attacking Draco.

"It is," Harry said, and there was sympathy like fire in his voice, which warmed Draco and made him think uneasily about burning at the same time. "It's going to be *very* hard. I'll say things you can't understand sometimes, and you'll get sick of the explanations. I'll have to talk about myself for months on end, and that'll make *me* upset and unreasonable. You'll have to resist these instincts that I—I know you have, because of my experience with *him*." He paused, catching his breath, though he hadn't spoken long enough to be out of it. "Are you sure that you want to do this?"

Draco watched him steadily for some minutes. Then he nodded.

Harry was the one to step away this time. He tried to pretend it was only about shifting his weight, but Draco knew better. "*Why*? It can hurt you as much as me—"

"Because I feel bound to you," Draco whispered. "There's no way that I can walk away now. *No* way. I don't want to suffer through the agonies that you're describing, no, but I would suffer through much worse than that to help you."

Harry looked at him, his eyes shadowed. *How can he go through so much suffering and still be so beautiful?* Draco wondered. "What if you don't gain back enough to make up for your trouble, though? That's what I'm worried about."

"You help other people, including my parents," Draco said. "Do you ever feel as if you've done too much work for too little reward?"

Harry blurted out, "No!" When Draco raised his eyebrows, he flushed and turned away, kicking at the grass and scratching the back of his neck. "It's just what I do," he mumbled. "If I had thought I'd ever get tired of it or unable to do it, I wouldn't have tried to become an Auror."

"And you can maintain that spirit despite everything that's happened to you," Draco said, moving slowly nearer so that Harry would have plenty of time to hear him coming. Harry tensed, but didn't look around. Draco wasn't sure what that meant. "That's one of the things I could fall in love with you for, one of the things I *want* to fall in love with you for. Yes, you need healing, but you've accomplished so much already. You haven't made your whole life one of fear or resentment or nursing your wounds. I admire that."

He let his hand rest, open-palmed, on Harry's back, and waited.

Harry stiffened his shoulders and practically pranced away from Draco's touch before he could calm himself. Then he shut his eyes and shook his head. His flush had turned into a heat that must make his cheeks look like Ron's when he was caught stuffing his foot in his mouth yet again.

He'd been able to let Draco touch him only a month ago, when he didn't have to think about dating him. Yes, he'd still been poised on an edge of quivering tension, because he knew that Draco was a Veela and *could* use the control of the allure, but at the time he hadn't thought Draco would have any motive to do so.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Draco sighed. "Is there anything else that you want to do in this park, or could we go somewhere more cheerful?" he asked.

Harry turned around again in sheer surprise, and then smiled. He had forgotten how the brooding magic of the cairn would cause other people to feel. He liked it because he understood, here, exactly where the danger was coming from, and he didn't have to worry about unexplained Dark magic.

"Yes, if you want," he said. *As long as I know where we're going in advance,* he didn't say. He was all right with giving up control in this one instance because he had accompanied his friends to shops and other public places in the last few years. "What were you thinking of doing?"

Draco glanced at him with dark, liquid eyes, and Harry winced. He really should have thought better before he phrased his question that way, because of course he knew exactly what Draco was thinking of. But an apology would make it more awkward still, so he lifted his eyebrows and waited.

"I thought a pub," Draco said. "But I remember what you said about liking to cook your own food."

Harry tilted his head. "I don't mind beer I didn't make." After two years of experimenting with that, he *still* hadn't managed to master the spells or the recipe that would make butterbeer he'd concocted on his own taste good, never mind stronger drinks. "As long as you don't mind me testing it with every spell in the known universe."

Draco looked at the ground as if he wanted to hide the sorrow in his eyes, then nodded and extended his arm. "Side-Along Apparition?"

It was a test and a challenge. Harry knew he could bear it long enough for a Side-Along, as he had borne Hermione's hold on his wrist the last time he visited her. He nodded shortly and moved closer to Draco, although his mind spun and a long line of sweat broke out down his back.

Laurent had liked to drag him about, Side-Along Apparate him and stand with his hand on Harry's back or shoulder or arm in public. It had taken Harry a long time, thinking things over in the after, *to realize that even that was a manifestation of Laurent's possessiveness, a way of saying that Harry was his.*

He gritted his teeth and stood still as Draco draped his arm over Harry's shoulder, drawing him in. Draco's breath touched his neck. He sighed, and Harry wondered if he was breathing in Harry's scent, something he knew Veela liked to do.

His stomach spun to join his mind. But Harry had had a lot of practice in controlling this particular reaction, since Hermione, in particular, seemed to need to cling to him every so often. He didn't vomit as they Apparated and arrived outside the Leaky Cauldron, although there was no way that he would be able to eat anything.

Draco glanced at him with a triumphant smile, which faded, probably because he'd seen the expression on Harry's face. "Fuck," he muttered. "Will it always be this hard?"

"I hope not," Harry answered, lifting his head and trying to step away. Draco's arm tightened automatically, but Harry gave him a level glance, and Draco let him go with a little hiss. "I hope it'll get better," Harry added, and shook his head when he heard the despair in his voice. "I *do*."

Draco paused as if he wanted to say something more, then bowed his head and gestured Harry into the pub. Harry smiled at him. Not even Ron and Hermione always remembered that he liked to go into a pub first so that he could choose a table.

Draco stared at him. "For a smile like that," he said, in a murmur that Harry might have been meant to hear and might not have been, "I'd do a lot more than restrain myself for a while."

Harry felt his cheeks flush, but this time, it wasn't as a prelude to vomiting or because he was upset that someone had seen how hard he was still struggling. Draco had spoken the words as a compliment, and Harry could accept them that way.

Are things changing already? he asked himself hopefully while he took a table from which he could see the door and Draco went up to the bar to order. Then he shook his head while he cast a number of spells around the table that would show him if someone had spilled poison or done Dark magic there lately, as well as alarms that would warn him when anyone approached. *I don't think it can happen that fast.*

He still found it easier than he thought he should have to take his drink from Draco, and although he had to test it, Draco sat and watched him with a patient expression, not even swinging his leg the way that Ron sometimes did when this happened. Harry finally took a drink of the warm butterbeer and leaned back against his chair, as contented as he could remember being in a public place since *that* had happened.

"Will you tell me what you need?" Draco asked.

Harry blinked at him. "Control. I've told you that."

Draco shook his head. He was tracing one finger up and down the side of his own bottle of Firewhisky. "More than that. What does it *mean*? I know that you don't like to be held close. Is that something you want to work on? Is it another expression of the desire for control? What else do you need or what else can't you do because of this?"

Harry found himself relaxing even more, which was odd. Still, he'd listed these things before, for Ron and Hermione. That made it easier to tell them to Draco than if he'd had to come up with the list from scratch.

"It's hard for me to tolerate someone holding me close, yeah," he said. "I have to make my own food. I'm very cautious about who I invite into my house, and my wards are a lot stronger than they used to be." He gestured to the door, and Draco turned around to stare at it before he realized what Harry was doing. "I have to sit where I can see the door. I tend to flinch a lot more at loud noises and unexpected touches than I used to." He had to smirk a bit. "Some of the blokes in the Department thought that was—funny, for a while. They competed to see who could prank me and get me to jump the highest. But it stopped the first time I turned some of them into mice and brought Crookshanks in to work."

"Crookshanks?" Draco echoed blankly, staring at him in fascination.

"Hermione's cat," Harry said, and then rolled his eyes and snorted. "Well, *she* claims cat. Ron and I are pretty sure he's part Kneazle. Anyway. So I don't like pranks. I don't like it when people try to heal my injuries. I can do that myself, thanks."

Draco's fingers tightened on the side of his bottle of Firewhisky, but he gave a short nod.

Harry tapped his butterbeer. "No drink stronger than this for me. It might make me start losing track of where I am. Similarly, unexpected potions forced down my throat are a *bad* idea, as a Dark wizard last year found out."

"What happened to him?" Draco asked, with a faint smile that showed he expected another amusing story.

"They don't know exactly," Harry answered simply, meeting his gaze. "They never did find the body, you see."

Draco swallowed, his face turning pale. "I *see*," he said. "And no sex?"

"No sex." Harry narrowed his eyes, another memory coming to him. He didn't know if this applied simply to Laurent or to other Veela as well, but he would have to warn Draco just in case he was still around when the Blazing Season started. "Another thing. I can't stand it anymore when people try to act possessive of me, or claim that I belong to them. *Don't do that.*"

Draco's mouth fell open slightly. He stared at Harry with wide eyes, and there was a click in the back of his throat when he tried to speak. Harry sat watching him, hands clasped around his bottle, and said nothing. If this was going to be a deal-breaker for Draco, better they know now so that he could leave.

On the surface, Harry didn't want him to go. He *did* want control of his life. He *did* want to heal completely. But in the depths of his being, he had to admit that it would be easier. He wasn't looking forwards to the inevitable moment when Draco lost control.

And he didn't like the idea of someone trying to take care of him when he wanted, *needed*, to take care of them instead.

Draco had no idea what to say. Possessiveness was perhaps the core of a Veela's relationship with their chosen one. They were driven to protect and do all they could for that other being out of the sense of belonging.

He had known that Harry wouldn't like it. He had known that *intellectually.* But what it really meant hadn't come home to him until now.

Draco lowered his eyes to his fingers, while Harry watched him steadily. But Draco's hands gave him no help, as they simply writhed together and then lay there, silent. So he started listing to himself all the things that he wouldn't be able to do instead.

Not call Harry "mine."

Not take over the little, simple, everyday chores that I'd like to do to spare him as much bother as possible.

Not hold him still and sniff him when I need to, to make sure that he hasn't been with anyone else.

All of those were things an ordinary human might have done. Draco had resigned himself to not using his wings or the croon or the trill or the experience of flight that he could give a partner's mind. But all of these things, too…

"Yeah, it's hard," Harry said, his voice soft with compassion. "That's why I need to know now if you're serious about this."

Draco looked up. Harry was leaning towards him, eyes bright and gentle, the way he had been the day Draco had first come to his office and Harry had thought someone had hurt him. This role was the easier for him to assume, doubtless—the role of caretaker. Draco was sure that Harry's tendencies before the rape had melded with what had happened during it to make him what he was now.

"I can bear it if *you're* serious about it, too," he said, mouth dry.

Harry cocked his head, a line forming between his brows. "What do you mean?"

"If you try to learn to get closer to me," Draco said. "If you work on putting up with possessive talk and gestures and someone touching you. If you do your best to let someone take care of you when you need it."

Harry frowned and looked away. "Some of that doesn't *have* to happen," he muttered.

"Yes," Draco snapped, leaning forwards. "It does. For a Veela, it does. I'm not going to think you're serious unless you show me that you're serious about *all* of it. This is going to be hard enough for me. I need to know that you're not taking the easy way out."

For endless moments, Harry played with his butterbeer and didn't respond. Then he glanced up, and Draco thought his eyes looked the way they did when he'd gone to face the Dark Lord.

"Yeah," Harry said. His voice was a dry whistle of air. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Yeah, I'm game. I promise."

Draco reached out and took his hand, running his thumb gently across the back of Harry's knuckles, unable to do anything else just then.

Harry stared at his fingers. Draco gave him one more squeeze, and let go.

Slowly. It will have to be slowly.

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Chapter: 5

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Five—Challenged

Laurent bent down and bit his ear. Harry whimpered and stretched his neck. There was a seething chaos in the back of his mind, which wasn't unusual when Laurent was on top of him like this, except he still didn't know why it happened. Laurent was all that was good and fulfilling in the world, and he had a perfect right to do this to Harry if he wanted.

"*Mine," Laurent said. "Always wanted to have you, never could, and now you're* mine*, and no one else can have you."*

"*I don't want anyone else," Harry panted, and spread his legs so that he could wrap them more securely around Laurent's waist. "Will you* move *already?"*

Laurent laughed and heaved forwards, thrusting, giving him what he wanted, what he always wanted. And all the time, his hair shone, and his eyes, and the wings lifted and then descended, wrapping around Harry's torso in a way that made him shiver with delight. No one could touch him when he was this way, no one could harm him.

Harry opened his eyes. The sheen of sweat on his forehead and the bile on his tongue made him dizzy for some moments, until he sat up, took his wand, and cast a charm that dried the sweat and Vanished it. Then there was only the bile to deal with.

He cared more about other people not having me than about having me himself.

Harry leaped to his feet. His body was crazy with energy, and he would do something regrettable if he didn't release it soon.

His bedroom had multiple wards around it, and at least seven of them were specifically designed to conceal a small room that Harry had built as an addition not long after the Wizengamot

sentenced Laurent. At least seven; Harry had layered and rewrapped them so many times that he was no longer sure how many there were. The point was, no one knew about that room except him, and now the door opened to his touch.

The room was circular and made of bare stone, and when Harry stepped inside it and the door shut behind him, it appeared to have no way out. The walls groaned with the force of the magic that powered them.

Harry whirled and lashed out.

The magic screamed around his body, leaping from his core to the power in the walls as lightning leaped from sky to ground. More magic came back as streams of clear, coruscating light, which snapped out like whips and flayed the top layer of stone from the walls. Harry spun again, and the power trailed him, a buzzing strength great enough to lift his feet a few inches from the floor.

Harry focused on one particular portion of wall under the ceiling, imagined that it was Laurent's face, and lifted a hand.

No need to aim his wand, not in this room that was built to both contain and channel his magic, making him more powerful and holding him harmless to anyone outside it. The stone exploded, the individual bits of it traveling through a fire so fierce that they vaporized long before they touched the floor.

Harry screamed, mindlessly. He heard the sound and then put it from his mind, just like he did the tingling air under his feet and the blinding, nonexistent colors the light created. There was anger, and he had to get it *out* of him, just as he'd had to get *Laurent* out of him.

He had known enough about rape cases, since he'd worked as an Auror, not to bathe until after he had taken Laurent in and provided evidence. But then he had come home and scraped and scraped and scraped with soap and water. It lasted until his hole bled, and that hadn't been enough. He had ended up under the shower, arms wrapped around his head, crying out his rage in waves of magic that had nearly destroyed his house.

With the room, that wouldn't happen. And if Ron or Hermione or someone else felt compelled to come and check on him, they wouldn't be hurt.

Harry flung himself through the shattered remnants of his anger, his pride, his fear, his pain, until there was nothing left. Instead, a great, blank, white peace fell over him, a peace the color of—

The color of a Veela's wings.

Harry smiled through bloodied lips at the irony, and because he could smile and not immediately need to destroy something, he knew this particular fit was over. He climbed to his feet, wincing as his hipbones and tailbone ached. He had probably hit them when he was soaring from one wall to another, but he couldn't remember the individual knocks. Sometimes he had dreams he

thought were memories of these bouts, much less clear than the dreams about Laurent.

Will I do the same thing with Draco? I don't want to hurt him.

Harry hesitated, but ultimately shook his head and stepped back into his bedroom, sealing the room up behind again. Hermione would be worried if she knew about it. Ron might understand, but he would also feel compelled to tell Hermione. Harry thought a lot of problems were avoided if they just didn't know.

I think I can get out of range before I hurt him like that. I'll never remain near him if rage like that builds up.

Besides, if that happens, then we've probably already fucked up things beyond repair.

Harry lay down gingerly in the bed again and closed his eyes. He had a meeting with Draco tomorrow at lunch. The more rested he was, the calmer he'd be.

"Malfoy."

Draco tightened his shoulders, but didn't look around as he strode through the corridors towards Harry's office. He didn't recognize the voice, which probably meant that this was another of the minor Ministry flunkies convinced that the Malfoys had hurt him "personally" in the war and that he "needed" revenge. Draco had no time to spare for such idiots.

"I'm *talking* to you, Malfoy."

Someone seized his shoulder and tried to slam him into the wall. Draco sidestepped gracefully and yanked himself free. He would have liked to spread his wings, but he didn't advertise the fact that he was Veela.

The enhanced strength his heritage gave him often came in useful, though.

The man facing him wore the robes of an Auror, but he had a wet-behind-the-ears, unfinished look that Draco had learned to associate with trainees. Probably someone who had been at Hogwarts with him and hadn't learned that most people considered the war over now, Draco thought. He curled his lip, ran his gaze quickly up and down the bloke's body—scrawny legs, the beginnings of a gut, sandy-blond hair, a pouting mouth—and said with a frozen distance that only his father did better, "Do I know you?"

The man flushed and took a step closer. "My name is Elton Lewis," he said. "And yeah, you *should* know me."

"Lewis."

Draco snapped his mouth shut at that tone of voice, and looked over his shoulder. Harry had

come out of his office.

God. All the spit in Draco's mouth dried up. Harry looked like a stalking predator. He had one hand in his robe pocket, where Draco knew he often kept his wand, and a slight smile on his face, which you could perhaps have considered friendly if you came from an alternate universe—or if you had been dropped on your head as often as a child as Lewis undoubtedly was.

The menace he exuded didn't come from the position of his hand or his smile. It had to do with the hunch of his shoulders, the way his leg muscles were tensed as if to shift his weight suddenly and unpredictably, the savage eagerness in his eyes.

Draco curled his fingers into his palm and fought for composure, knowing he would make the situation worse if he said something. He wanted Harry so fiercely at this moment. To have the predator tamed, to feel that lion-like weight leaning trustingly against him—

Maybe I can even explain it to him that way.

"We've been over this, Lewis," Harry said in a soft, smooth voice that made Draco's back teeth tingle with the urge to bite. "The Malfoys had nothing to do with the death of your grandmother. That was Yaxley, and he was sentenced to Azkaban two years ago."

"You're going to tell me they didn't do something to help? Everyone knows that those Death Eaters planned something together. They couldn't go to the bathroom without help!"

Draco watched in fascination. Lewis's words were belligerent, and if Draco had only heard them without seeing the expression on his face, he would have expected a charge in the next moment, and the beginnings of a duel.

In fact, and in person, Lewis was flattening his hands to his sides and shrinking away from Harry. His eyes were fastened with particular dread on Harry's wand, and when Harry's pocket twitched a bit as if he would pull it out, Lewis actually hid his eyes and turned, preparing to run away.

Harry laughed, a sound rich in scorn that Draco hadn't known he could make. "If you have nothing new to say—especially if you have nothing new to say that directly contradicts Yaxley's and Malfoy's testimony under Veritaserum—then it might be best if you leave."

Lewis retreated, giving Harry terrified looks over his shoulder all the while. Harry watched him carefully, in the way that Draco thought he might regard any threat, but without particular fear. When the other bloke was around the corner, he rolled his eyes, snorted, and turned to face Draco.

"Forgive me for not checking right away," he said softly, reaching out and laying his hand on Draco's shoulder. "But it looked as if you weren't hurt, so I didn't want to show Lewis any sign

that I thought he *could* injure you. Now. Did he hurt you?"

Draco shook his head. His throat was still dry. His hand drifted out, as soft as thistledown and blown by as inevitable a wind, and settled against Harry's temple.

Harry's eyes darted to the side, but he didn't move immediately. He said, as if nothing had happened and Draco wasn't touching him, "Good. I'm sorry about that," he added, moving to the side so that Draco had no choice but to drop his arm. "Lewis has never forgiven the Wizengamot for exonerating you or your family; he thinks that *all* Death Eaters should have been put in Azkaban. And he's never forgiven me for standing up for you. I 'betrayed the right side of the war,' to hear him talk." Harry rolled his eyes. "Of course, if you listen to him at all, you wouldn't know the war wasn't still happening."

"I feel the same way about you," Draco said.

Harry blinked. "What? That the war is still happening?" He smiled suddenly, and Draco's throat grew thick with something strangely like desperation. "Or that you've never forgiven me for standing up for you?"

"Neither," said Draco. "I wasn't talking about Lewis. I was talking about the way you defended me."

"What about it?" Harry gave him a nonplussed look.

That's it. That's what I want to make him see I feel. Draco leaned forwards insistently. "Did you *think* before you came to my rescue? Is there any force on earth that would have held you away if you wanted to do it?"

"No," Harry said, without hesitation.

Draco nodded. He was smiling, and could only hope that he didn't look an idiot. He reached out, again giving Harry plenty of time to see that his hand was coming, and stroked Harry's cheek. Even the dry skin Draco felt here and there was only more kindling for his desire, more fodder for his fantasies.

"That's the way I think about protecting you and cherishing you," Draco said. "The way that all Veela think about it, if they're healthy." He spoke those last words quickly, because a flicker in Harry's eyes said he was about to mention Laurent. "Automatic. Instinctual. Something that you couldn't *not* do without violating the deepest parts of your nature."

Harry closed his eyes and didn't reply for some moments. Then he murmured, "I thought—I didn't think about it that way. Maybe because Laurent acted as though he was conferring some great favor on me if he spoke nicely about me or argued on my behalf in front of someone else." A shudder rippled through Harry's body that seemed to bow his spine.

If he hadn't known how adamant Harry was on the subject, Draco would have asked again whether he couldn't hurt Laurent. As it was, he had to clench his teeth and make sure the rage wouldn't explode out of him in the form of claws or something else. "He was a bastard," Draco finally said, when he could sound like a normal human being. "A Veela gives of himself because that's what we *do*."

Harry was watching him when Draco looked up again—probably more closely than Draco thought he was, because he would be attuned to the minor signs of the body that Aurors received training to read. "You're a Veela the way I'm an Auror," Harry said, as if to test the concept.

Draco gave him a quick smile. "Not *exactly* the same, of course. Mine's in the blood, and yours in the training. But I think we meet in the soul."

Harry caught his breath, and he shook his head a little. Then he turned towards his office and said in a rush, "Do you mind if we eat in my office today? I need to think about this, and I wouldn't be—at my best if we were out in public."

"I was sure we would eat here anyway," Draco confessed as he followed Harry into the small room. Weasley wasn't there, thank Merlin. Draco thought Harry had probably told his friends the truth about Draco and what he wanted by now, but Draco would still like to put off a tiresome confrontation as long as possible. "Since you need to make your own food."

Harry gave him a shining, enigmatic look, the origin of which Draco wasn't sure about, and pulled out a box from beneath his desk that he quickly enlarged. "I had planned on a picnic," he said. "But with my food, yes." He opened the trunk and gave Draco a plate—pewter, to Draco's surprise, not paper—and then added sandwiches and a cup that he filled with hot chocolate from a flask.

Draco bit tentatively into the first sandwich, not knowing what to expect. His eyes rolled back in his head as he tasted the mingling of fresh lettuce and tomato, soft chicken, and some kind of sauce that he didn't know.

"You made this?" he demanded, when he had eaten half the sandwich and stopped long enough to realize that Harry was watching him in amusement. "I would have said that it was professional quality if I didn't know better."

Harry flushed and ducked his head. "It's just a sandwich," he muttered. He had one of his own, Draco was glad to see. Even if he didn't dare show it openly yet, he felt entitled to worry about whether Harry ate and slept enough and was otherwise in good physical health. "Not something complicated like I'm sure your house-elves make for you."

Draco pointed the crust at him. "There's still an art to a good sandwich, and some people never master it."

Harry shrugged. "Well, I had more incentive than most, didn't I?" And the flush faded, and he

looked half-wary again, half-grim, as he began to eat, watching Draco all the while.

Draco took a few bites before he tried to answer. "If someone had asked me what you would do if necessity obliged you to," he finally said, "I would never have thought that you would make something *this* good. I'd have thought you'd content yourself with a few thrown-together pieces of stale bread and old cheese."

Harry blinked at him.

"You're better than I thought you'd be," Draco whispered. "Not better in the sense of healed, but skilled and proud and confident."

Harry turned his head slowly to the side, as if looking at Draco from a new angle would offer him the solution to the mystery. "But I've always tried to be that," he said. "It's not something that changed with—Laurent."

Draco smiled, and wished he dared to reach out and stroke his fingers over Harry's wrist. He could feel the soft skin there in imagination, the dazzled flutter of the blood, and so the imagination would have to do for now. He was proud of Harry for speaking Laurent's name, instead of avoiding it with that mixture of dread and awe that sounded too much like reverence. "Then say that I'm seeing it for the first time," he said. "I was hardly the best audience in school."

Harry gave him a wry glance. "If you could go back in time and tell your younger self that you'd be here someday, eating lunch with me in a friendly fashion, he'd be horrified." He bit into the sandwich. Draco held his breath until he caught a flicker of enjoyment across Harry's face. He wouldn't have wanted to miss it.

"I don't think so," Draco murmured, when he had time to think about Harry's statement. "I always wanted you, in the same way that you always wanted to be skilled."

"As a friend," Harry said. His color dimmed, the smile fading from his lips. "It's different now."

"Not *that* different," Draco said. He would fight as hard as he could to keep Harry from dwelling on doubt and fear, or regretting his decision to let Draco eat lunch with him. "It was a clutching desire then, an insistence that I had to keep you with me or you would vanish, and it's much the same thing now."

Harry chuckled. His eyes brightened and he asked around a mouthful of sandwich, "Is it all right if we discuss this? I don't want to distress you if reliving those memories is painful to you."

"Not nearly so painful as when I thought I would never have you," Draco said.

He saw the tension that Harry tried to hide, the way his shoulders and head bowed as if before a mighty wind, but he revived so quickly Draco wasn't sure he could guess what had caused it. At least, Harry's voice was utterly casual when he asked, "Tell me what it was that you used to want

from me."

Draco obliged and went ahead, but he was on the alert now. He would watch. It appeared there were traps strewn everywhere for Harry in conversation, and while Draco didn't think he could possibly guard all his words well enough to avoid ever hurting Harry, he could learn the most common ones.

And he could help Harry heal the wounds that caused those traps to spring.

Have you.

Laurent had said the same thing when he was raping Harry. He had said the same thing with love and longing when he was standing with Harry in front of the mirror, naked, showing him the way that his wings could drape Harry's body from neck to ankle and enclose him. He had run his hands up and down Harry's chest, scratching lightly and not so lightly at his muscles, and murmured about how no one else would ever have Harry, and that was sweet to him, so sweet.

In a way, Harry's whole life since Laurent had gone to Azkaban had been a rebuke to him for that remark, and in other ways it hadn't. Laurent was right that no one had slept in Harry's bed since he was sentenced.

I am going to change that, Harry thought, holding so fiercely to the idea that he was somewhat surprised to look down and not find bruises on his hands. *If not with Draco, then he can help me get ready for someone else, the person who* will *share my life. I will not be ruled by what Laurent thought was best.*

And I'm not going to be ruled by my fear of some words that Draco couldn't know would remind me of Laurent when he spoke them.

It took long moments, but Harry managed to surface from the memories that had threatened to drown him when he heard Draco speak, and keep those memories to images instead of an intense second reliving. He began to listen to Draco instead, who had been talking while Harry struggled.

"…started in first year, but it went on from there. I wanted your attention. And sometimes, I have to admit, I wanted your bloody fame and the power that so many people were willing to bestow on you and not on me." Draco pouted and took a bite of his sandwich. Harry struggled not to laugh at the innocence of the pout, which he wouldn't have believed on a much younger man's face, never mind Draco's. "For a long time, I was sure, and my father was sure, that that was all it was. That I wanted to be the Boy-Who-Lived."

"It wasn't all as good as it looked," Harry muttered, his hand going up to rub the scar through his fringe.

"I know that, now." Draco's voice rang like a piece of iron dropped on stone, and he leaned

forwards. "But we're talking about things that we never noticed until later. Can you blame me for not knowing that at the time?"

Harry looked up, surprised at how stung Draco sounded. Draco's eyes held a real spark of agitation.

Laurent's eyes had never looked like that. He had always been proud, serene, collected. Even when Harry had defeated him, arrested him, and taken him into the Wizengamot, he had never looked more than puzzled, as if it was going to take his mind long months to catch up with what had happened to his body.

Harry relaxed. Draco was human as well as Veela, and the expression he wore now had helped Harry to remember that. "Sorry," he said. "Of course it was hard for you to know, when almost no one realized what was happening to me behind closed doors."

Draco cocked his head, opened his mouth as if he was going to ask what had changed Harry's mind, and then turned his words into a continuing story instead. "But sometime around my fifth year, maybe when I saw you fighting so hard against Umbridge and her takeover of the school, my feelings changed. I stopped wanting all your fame and power. I wanted people to pay attention to me, sure, but I also wanted *you*, there with me." He shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps I hoped that the shine you carried with you would rub off on me."

Harry laid his sandwich on the plate and leaned forwards. "I can understand why you would feel that way," he said. "But you don't still, do you?"

Draco swallowed his last bite and leaned forwards in turn. His left shoulder had risen as though he wanted to extend a wing that wasn't growing there at the moment and touch Harry. Harry breathed through his nostrils to avoid getting sick. "No," Draco said softly. "I am very much in possession of my faculties, and I want you because I want you."

Harry nodded. Draco's expression was full of yearning that Harry still found it hard to face, but he trusted him enough to accept this.

And enough to know what he needed in turn, and to be happy to give it, because it meant that he could help to take care of Draco.

"I envied you at least once," Harry said. "I saw how much your mother and father loved you at the Battle of Hogwarts. I overheard your father asking about you, and your mother lied to Voldemort about me being dead, because I'd told her that you were still alive."

Draco froze, except for a few slow flickers of his eyelashes. Then he said, "You really envied me?"

"Yes," Harry said. "I wanted a family. You had one, and—I know it was hard for me to see this before, but I saw it then—they really loved you." He braced himself, counted three under his

breath as he often did before doing something dangerous, and then reached out.

Draco sat absolutely still as Harry touched his cheek, then his chin and jawline and throat, getting to know the shape of them. Harry would have liked to touch Draco's lips, but his eyes literally wouldn't look at them, and he didn't think that was a good sign.

Instead, he drew a circle on Draco's left cheek, let his fingers trail up to cross the bridge of his nose, grew acquainted with the way his right cheek swelled, and then counted his pulse through his fingertips.

Draco stared at him with sheer hunger. Harry therefore looked only at the lower part of his face, and not his eyes.

"Is this all right?" he asked, surprised to find that his voice wouldn't rise above a whisper. "I mean, it won't make things worse for you that I'm touching you like this?"

"Oh, *Merlin*, no," Draco said, and his fervent tone made Harry smile.

The end of his tolerance came suddenly. His hand had left Draco's face before he realized it, flinching away as if from a fire, and he had to turn his back to forget the sight of pale skin and pale hair and pale eyes.

White. It had been so white.

Harry gagged, but locked his throat and kept himself from vomiting. He conjured a glass and filled it with clear water from the *Aguamenti* charm, then gulped it several times. After that, he felt better, and nodded to Draco without turning around. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"I understand," Draco said, and his voice was resigned and calm if not cheerful. "Let's finish lunch, and then I'll leave you alone for a while so you can get caught up on your work."

Harry knew exactly why Draco was leaving him alone. It was not something Laurent would have done.

He turned around and smiled before he could think better of it, and saw Draco soak up the smile like a man in a desert would drink the rain.

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Chapter: 6

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Six—Snapped

"We would be most pleased to see your Potter here whenever he chooses to come."

Startled, Draco looked up from the dessert he'd been eating, which had so much whipped cream on top that he wasn't actually sure what it was meant to be. Pie, perhaps. "What did you say, Mother?"

Narcissa regarded him patiently, her eyes so bright that they made the scar on her face seem like nothing. "I'm sure you heard me, Draco. When Mr. Potter feels comfortable coming to us, when you have begun officially dating, we look forwards to a visit from him."

Draco picked up the glass of champagne that still sat beside him, although it was empty, and licked a drop from the rim to give himself more time to think. Of course his parents would want to meet Harry. They'd implied, and said, as much before. And Draco hadn't let them know exactly how fast his relationship with Harry was advancing, which lent him a bit of plausible deniability should something happen.

But how was he going to excuse the fact that Harry wouldn't want to eat any food that house-elves had made?

"Um," he said.

"Something else is wrong, I know," said Narcissa, with a gentle, encouraging smile. She reached out her hand to Lucius in that way they had, the way that made Draco's throat ache. Lucius caressed her fingers and released them only so that he could continue eating, and pat delicately at the whipped cream that had smeared itself on his cheek. "We have learned that Mr. Potter has not dated for the past three years—well, nearly three, I suppose, if one *must* concern oneself with fractions."

Draco found a smile for his mother's mincing, ridiculous manner, even with as hard as his heart had suddenly begun to pound.

"Even granted that he would have a hard time finding someone not intimidated by his fame," Lucius said, pointing his fork at Draco, "that seems excessive. And surely he could arrange matters privately if he wished. Is that the answer, Draco? Has he simply been discreet before, and does he worry about our discretion now? Pray assure him that there is nothing we will not do to see our son happy."

Draco swallowed and looked at his hands for a long moment. He still couldn't betray Harry's secret to his parents, but he *knew* they would welcome Harry and close ranks around him in defense if they understood even a tenth of what had happened.

The problem was convincing Harry of that.

"Simply speak to him, Draco," his mother said, and rose from her chair to lean over and kiss him on the cheek. "I can see that you are interested in him and invested in his happiness as you have been with no one else in years. That increases my own interest in *his* happiness. There are no old grudges left, and no new ones to invent. Also reassure him that we have forgiven him for aiding us, if he needs that."

Draco nodded, mumbled something that he feared sounded stupid, and returned to his dessert. His father made small talk for the rest of the evening, and by the time that Draco was ready to step back through the Floo to his own house, he would have said that Lucius had entirely forgotten about the dinner conversation.

Narcissa laid her hand on his arm, though, and looked into his eyes with a wise patience that Draco found himself meeting with a prickling flush.

"Remember that we will wait for him," Narcissa whispered. "Whatever is wrong can be healed and brought full circle." She kissed Draco's cheek a second time and finally let him go, leaving him to stumble rather than step neatly through the Floo.

Draco collapsed into his favorite chair the minute he came out of the fireplace and didn't move for ten long minutes, sitting there with his fingers across his face while he breathed slowly and steadily.

He had remembered something he should have remembered before. His parents had nothing like the influence they had possessed before the war, when the very name "Malfoy" had been one to, literally, conjure with, but they still had money, contacts in the Ministry, and cunning. It wasn't impossible that they could find out what had happened to Laurent, and, from there, guess what had happened to Harry.

Draco wondered if he should tell them before they could find out that way—or warn them to back off.

Yet even that warning might be more than Harry wants me to say, he thought in misery as he leaned back, opened his eyes, and mopped at his forehead. It was covered with a light sheen of sweat. *I don't know if he would ever agree to let someone who doesn't absolutely need to know hear about it, given how well he's hidden it from the wizarding public and most of the people who would have been sympathetic.*

He would ask, though. Surely that could do no harm.

Harry rolled out of another troubled dream of Laurent and sharp kisses and nibbling hungry sounds when he heard someone shouting his name. It took a moment's struggle with his bathrobe, but he was finally something other than barefoot. He snatched his wand as he ran towards his fireplace.

Ron's head floated in the flames. His eyes were so wide that Harry's mind immediately flashed to the way he had looked when Fred was buried. Had something happened to his parents or siblings?

"Mate?" Harry asked quietly, dropping to one knee and reaching towards Ron. He could feel calm settling over him like a suit of armor. When there was something to be done, someone to be defended, he became this person, this tower of strength. What Draco had said about the instinct to protect being in his blood was correct.

And that he has a similar instinct?

Harry ignored the temptation to follow the thought. There were more important things going on right now, and Ron's hurried gasp confirmed that—though the words he spoke weren't the ones Harry had anticipated.

"Hermione's having her baby! Right now!"

Harry couldn't hide a smile as he thought about what a relief this would be to Hermione, but it was Ron's first child, and it made sense that he would be panicking. He nodded and stood up, reaching for his Floo powder. "I'll come right through."

By the time he tumbled into Ron's drawing room, Ron was pacing back and forth, his hands on his head. He whirled around and flung himself into Harry's arms, and Harry stared. Ron's fingers were entwined with red hairs that Ron had literally tugged from his scalp.

"It's going to be all right," Harry said to his best friend, rocking him back and forth and trying not to think about the tightness of Ron's arms twining around him. This *wasn't* the same way Laurent had clutched at him. He'd used his wings, and Ron didn't have them. Ron was solid Weasley, none more human. Harry just needed to remember that. "Hermione's the strongest woman I know. She'll have the baby just fine, and then you'll have a beautiful little girl to be proud of."

Hermione's scream rang out from her bedroom just then. Or maybe it was more like a shout, Harry thought, blinking. He had expected a wordless noise of pain. Instead, it seemed Hermione was cursing the Healer attending her. Harry smiled.

"Listen!" Ron wailed, clinging at Harry again. "What if she's *dying*?"

"She's not," Harry said firmly. "She's too strong and smart for that. You'll have a beautiful little girl, Ron, and—"

Hermione screamed again, this time something about how she would hex people when she had her wand.

"I want to go in!" Ron detached himself from Harry and ran up to the bedroom door, then turned

and ran back the other way again. "But I can't," he told Harry dismally, halting right in front of him, panting. "They told me not to. They said I was a nuisance and I was getting in the way. Just because I fainted! *Once*. You should see Hermione's face. Who wouldn't faint from that?"

Harry bit his lip firmly to stop himself from laughing and patted Ron on the shoulder. "I know that I probably would have," he said. "I can't even imagine what it looked like."

"*Horrible.*"

Harry managed to turn a snicker into a cough. "You know what you ought to do, Ron?" he asked thoughtfully.

Ron turned to him with a hopeful, big-eyed look on his face. "Anything you can come up with would help, mate."

Harry nodded. "Then why don't you practice on your Auror training exercises?" Ron gave him an incredulous look, and Harry continued soothingly, "It means that you'll take your mind off what Hermione's suffering, and you'll be keeping in shape for your job when you go back to it, and you'll be calm and relaxed when they hand your daughter to you so that you don't drop her."

Ron nodded back and then flung himself on the ground, doing push-ups. Harry walked around him, offering critical comments for Ron to respond to occasionally, and keeping one eye on the door of the bedroom.

Sooner than he would have thought, the screaming stopped. Harry felt his muscles tense to the point of snapping as he stared at the door. He'd spoken reassuringly to Ron, but what if he was wrong? What if Hermione had actually *died* trying to give birth to the baby? What if Ron had to deal with—

The Healer, a stern-looking older witch whose grey hair was somewhat disarranged around her face, opened the door and nodded to them. "Congratulations, Mr. Weasley," she said, raising an eyebrow as Ron scrambled to his feet. "You have a daughter, and both mother and little one are healthy." She sniffed. "Of course, they would be better-off in St. Mungo's, where they could be looked after properly—"

Ron lurched past her into the bedroom. The Healer turned to stare after him, and then had another reason to be offended, since Harry was right behind his best friend.

Hermione was sitting up against the pillows, cradling a small, white-wrapped bundle to her chest. She nodded to Harry, who was more than a little awed that she could look so calm after so much time of *that*, and then held out the baby for them to see.

She was small and squashed, pink and scrunched-looking. Harry smiled and made approving noises, while Ron took the baby with arms that trembled so much, Hermione stubbornly maintained a half-grip to keep Ron from dropping her.

"What are you going to name her?" Harry asked. Hermione and Ron had discussed so many names that he had never been sure what the latest one was that they'd settled on, or when they were next going to have a violent row about it.

"Rose," Hermione said.

Ron turned about, frowning, and opened his mouth. Hermione gave him a look that would have done justice to a gorgon and said sweetly, through clenched teeth, "*You* didn't go through hell for five hours to get her here."

Ron nodded, looking a little shame-faced, and then stared down at his daughter as if he had just now noticed that she was there. "Rose," he whispered. Then he lifted his head and stared at Harry in turn.

"Mate, I'm a dad," he said dazedly.

Hermione snatched Rose quickly back to her chest, and Harry leaped forwards so that he was in the best position to catch his friend, as Ron fainted again.

Draco chewed the end of the quill. He was trying to write a sensitive letter to Harry that would warn him of the danger if Lucius and Narcissa started asking around about the last person he had dated, but also one that wouldn't make Harry suspect Draco was trying to force him into a corner.

I don't know so much. I could hurt him so badly without meaning to.

Draco huffed and shook his head. Well, he had known that when he started dating Harry, and he had still decided to go ahead, hadn't he? If he was feeling tired of or impatient with it now, he should tell Harry, who might be happy to back off.

I can't stand that, either. I want him so badly. And I'm on the way to falling in love with him. It would kill me to see him with someone else, or alone and suffering for the rest of his life.

Draco finally dipped the quill in the ink, gave up on writing the perfect letter, and wrote what he honestly felt.

Dear Harry:

My parents are becoming curious to know you. One of the problems is that they might have enough money or power to find out what happened to Laurent; not all of their political contacts with the old Ministry have faded, even if they will look the other way when my family is assaulted now. Can I tell them what happened? Or at least tell them some sort of plausible cover story, or that you don't want to discuss it? Otherwise, I'm afraid that they'll think they're justified in taking revenge if they do discover it.

Please tell me what you'd like me to do. They also want to meet you, but I don't know about that, either, since it would involve going to the Manor and eating dinner. Is there anything that would explain your not eating the food the house-elves prepare?

Love, Draco.

Draco sealed the letter and went to find his owl, running the words over in his head and wondering what unexpected memories they might trigger in Harry. Then he shook his head and did his best to think about the latest letter from Pansy, who wanted advice on how to get ahead in the Muggle business world. Why she thought *Draco* would have that advice, Draco had no idea.

If I do something wrong, Harry will forgive me.

Harry paced around the drawing room and glared at Draco's letter. It lay innocently enough on the table next to the fireplace, but it had started this whole cascade of thoughts in his head on what ought to have been a happy weekend; he didn't have to go to work, and Ron and Hermione and Rose were all still fine.

"I have to make some decision," Harry said aloud, just to hear the words, and then flinched. Laurent had made fun of Harry's habit of talking to himself, telling him pointedly that it would make most of the people who only knew him from the papers think of him as mad. He had said that anything Harry wanted to confess or argue over, he could say to Laurent.

I don't want to spend this much time thinking about him.

Harry took a deep breath and nodded. Yes, he had spent too much time obsessing over Laurent—a lot more in the weeks since Draco had asked if he could date Harry. He wanted to break free. He wanted to do something bold and reckless, something courageous, something that the old Harry would have done.

That didn't mean that he was going to explain his rape to the Malfoys, of course. He agreed with Draco; they would feel compelled to take revenge for the rape on Laurent, and that was what Harry would most hate. He would go to them himself and tell them a story that most people had thought was the truth in the past.

He wrote a response to Draco's letter telling him that he would be pleased to go to the Manor for an afternoon visit whenever he liked, as long as he didn't have to eat anything, and then picked up a case file and buried himself in it.

"We're so pleased to see you again, Mr. Potter."

"Please, call me Harry," Harry said, smiling at Narcissa. Draco was pleased to see that he could evidently notice something in her face other than the scar that crossed it; his eyes stayed on her eyes instead of straying. Of course, Harry also knew what it was like to be stared at because of a scar.

"Of course," Narcissa said, and made a little curtsey to Harry without rising from the chair. "I appreciate the privilege. I imagine that not many of those whom you protect get to address you by that name."

Harry sat down opposite from her, in a chair that Draco had chosen for him, one from which he could see the door of the sitting room. "Well," he said, "it's true that I don't often have as, um, extensive an association with them as I do with you."

Draco's mother laughed quietly. "Meaning that you have had to rescue us multiple times?"

Harry smiled at her again. Draco's breath caught. He would have liked to embrace Harry or touch his shoulder simply for being nice to his mother, but he suspected that Harry might get angry if he did, so he settled for nodding fiercely to him and sitting in the chair nearest him. Lucius hadn't come in yet, though Draco knew that the house-elves had gone to fetch him when Harry arrived.

"You could say that," Harry said. "Or you could say that I've known you from the time I was a child, even if we haven't always been on good terms, and that I've been more interested in what happens to you than I am to most people after the crisis is over."

"What is this I hear?" Lucius asked, the soft thumps of his stick marking his progress into the sitting room. Draco knew Harry must have heard him coming even before then, because he turned his head with no sign of surprise. "That you have some contempt for those who need your help?"

Harry laughed, and Draco, who had started to tense up because he thought Harry might not understand or like his father's joke, relaxed again. "Of course not! But I know what I am. I understand my own flaws. I'm mostly interested in saving and defending people. When I can't do that anymore, either because they don't need my help or because it turns out that they need things I can't provide, I have to stop worrying about them and move on to the next case. Otherwise, I'd be driven mad."

Draco growled softly in his throat. *Does Harry see himself as saving or defending me? Is that one reason that he's so reluctant to go further than he has so far and admit me into his life?*

"An admirable philosophy for an Auror to have," Lucius said, and lowered himself into his usual chair next to Narcissa. Draco hadn't missed the way his father's eyes, bright and contemplative, stayed on Harry's face. He was going to ask an uncomfortable question next, Draco just knew it. "Now, do you mind us asking why you have broken a self-imposed dry spell to date Draco? Not that we not delighted, of course. But it does seem shocking that you should have chosen Draco when he asked you, and no one else before or after."

Harry turned his head and looked at Draco. Draco swallowed at the gentleness of his smile.

"The simple truth is that I've got tired of people who look to me for things I can't give them,"

Harry said. He folded his hands in his lap and crossed his legs, and if it hadn't been for the way his gaze went compulsively to the door every so often, Draco might have been fooled and thought that he was completely relaxed and casual. "People who want me to stop being an Auror. People who demand that I rescue them from impossible situations they create themselves. People who pretend to hate my fame and then revel in the attention that I get from the press, or promise that they're all right with it and then break up with my because of the pressure. Draco doesn't fit into any of those categories. Besides, I know him and I like him. That's something I can't say about the majority of people who've asked me to date them in the past."

Draco sighed in relief. The story sounded plausible, and in fact was what he had thought himself before he approached Harry—when he hadn't thought the man was simply so consumed with his job that he had let casual things like a personal life fall by the wayside.

"Forgive me," Lucius said, and his eyes grew brighter and shimmered like dew on leaves, "but I had understood that the problem was something else. Multiple witnesses that I have been able to find indicate that your last relationship ended badly. No one seems to know what happened to the young man, in fact. You were seen entering the Ministry with him one night and then—nothing. What *did* happen, Mr. Potter?"

Harry tensed like a serpent coming to attention, and his face froze. "I would rather not answer those questions, Mr. Malfoy, thank you all the same," he said.

That's his Auror voice, Draco thought. *The one that he uses to stop criminals from babbling and witnesses from asking him things they have no right to ask.* He stood up, not caring how awkward he might look in his desire to prevent this from going further. "Father—"

"But you should answer them," Narcissa said, tone gentle with surprise. "Why would you not do so, Harry? We are concerned for Draco's happiness. We have uncovered evidence that something happened to destroy your last relationship, so perniciously that the young man involved has not been seen in Britain since. What could it be? If the same is likely to happen to Draco, we would like to know now. Of course he is grown and can make his own choices, but you cannot expect the protection of parents to cease simply because their child has reached a certain age."

Harry rose to his feet. The magic rolling out from him caused the walls to ripple and made a ringing sound start in Draco's ears. "With all due thanks to your hospitality," Harry said, "I should be going now." He turned towards the door.

"There *is* something, isn't there?" Lucius said. He pointed his cane at Harry, and his eyes were fierce. "I have also learned that the young man in question was Veela, as Draco is. That makes it even more likely that Draco might suffer the same fate, at least if his fate had anything to do with his blood. Did it?"

Harry swung around.

Draco had never seen anything like the expression on his face, so twisted and murderous that it

might have belonged easily on Voldemort's. He moved so that he was between Harry and his father, but that didn't seem enough. It *couldn't* be enough, not when Harry's magic was now intense enough to sweep like a storm around the upper corners and ceiling of the room.

So he reacted without thought, and chose the only weapon he had that possessed a chance of protecting his father or containing Harry's magic.

His wings burst free of his back and extended out, swaying and shining, cloudy masses of white feathers shading to silver at the tips, and the strongest defense known to the magical world. Draco took one step forwards.

Harry's expression twisted again, and he fell to the floor. It was as though his legs had simply given out from beneath him. He raised one arm to cover his face and extended the other hand towards Draco.

"Please," he whispered. "Please don't touch me."

Draco couldn't have moved for a million Galleons. Harry had gone from warrior to child in an instant, and seemed to have forgotten his wand entirely. His teeth were chattering, from the sound, and then he gagged and vomited a small puddle of bile onto the floor of the sitting room.

Draco had heard about Harry, how he remained calm and self-possessed in the face of some of the most horrific murders the Aurors had ever faced. He wasn't throwing up because he had seen Dark magic he couldn't deal with. He was vomiting from sheer fear.

And it would be all the worse for him because he was betraying this weakness in front of Draco's parents, as well as Draco.

"Harry," Draco whispered.

Harry sprang to his feet as though the word had been a charm to release him from his terror and shook his head. His eyes were mad, and his magic had gone back into his body, but still buzzed there with a rattle that hurt Draco's teeth.

"Just don't come near me again, Malfoy," he said. "I'll hurt you next time. This is over."

He vanished from the Manor, Apparating straight through the wards. Draco cried out in loss before he could stop himself. He knew how much breaking through the ancient magic would hurt Harry, and he wanted to find and hold him.

The one thing he could not do.

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Chapter: 7

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seven—Struggled

"Harry?"

"Yeah, Ron?" Harry didn't look up. He was in the middle of an old file that he thought he had almost figured out. The Aurors who had originally handled the case had made so many mistakes that Harry didn't know why they were still in the Department. Well, one of them, old Trigg, wasn't—he'd retired last year—but Harry certainly wasn't going to look at Auror Whittaker with the same respect he'd always used.

"Why was your Floo connection shut?" Ron asked. His voice was cautious, as if he found something odd in the sight of Harry's hunched shoulders and ferocious scowl. He shouldn't, Harry thought. This was the way he often looked when he worked, especially since Ron had started leaving regularly to be with Hermione and Rose. "I only caught you this morning because I took a chance on seeing if it was open. Is something wrong?"

"It's Saturday, Ron." Harry gave him a smile, and was proud of its naturalness, but Ron's skeptical expression remained. *Bloody inquisitive Weasley. I reckon Hermione taught him to be like that, or maybe Auror training did.* "I don't have to take Floo calls if I don't want to."

"But you're working, Harry." Ron's voice had taken on a careful tone that Harry hated. "Listen, I'm coming through, all right?"

"It doesn't seem to matter whether it's all right with me or not," Harry said bitterly, "since you've already made up your mind."

Sure enough, Ron didn't hear him because he'd pulled back from the flames and was on his way through the fire at that moment. Harry pushed the file away—Ron refused to talk to him when he had work in front of him, something Harry thought was perfectly ridiculous—and folded his arms across his chest. That wasn't enough, though, so after a moment, he stood up and prowled back and forth.

Ron materialized in the drawing room, stumbled in the way that people always did—and Harry wasn't thinking, or trying to avoid thinking of, one person in particular—and then took a step towards Harry. "We're worried about you," he said.

"You don't need to be," Harry said. "I was working late on Friday, and then I kept the Floo connection closed because I was tired, and now here I am, still working." He tilted his head at the stack of files on his table, wondering how soon Ron would let him get back to it. The files were

like a wall, holding out the world. Not that he had anything to hold out, of course. "You can see for yourself that I'm all right."

"No, you're not," Ron said softly. "You're acting the way you did when you first came back to work after Laurent—"

Harry swung around. He knew crackling black fire had sprung up around his head, because he could see it from the corners of his eyes, and his wand tingled warmly in his hand where it was aimed at Ron's heart. Ron's eyes widened, and he stood still, staring at Harry as if he didn't know or recognize him.

That was worse than the fear Harry had expected, but he pushed the idea grimly away. The whole *point* of this was that Ron ought to have known better than to mention that.

"*Don't* continue," Harry whispered.

"Harry. Mate." Ron held up one hand, palm towards Harry, as though he were trying to calm a wild beast. Harry felt shame somewhere, buried under all the alertness that thrummed through him and made him want to jump and kick and scream, but he couldn't bother to bring it to the surface. Ron knew better. He ought not to have brought this up. "You need help."

Harry burst out laughing hysterically in spite of himself. "Those were the same words Malfoy said," he told Ron, whose face was so pale the freckles stood out. "And it didn't work out, did it?"

"This has something to do with Malfoy, then?" Ron sighed. "I told Hermione that I didn't know if he could help you. You ought to have been talking with the Mind-Healers for a longer period of time. You ought to have eased into dating a Veela."

"Shut up!" Harry shouted, talking a step towards him. Ron glared, and Harry fought his anger back under control—for now. *Why won't he stop talking about it and go away? He knows better. He's so* stupid *sometimes.* "You know the Mind-Healers would have kept me from work," he managed to say, his voice almost calm. "That's the reason I didn't stay with them. For Merlin's sake, Ron, we've been over and over this."

Ron shook his head, gaze level. "I see now that we haven't talked enough about it."

"There's no reason we have to talk any more about it." Harry knew he was spitting, and the black flames had surged high enough to streak around his mouth now, but he didn't care, he didn't. He wouldn't. He forbid himself to care. "Malfoy did something. He showed me that I couldn't trust him. It's done. It's over. And you have Hermione and Rose to worry about."

"I can worry about them and about you at the same time." Ron took a step forwards, not seeming to notice how Harry's wand promptly jumped up to point at his heart again. "This—this situation with Malfoy needs to be worked out, because either it'll impede your healing for the rest of your

life, or you'll think about it once you *do* heal and obsess over it and feel guilty for it."

"Go and talk to him yourself, if you want." Harry's breathing was getting faster and faster, and there was sweat on his palms, and all he could see every time he blinked were those mounds of white feathers rising up in front of him, like mountains, fit to shut out the sky. "I don't—I don't care. I'm done with this. I'm done with *him*."

Ron nodded, though Harry didn't think he was agreeing with the need to end this, and stepped back towards the fireplace, never taking his eyes from Harry. "You haven't communicated with him, have you?" he asked. "Refused his owls and the like?"

"That's *none* of your business," Harry said flatly.

"Yes, it is," Ron said, and gave him the pitying glance Harry hated. "Because I'm your friend." He vanished into the flames.

Harry sat down and closed his eyes. He wanted to scream from the unfairness of it all. He had already suffered this, and he had made a recovery. Everyone agreed that it was remarkable. The Mind-Healers had wanted him to spend months in St. Mungo's, and he had proved them wrong, that he didn't need it. Other Aurors said that they would have understood if he hadn't come back to work, but he had. He had *healed*. He had *fought.* He had struggled *so hard.*

And now Ron was telling him that it wasn't enough.

How much of my life am I going to spend in someone else's care? Harry thought, lifting his head and staring at the wall. His mind whirled with feverish pictures, the white of Veela wings imprinted with the black letters that composed the official verdict on Laurent and the cases he had been studying this weekend. *How many times am I going to have to fight the same bloody battle?*

Then he caught his breath and reminded himself that he was probably worrying over nothing. After all, what exactly was Ron going to do? A week had passed. Draco had probably given up and was looking for someone else by now. Harry wouldn't be surprised; in fact, it was what he wanted.

Veela were made to protect and love the people they chose, Draco had said. Good. Let him choose someone who would be happy to have that. Harry wished him nothing but the best.

Just as long as Draco never came near him again.

The sound of the Floo flaring to life woke Draco from a sound nap. He had wanted to hear it so badly, had waited for a reply to his owls, and there had been *nothing,* he thought as he patted his hair back into place and retracted the wings that had immediately sprung out in response to his anxiety, and now it was happening, and—

Ron Weasley's head floated in the flames. Draco stopped, his excitement dropping back into numbness, and struggled to remember for a moment why Weasley would have known his Floo address.

Oh, that's right. That bloody harassment case last year when I gave it to the Aurors. Draco sank down into a chair and sighed. "What do you want, Weasley?" he asked. He knew his voice didn't sound as sneering and defiant as it should have when he was speaking to one of the dreaded red-haired family. It sounded defeated and tired.

Instead of explaining himself, Weasley blinked and studied Draco attentively. "You look like shite, Malfoy," he said.

Draco pulled himself up a little. He knew he did, and he knew why, but neither of those reasons were something Weasley would or should know about. "Did you firecall me merely to inquire about my health?" he asked acidly.

Weasley shook his head, his hair swaying around his ears. "I know that something happened between you and Harry, and it's tearing Harry apart. I know that you've sent him owls he hasn't returned. I know that you were trying to date him." He paused. "And I know about the reasons that Harry has trouble dating Veela."

Draco sat up and stared at him. It almost sounded as though Weasley was offering to intercede between Draco and Harry, but that was—

Insane, he thought, and bit his lip to stop the hopeful questions he wanted to ask. He said, managing a bored drawl better than he had managed indifference, "What is that to me?"

"Don't be an arse, Malfoy," Weasley snapped. "I don't like seeing my best friend suffer—bloody hate it, in fact—and I know the reason you probably look like that is because you've chosen someone and now he's rejected you."

"The legends about Veela pining to death over one person are just that," Draco told him dryly. *I should have known, of course. Bloody Gryffindors and their savior complexes.* "I'm not going to die because Harry rejected me."

"But you want to feel better, don't you?" Weasley insisted. "And you want Harry. I don't think you'll ever be contented with anyone else."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Don't think that you know me, Weasley."

"I only have to see what's in front of me to figure *this* part out," Weasley said, and rolled his eyes. Draco had always found that an odd sight when someone's head was floating in the flames. "Now. Listen. I want to see Harry get over this wound that's destroying him. I don't know if he'll stay with you, but he deserves a chance to figure that out for himself, rather than letting his fear control him."

Draco blinked. "And?"

"What happened?" Weasley's head bobbed towards him in a manner that Draco knew meant he was leaning forwards. "I need to know that so I can know how to fix it."

You don't have to tell him. Draco twined his fingers in his lap and thought about that. He certainly didn't need to tell Weasley about the soft, horrified apologies from his mother when Harry had fled, or the way his father had flinched from the look Draco cast him, or how much he had wanted to *hurt* Lucius. He didn't need to know how Draco had agonized and wept over the letters he sent Harry.

But he could tell him about the incident as it had happened. It might be the only way he would get Harry back.

And as true as it was that Draco wouldn't die of the pining, and that he could choose someone else and attempt to be happy with them, it was also true that he wanted Harry. He wasn't going to be defeated by something that had happened before he ever met Harry—something he could do nothing about when Harry wouldn't even let him punish Laurent. That meant he had to do something about what he *could* control, instead.

I'm not that different from Harry, really, Draco thought, and some of the ice that had clutched at parts of his heart melted. If they were similar, there might be a chance for them to reconcile and get along better after all.

So he told Weasley what had happened, making sure to emphasize that he hadn't known his parents were going to ask Harry those questions about Laurent, that they had no idea what had happened and had doubtless thought Harry would respond easily, even disdainfully, and that Draco had spread his wings because he was afraid of Harry's magic.

Weasley listened to the story with his brow wrinkled. Draco finished it, and waited for the denunciation, the return of Potter's best friend who would surely hate Draco and his family for doing that to Harry.

Instead, Weasley began to grin.

"What?" Draco snapped, leaning forwards. "You'll excuse me if I don't see anything funny about this."

"But it's perfect," Weasley said. His hand came briefly into view, as though he were making a wide gesture with it, which of course Draco missed, since he couldn't see most of the git's body. "You spread your wings because you wanted to protect your parents and you thought Harry would hurt them, right? And that was the most powerful weapon you had."

"Yes," Draco said slowly, wishing he knew what had got into Weasley. Perhaps he'd been too

near the effects of a Stunner recently. Perhaps he had to continually cast Cheering Charms on himself to make sure that he didn't fly into a rage and start blasting people apart. Draco had seen similar effects when either of those things happened.

"But that's *perfect*," Weasley repeated, and this time both hands briefly appeared, apparently because they were orbiting his head like fireflies. "Don't you see? Harry understands all about protection. He only *died* to save everybody and all. He died because he had to before You-Know-Who could die," Weasley added, probably because of the blank look that Draco could feel taking possession of his own face. "Then he came back to life—I dunno how he managed that, really—and saved the world."

Draco's arms itched. He wanted to wrap them around Harry and reassure him that he didn't have to do anything like that anymore, that Draco was here and could spare him the effort if he wanted.

But he won't want. And that's part of the problem.

"Harry does harsh things because that's the only way to protect me and Hermione and other people that he cares about," Weasley said. "He's already been over to our home to make sure that the strongest wards and tracker spells are in place in case someone decides to kidnap our daughter." Draco tried to force his mouth open to speak a congratulations, but Weasley went on at full speed, not seeming to expect such words from Draco. "He'll understand that you did this to protect your family, in a way that he never would if you'd done it to soothe him or calm him down."

"You didn't see his face," Draco snapped. "He was terrified. He said that he didn't ever want to come near me again."

"That's how he felt then," Weasley said, indulgently, as though he were talking to a child who didn't quite understand the words flying over its head. Draco folded his arms and scowled at him. Even *that* didn't deter Weasley, who just gave him a funny little smile and continued right on. "He was too frightened to think straight. If you write to him and explain that you were acting as a protector, I think he would come around."

"You don't know that," Draco said, trying to ignore the suddenly rapid beating of his heart.

"But it's more hope than you had half an hour ago, isn't it?" Weasley challenged, and Draco nodded in spite of himself.

"All right," he said. "I'll try. But he's ignored all my owls so far. I don't know what makes you think he'll accept this one."

"Because an owl's not delivering it," Weasley said, speaking, again, as if Draco should have known better than to say the words he did. "I am."

Harry tensed when he heard the sound of the Floo opening, but he didn't take his eyes away from the notes he was madly scribbling. Solving cases. Helping people. In the case of old files when the victim was years in the grave, giving some peace to their family by bringing the murderer to justice. That was what he did.

He had been a fool to try doing anything else.

"Mate?" Ron climbed out of the fire again and shook himself all over, as if that would get the soot off his robe. Then he held out something. Harry kept his eyes on the desk, so he couldn't see for certain, but he thought it was a square of parchment.

"I don't want it." Harry didn't recognize his own voice when he spoke. It was a desperate gasp, rattling as though it had shavings of iron in it.

"You don't have a choice." Ron spoke mildly, but Harry knew that tone of voice, and also that Ron would stop at nothing to get through to him. He would camp out in Harry's drawing room if he had to. And it wasn't fair that he should stay, not when Hermione and Rose needed him.

Harry gave Ron a deadly glare, to let him know he was deeply annoyed by this, which Ron returned by a cheery grin. Harry accepted the parchment and unfolded it, already braced to find justifications and accusations. That was what Laurent had done long before he made Harry Veela-struck, when Harry had wanted to take a holiday alone. *You're leaving me, aren't you? You want someone else, don't you?* Ordinary Veela behavior.

Harry, I'm sorry. I should have insisted that my parents not confront you like that. And I should have thought about what I did before I did it, but I wanted to defend them so badly I didn't consider it.

Harry blinked, and then leaned back in his chair. Draco was defending his parents?

That made sense. A Veela's wings could be weapons, but they were more often shields. Harry had known that long before—long before the knowledge was pushed into his head and *held* there.

His own thoughts made him grit his teeth and read on, though he wondered about the multiple apologies. The situation had evolved out of a misunderstanding and Harry's own foolishness. He never should have tried to date Draco in the first place.

I felt your magic, and I believed it might harm my parents. You're powerful, and terrifying with it. I know that you were afraid of me, but I felt much the same way about you.

Harry shook his head. "If you're trying to convince me that we belong together, Malfoy, you're doing a bloody poor job of it," he muttered. Ron sneaked a quick glance at him, but Harry refused to look up and meet his eyes.

I know that you've defended my parents in the past, but at that moment, you were the threat. I've never forgiven myself for not being there to interfere when my parents suffered the attack that left my father crippled and my mother scarred. I vowed that I would never let them be left exposed again. So I obeyed my instincts, and you obeyed yours, and we're left with this mess.

"We are," Harry told the letter. "And I don't see a way around it."

Ron shifted. Once again, Harry ignored him. He knew that Ron had gone to Draco and interfered, but that didn't mean Harry was compelled to pay attention to Draco, or take him back, or whatever the point of this letter was.

It will take time to work through what happened, and I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to speak with me by owl or firecall for a time instead of meeting directly. I can put up with that, and I made sure to tell my parents that they had forfeited their right to your secrets by acting the way they had. They accepted this. In particular, my father is no longer concerned about me because he has seen how you reacted to my defenses.

Harry mustered the shadow of a smile. Perhaps that would be the one good thing to come out of all this.

We both have our overwhelming terrors, Harry. Mine is that something else might happen to my parents, something that I can't keep them from. Yours is of Veela. Perhaps we could get together and work on overcoming those, as well as comparing our protective instincts.

I know that you will be reluctant, among other things, because I saw your fear. But your fear has the same effect as your anger. I want you more.

"You can't," Harry whispered. "It's mad for us to try and be together, don't you see that?"

Part of me is Veela, yes—the part that raised its wings, the part that drove you away. But the rest of me is human, Harry, as I've tried to prove by confessing my fears to you. Will it surprise you to know that we're similar in other ways, such as how we try to control our lives? I can't guard against every possible threat my parents might get. You can't control your every flinch or your reaction to my wings.

Yet.

I want to be stronger. I want you to be stronger, for reasons that I think you know. There's no way that we can accomplish that on our own. If we could, the last few years would have showed us how.

Please, Harry. Allow me this privilege, to lean on you and show you how to lean on me. There are no two people in the wizarding world so suited to doing that for each other as we are.

Draco.

Harry shook his head. His mind felt clouded and hazy. He had tried to put the incident out of his thoughts so strongly because he had known Draco would blame him, and he was ashamed of the way he had reacted, and he was angry about what had happened, but it would be useless to hope for an apology from the Malfoys.

Here was proof that Draco didn't blame Harry as much as himself (which was worrying and irritating in another way, but Harry would deal with that later). Here was Draco admitting his own kind of shame and holding out a hand to help Harry over his. Here was Draco's word that his parents were at least sorry for the consequences of their actions.

Harry clenched his fingers down on the edge of the letter. There were still problems here. He knew that he would shy back from Draco far more than he had so far. He didn't like this notion Draco had about teaching Harry to lean on him. He'd already done that too much with Laurent, thank you.

But there was a path forwards.

Harry had not known how much he wanted one until then.

He glanced up, realizing he owed gratitude to more than one person. "Thank you, Ron," he said quietly.

Ron nodded to him, a smug smile on his face that wasn't concealed very well. "No problem, mate. Hate to see you dragging around like this." He punched Harry in the shoulder, and turned to the fire. "Just try not to have a crisis every week, all right? I'll waste all my energy running back and forth between you and Malfoy like a right berk."

Harry was still smiling when Ron vanished into the flames.

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Chapter: 8

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eight—Lost

"Well, this is awkward."

That comment won a quick, faint smile from Harry—less than Draco had hoped to win, more than he expected. He did his best not to lean too close to the fire, or to show how much simply

seeing Harry, willingly near him and not pulling away or wincing in disgust, helped him. It burned away the ashy sluggishness that had consumed him when he was dealing with rejection. It made his eyes keener, and the air in his lungs seemed to burn and spark in a way that made each breath a pleasure.

And you can lose it all again just as easily, Draco reminded himself, pulling his chair closer to the fireplace. "I want to say I'm sorry again," he murmured.

Harry shook his head. His hair was flopping wildly in every direction, and Draco's hands twisted as he thought about what it might be like to reach up and run his fingers through it. "I wasn't being entirely fair," he said. "I would have understood what you were doing if I'd thought about it more. You didn't come towards me, after all, the way you would have if you wanted to—embrace me." He spoke as if the words burned his throat, and turned his head away for a minute to stare into his room, which was invisible from Draco's angle. "You stood in front of your parents. Of course you were protecting them."

"But *could* you think just then?" Draco asked quietly.

Harry shook his head again, his cheeks flushing with a deep red that Draco thought might be either anger or humiliation. "And I hate it," he added. Before Draco could reassure him, Harry turned around again, his jaw stuck out. "That's the main reason I agreed to talk to you again. Because I want these stupid reactions under *control.*"

Draco nodded slowly. "You realize it can't happen all at once," he warned. He wasn't going to promise Harry anything that he couldn't deliver, not this time. "And maybe not ever completely."

Harry clenched his hands into fists on his knees. "I'm going to do my best to make sure it's complete."

"If you can't, are you going to blame yourself?" Draco asked. Harry cast a quick glance at him. Draco forced himself to swallow before continuing. He knew his voice had probably grown sweeter, with a hint of the croon. "I can't stand to see you doing that. Please don't."

"I don't know," Harry said. The words came out in a sigh. "I didn't blame myself before, but that was because I thought I really *had* achieved control, and it didn't take that long. I don't know what I'll do if it stretches out to months."

"I'll help you," Draco whispered. It was physically painful not to reach through the fire, but he had done harder things, including being without Harry for a week. "That's one of the reasons I want to be there."

Harry gave him a wan smile and shifted. Draco thought he was probably curling further in on himself, though it was hard to tell when he couldn't see Harry's body. "This was rough on you, huh?"

Draco fought back the impulse to reassure Harry it hadn't been so bad. Yes, it was a Veela instinct to downplay what they suffered so that their chosen ones wouldn't have to worry, but Harry wouldn't appreciate being lied to. And Draco didn't want Harry coming back to him out of guilt only.

"Yes, it was," he said at last. "I was depressed, mainly. It was hard to convince myself that I should get out of bed in the morning. I walked around in a daze or a fog. I would have got over it if you hadn't changed your mind, but I'm not going to deceive you. When Weasley showed up with his offer, I was delirious with joy."

"We owe him a lot," Harry said.

Draco nodded. He once would never have thought of agreeing with such a statement, but he hadn't known Weasley was such a good friend to Harry, either.

Harry was silent for some minutes, scratching the side of his head as if he was trying to figure out how to phrase his words. Then he said, carefully, "How bad was the pain?"

"The pain?" Draco looked at him blankly. "The point of being without your chosen is that it's not really pain. All sensation numbs. I could look at something for hours and not realize what I'd been staring at. That kind of thing."

Harry's eyes darkened. Then he said, "*He* told me that every minute of being without your—person, once you'd settled on him, was like being dipped in fire. Your ribs ached. Your wings ached. Your legs hurt so badly you couldn't walk." He was scanning Draco rapidly from head to foot, as if trying to figure out where Draco hid all those wounds he must have suffered. "Didn't you feel that?"

Draco choked on his anger. Harry moved warily back from the fireplace, and his hand dropped down as if he was picking up his wand. Draco nodded to him, hunched his shoulders and shut his eyes, and waited until he was sure the wings wouldn't come bursting out of his back.

They wanted to, though. How they wanted to. And while Draco had plenty of experience in repairing his shirts and robes when it happened unexpectedly, there were so many other reasons to avoid doing that in front of Harry that he gasped to think of them.

"That's another thing Laurent lied about, huh?" Harry's voice was flat, but that didn't hide the old emotions bubbling in the back of his voice.

Draco opened his eyes and nodded. "Yes. The pain is all mental. It's horrible, but it's survivable, the way grief is. Most Veela manage to accept that some of the people they choose aren't right for them, and they'll move on and find someone else. Nothing like you described happens, even if a long-term partner breaks the relationship off. Laurent was trying to blackmail you into never leaving him, it sounds like." His voice soared again, but at least this time he knew, from the harsh, ringing tones, that he was nowhere near the croon.

More silence. Harry scratched his temple again. Draco watched him curiously, letting his anger ebb. There was nothing that he could do about it right now.

"I don't understand," Harry said at last, his voice soft and distant but his eyes hard. "Why is Laurent so different from you? Why would he lie about anything and everything to keep me? Why would he rape me, and blame it on being a Veela, when you can keep yourself in check?" He looked at Draco now, but his eyes hadn't lost their hardness. "*Why*?"

Another mire to walk. Draco couldn't give less than the truth, though, and only hoped that such truth would be acceptable to Harry.

"Veela are different in the same way that wizards are different, Harry," he said. "Being all of one species doesn't make us all the same."

"But you're defined by your characteristics," Harry said, "in a way that wizards aren't." He gestured with his hand, and Draco could see that he was holding his wand now. "The books and *he* agreed on that. The wings, the magic, the need to choose and comfort a partner. It seems that you have a lot more in common than most wizards have in common." He eyed Draco sideways.

Draco let his eyes narrow and his displeasure show through. Harry ought to be able to deal with anger. "We have those traits," he said. "Yes, you could argue that we're more similar to each other than you're similar to Weasley, or any other human wizard. But that says *nothing* about our personalities, Harry! Some Veela abuse their partners. Some don't. Some resist what they are and stay celibate and some find their partner right away and some go through life lonely because they *want* a partner but can't find someone who fits their needs. Some are good at acting and lying, and some aren't. Why are you trying to shove us all into some neat little box? I've never known you to do that with anyone else, even Death Eaters."

Harry felt himself go pale. Draco was right, and he hadn't even *realized* he was doing that. His words would have sounded ridiculous if he'd tried to apply them to Hogwarts students or centaurs or merfolk, but…

He had thought he was a better person than that. He had thought that Laurent hadn't managed to corrupt him in the depths of his personality. He had changed Harry's behavior, but not who he was. That had been Harry's article of faith ever since he had fought his murderous rage back for the first time.

But he had been wrong.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, trying to think of some way that he could make up for what he had said, and not seeing it. Shame raced through him like heartburn. Why had he been trying to make Draco pay for Laurent's mistakes? Why had he thought all Veela were the same? He had been at least *able* to say they weren't before Draco asked him to date him, even though he hadn't wanted anything to do with them. What had made him go backwards and become a worse person than he

had been?

"Harry, it's all right," Draco said. "I know you're blaming yourself, and you should be blaming Laurent instead."

Harry shook his head, keeping one hand on his forehead. It felt as if he had a fever, so fast were the thoughts speeding around his mind. "Thanks for saying that, Draco, but he didn't command me to say and think those things. I did that."

"You've been through trauma." Draco's voice was even softer, and Harry was glad that he wasn't looking at Draco just then, because he didn't know if he would have been able to stand a tender expression if Draco wore one.

"But that can't excuse everything," Harry said. He would have liked to cut off the firecall and work through things on his own, but Draco was concerned in this now. Harry had admitted him to his confidence, and he couldn't arbitrarily shut him out. He looked up at Draco. "I did tell you that I might make mistakes," he said, laughing in spite of himself. The expression on Draco's face was more impatient and less tender than he had thought it would be. "Can you live with this one?"

"I think the question is whether *you* can," Draco said.

Harry shrugged. "I want to get myself under control. I want to be stronger than I was, less prone to react hysterically." One of Draco's hands rose as if he would reach through the fire, and Harry shifted back before he thought about it. He shrugged again when he saw Draco looking at him. "But that's not the same thing as getting there."

"I told you that I wanted to help," Draco said. "I will. What would help you the most right now?"

Time alone, Harry thought, but he knew from experience that he would either brood on what had happened and promise to be stronger next time without a clue on how to change things, or dive into a pile of paperwork to avoid thinking about his mistake at all.

God, healing sucks.

"Show me your wings," Harry said.

Draco's mouth fell open, and Harry got to enjoy the sensation of having surprised *him* for once, though it didn't last long as Draco's eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "I don't think you're ready for that," he said. "And I won't be responsible for traumatizing you further."

"You know what hurt me worse than anything else, when Laurent was done with me and I was in my right mind again?" Harry asked.

Draco shook his head, looking more apprehensive than ever, as if he thought he was going to

hear about a crime so evil that he couldn't comprehend it.

"He treated me like a toy," Harry said. "He didn't think of me as a living human being, or even a chosen one like the Veela sometimes do—if I can believe the books." Draco didn't smile, or look away, or blink. Harry wondered nervously if he could put up with all that attention for days at a time. "I was his toy. He lied to me and cast charms on me to keep me faithful to him and did anything else he wanted to, because I couldn't oppose it, but even more because it didn't really *matter* to him. You don't consider the feelings of a doll if you leave it face-down in a corner of the room. You can do that if you want to."

Draco licked his lips and apparently tried to look helpful instead of murderous. "And how can I avoid doing that?"

"Stop acting as if you know my feelings better than I do," Harry said. He was shivering, his teeth chattering so that he hoped Draco could still understand all his words, but he kept on regardless. Planning had never really helped him face his fears. He was better at the short, sharp struggle, which he thought was one reason he had won the fight with his emotions when he wanted to kill Laurent. "If I collapse in terror, it's my own stupid fault. But let me see your wings."

Draco looked at the floor, giving a sharp shudder, as though Harry had asked him to do something much more difficult than obey a natural instinct. But in the end he nodded, and turned away to pull off his shirt.

Harry felt sweat spring out on his hands and lips and chest. He rubbed one palm over his heart and tried to ignore the way that it was beating, so fast that he felt as if he might fly to pieces. He could bear this. He *had* to bear this. He would.

The sight of Draco's back was obscured with what looked like a soft bloom of white, as though flowers had grown from his shoulder blades. Harry clung to that delusion as long as he could, trying to avoid acknowledging the definite edges of the white mass.

But then Draco turned and spread them, and Harry couldn't ignore that they were Veela wings any longer.

Harry was breathing harshly as he dug his fingers into his knees. Laurent had used his wings to "shield" Harry—in reality, to keep him from escaping, to keep him from fighting, and to make him half-drugged and incapable of making his own decisions. He had said that he had done it out of love, and Harry had heard other Veela who came to testify at Laurent's trial claim the same thing. They had denied that any Veela could abuse his chosen one, and looked at Harry with dubious eyes.

They had disbelieved him.

But Draco had come seeking him, had listened to him, had begged him for a second chance, had given *him* a second chance. Harry focused on Draco's face in the middle of those wings and

struggled furiously to see them as part of the same being, the former Death Eater who had softened towards him over the past few years and shown that he had the ability to be a decent human being after all.

Harry's tension vibrated, stretched to breaking point. Draco watched him with solemn eyes, and the minutes stretched, and still Harry wanted to flinch back and shut the Floo, or cast a spell that would chop those wings from Draco's back.

Finally, it was too much. Harry buried his face in his hands and began to shiver so hard that he felt as if he would need a ring of fire to recover from it. "Please," he whispered. "Put them away. Please."

He heard stretching and rustling sounds, and then Draco's voice said, "They're gone, Harry. Harry, can you look at me, please?"

It was an age before Harry could. His body was convinced that it needed to run or fight, and he *knew* he would hurt Draco if he reacted too hastily. He tried to concentrate on his breathing, but it hurried like a frightened rabbit's, and so *that* was no use. He finally lifted his head, eyes scrunched tightly shut, and then unscrewed them bit by bit, ready to shut them again if he saw a glimpse of white.

There was nothing there but Draco, gazing at him in such compassion that Harry flushed and turned away again. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "You must think me so weak."

"I'm concerned about what Laurent did to you, yes," Draco said, but his voice had a steely tone to it that made Harry smile. He wasn't going to accept the generalizations that Harry always made about himself. *Good. I think I need someone to do that.* "That's a different thing." He paused. "Would it help you to talk to someone else about this? A Mind-Healer, maybe?"

Harry snorted. "They always wanted to know the details of the rape."

"And you didn't want to talk about it?' Draco asked quietly.

Harry glanced back at him again, impelled to by his incredulity. "Of course not! Especially not when I spoke with the first one, who acted as though she wanted all the gory details so that she could imagine them and wank to them at night."

Draco looked somewhere between nauseated and outraged. "I hope you got rid of *that* one as soon as you possibly could."

Harry nodded. "Of course, but the others weren't much better. They wanted me to talk about it all the time, and they wouldn't let me talk about *other* things, like the way I felt when I thought the Wizengamot might not sentence *him*." His skin crawled, and he cut abruptly away from that memory in his mind; he thought he really would throw up if he had to keep thinking about it. "They told me that I wouldn't be able to go back to my job. They wanted me to act as if the rape

was the most significant fact in my life, and I had to spend every moment brooding about it. It was strange," he added, thinking about those last few days he'd spent in St. Mungo's. "Most of them were sorry for me, but they weren't more than that. They didn't think I *could* heal. They thought that they'd be able to spend the rest of their lives pitying me, and to do that, they couldn't let me change."

Draco's anger had changed targets, or at least grown to include more people. He now wanted to rip apart the Mind-Healers who had made Harry feel this way as well as Laurent.

But it was in the past, he reminded himself, and this time he didn't even have names to go on. Though it would be considerably easier to sneak into St. Mungo's than it would be to sneak into Azkaban…

With a hiss, Draco forbade himself the fantasies. This was about healing Harry, helping him if he could, and not indulging his instincts for revenge.

"Then no Mind-Healers," Draco said. "Is there anyone else? I don't want you to have only me to turn to."

"Well, Ron and Hermione know, of course," Harry said, blinking. "But they just had a baby. I'm not sure they'd want another challenge."

"From what I saw of Weasley, he would be much more insulted if you didn't let him help," Draco said dryly. He was still amazed at the depth of Weasley's loyalty and courage, and he had to wonder now how much of that hadn't existed during Hogwarts and how much he had simply missed. "But I was thinking about someone even beyond that. Someone who would be a professional about it, but not in the way the Mind-Healers would be."

Predictably, Harry's jaw clenched. "I don't want to trust anyone else with the knowledge. We can't be *sure* that it would work out."

Draco licked his lips. "I think I might know of someone," he said. "Someone who would understand, someone who has dealt with these kinds of situations before, and someone who wouldn't blame you for succumbing to a Veela's deeper allure or think that Laurent was just following his 'instincts.'"

"But?" Harry said, watching him steadily. "Kingsley sounds the same way when he's giving me cases with a catch in them. Is this person a Veela?"

Draco bowed his head. "She is."

"No."

Draco considered whether that answer could be fought with, and then decided that it couldn't. Harry sounded as though he would close a door to shut out the whole world, if that was what it

took. "All right," he said. "But will you consider it later, when, maybe, you can stand to be around me and other Veela more?"

"Maybe." Harry was drawing in on himself, and Draco hated to see that, so he immediately changed the subject.

"When do you want to firecall me again?"

Harry relaxed and glanced at him with a grateful smile that it took Draco a few minutes to understand. He reckoned Laurent had never given up on pushing Harry when he was uncomfortable, or maybe it was the Mind-Healers who hadn't. Draco nearly growled. *What the fuck was he thinking? What the fuck were* they *thinking? You'd think that they would realize they were dealing with a rape victim, and more than that, someone magically powerful who wasn't accustomed to thinking of himself as a victim.*

"Near the middle of the week, maybe?" Harry offered. "Kingsley usually gives me a new case on Monday, and I'll probably be busy sniffing out clues and making sure that I know what I'm doing. Preliminary research."

"Is Weasley going with you?" Draco asked casually, and tried not to show the way his shoulders were tensing. Harry, away from Draco, was strong and capable, but there were more dangers in the world than Veela who might rape him.

"No," Harry said, raising his eyebrows as if he wondered what planet Draco's mind was on. "He's still on leave to spend time with Hermione and Rose."

"Who's your temporary partner when he's gone?" This time, Draco knew his voice was too sharp, and Harry straightened slowly, staring at him.

"I don't have one," Harry said. "Most of the Aurors don't when they're investigating routing cases and their partners are on holiday. *Kingsley* knows that I can take care of myself."

Draco gritted his teeth. He had no doubt what the emphasis in that sentence meant. "I know that," he said. "And you're powerful, capable. I have no doubts about you being able to take care of yourself. But accidents happen, and Dark wizards who want to target you specifically also happen."

"Oh, you're thinking of that case last year?" Harry smiled, but his eyes were still hard. "I was never in danger. The papers like to exaggerate."

Draco stared at him. "You were in hospital and had lost almost enough blood to die."

"And I was out of hospital that very same evening, which wouldn't have happened if I had really come that close to death." Harry laid his fingers along his elbow and shook his head at Draco. "I told you they like to exaggerate."

Draco swallowed. He hadn't paid as much attention at first to some of the things Harry had talked about when he was mentioning that he liked to be in control of his life. It had seemed more important that he wanted to cook his own food than that he wouldn't let someone else tend his wounds.

Now…

"Please," he said. "Be careful, for my sake."

Harry's eyes softened. "Of course. I promise. And I'll firecall you no later than Wednesday. Good-bye."

The Floo shut with a whooshing noise. Draco leaned back in his chair and sucked in deep gulps of air. His chest felt too tight.

Harry. Please be safe.

He wondered again if he really wanted to do this, with all its challenges and all its drawbacks and all its barriers and all its restrictions on him.

But he remembered how his body had seemed both to lighten and to burn when he saw Harry again, and he knew it was more than the ending of the vague depression that had plagued him when he had thought Harry wasn't coming back. To be with Harry made his life more vivid and intense.

He could not give that, or Harry, up.

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Chapter: 9

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nine—Dazed

Harry eased forwards, his back to the wall. He realized that he probably didn't need that much caution, but better to use it and not need it than the other way around.

Besides, he knew that Ron and Draco would have disagreed with him.

A sharp, small sound came from ahead, as though someone had just caught their breath. Harry

froze at once, his heartbeat louder in his ears than anything else, which made him wish there was a spell that would make it quieter without stopping it.

He was tracking Roland Yeary, a brewer of illegal potions who had recently moved into using Dark magic to harvest ingredients from humans. The reports in the file, from the times when the Aurors had dealt with Yeary before but had been forced to release him due to a lack of evidence, warned that he was dangerous and had "unknown capabilities," including spells that had laid up Aurors for weeks and which the staff at St. Mungo's didn't know how to deal with. They'd had to let the magic fade away on its own.

Harry knew Yeary was in this building, disguised as a hovel on the outside but a functional manor house beneath the illusion. He didn't, though, know how prepared he might be or whether he knew anyone was tracking him.

He waited, but the sound didn't repeat itself. And Harry took heart from the fact that the files had said Yeary worked alone most of the time, without partners or pets or the guards that illegal brewers sometimes made by forcing their potions down the throats of innocents. After a count of fifty, which he hoped would give his heart time to calm down, Harry eased forwards again.

A brilliant burst of light suddenly came from behind the corner.

Harry moved immediately, ducking under it and rushing forwards. Yeary cried out, but the cry was muffled and ended when Harry hit him in the stomach with his shoulder. Yeary went down on the floor, and Harry leaped over him, turning, struggling to keep an eye on Yeary, retain his advantage of surprise, and look around the room all at once.

There were already several cauldrons in progress on various tables, and another one nearby, draped with fingernails, hairs, and—other things. For a long moment, Harry looked at a whole flayed skin that he knew had been torn from the back of one of Yeary's unwilling victims, and it seemed as though he could see nothing else.

Then he glanced back at Yeary, a tall, sandy-haired man who had his mouth open and wand in hand, but cowered when Harry advanced on him.

"Aurors," Harry said briskly. "You are under arrest, Roland Yeary, for the crime of harvesting human ingredients for your potions from unwilling donors and using Dark magic. You have—"

Yeary screamed as though someone had hit him and lashed out with his wand, a jerky, stiff-armed motion that Harry had never seen before.

A blue spiral hit him in the middle of the stomach. Harry gave a breathy groan and folded up, but the pain wasn't bad yet, and he had the time to cast *Incarcerous* before Yeary could Apparate out. Yeary thrashed and yowled, but Harry Disarmed him in the next moment—which he should have done first, he thought, blaming himself—and that was the end of that.

Oh, God, he thought then, as the pain chewed into him and his skin began to peel back and the blood to flow. It felt as though he were being impaled on a great fork, the tines sinking deeper and deeper.

It was bad.

But going to St. Mungo's would be a waste of time. Harry already knew that they didn't know how to treat Yeary's spells, and he wouldn't be able to let them near him.

So he continued throwing spells, making sure that Yeary was Stunned and gagged, and then taking out a Portkey that the Ministry had given him for emergencies. He crawled towards Yeary, blood spilling on the floor—but only a little as yet, he noted—and seized his arm with a shaky hand.

The pain got worse.

Harry grunted a little in surprise and spoke the command word that would activate the Portkey and was only known to the individual Auror who possessed it. They vanished into the familiar swirl, and Harry was content to know that at least he had done his duty, and he would get Yeary to the Ministry before he could hurt anyone else.

Meanwhile, the pain got worse.

Draco hissed, and tried not to think how much he sounded like a peacock. Then he threw his book to the floor and stood up to pace around his library. His attempt to instruct himself in Defense Against the Dark Arts and surpass what he had learned in Hogwarts—what little that was, he thought sourly—was not going well.

He was restless, upset, unable to focus or concentrate, sick with dizziness. He didn't know the cause. It had begun this afternoon and increased until the words on a book page seemed to dance in front of him, urging him to be up and doing something else.

What something else, he didn't know.

I never do, he thought gloomily, and propped his chin up on his hand as he thought about it. He'd got like this before, but usually only when he thought about never having a partner. And then he would tell himself to cheer up, that he would find someone who loved him and for whom he could use his magic someday, and that did the trick. It certainly had when he got those fancies for a while after he stopped dating Pansy.

Then Draco straightened, staring at the wall.

I get this way when I think I won't have a partner.

He had never felt like this over Pansy, Draco thought, as he headed for the fireplace. But he

didn't think Pansy had ever been in life-threatening danger when he was dating her.

He flung the powder into the fire and shouted Harry's address. All the time, he was reassuring himself that it was nothing and Harry would probably resent Draco's intrusion. It was silly to be intruding like this when he should have just kept his silly Veela self *under control—*

The fire remained still and empty. Harry's Floo connection wasn't open.

Draco caught his breath and closed his eyes. *It doesn't mean anything,* he reassured himself. *It doesn't. You knew that he was going to be on a case, and he said that he would firecall you on Wednesday. It's not Wednesday yet. You're dealing with having a chosen one who didn't approach you, who might never fall in love with you. It's normal to have strange reactions like this. But the important thing is to remember that it doesn't* mean *anything.*

Which did nothing for the low-grade worry in his stomach.

Draco started to reach for another handful of Floo powder, thinking he would visit St. Mungo's, and then hesitated. Quite apart from the fact that showing up in hospital shouting Harry's name would probably made him seem mad, hadn't Harry said that he tried to avoid the Healers when he was injured? He certainly hadn't sounded pleased with the Mind-Healers, and if he had an excuse not to return there, then he would probably take it.

And you still have no proof that he's wounded, Draco told himself again, casting Floo powder but speaking the Ministry's name instead. *He's probably sitting in his office working on a report now, and he'll be astonished when you show up to see him.*

If he would even let Draco get close. Thinking about the little flinches he'd given when they spoke by Floo on Sunday made Draco's throat hurt.

He stepped through into the Ministry's Atrium and looked around alertly. If news had come that one of their best Aurors had been injured, he would expect at least a few whispering clumps of people.

He didn't see any, however. Instead, he realized that the Atrium was oddly empty of people for this hour in the afternoon, with only a few coming and going through the fires. The lifts didn't sound as if they were running at all.

Draco lowered his eyes and swallowed. Then he headed for the lifts, and he told himself that he wouldn't run.

He broke that rule halfway there.

"If you'll just let us through, Harry…"

Harry shook his head without looking up. One of the spells that kept the skin on his stomach

relatively stable had stopped. He cast it again, and the faint blue flicker he was looking for reassured him. He wasn't going to bleed to death any time soon, and although the wound still hurt, it had stopped going any *deeper.* That meant that the original spell Yeary had cast had to be gone.

"Harry," Ginny said again. She had her arms folded, Harry knew without looking at her—she always did when she used that tone—but her voice was soft. "No one blames you for what happened, if that's what you're looking to be reassured about."

Harry looked up at her in surprise, and then snorted. "I'm not looking to be *reassured* about anything, Ginny." As he spoke, he cast another spell, and some of the pain eased. Then he reinforced the barrier that hung between him and the people standing around in the corridor, because there was a good chance that they would try to take it down when he wasn't paying attention. It had happened before. "I only want to heal myself."

"Mate," Ron said firmly, stepping forwards. "This is ridiculous."

"It's what I need to do," Harry said, and gave Ron a guilty smile. "But I'm sorry that they pulled you away from Hermione and Rose. I'm all right, really."

Ron stood back, shaking his head. His face had a slight blue and golden tinge from the barrier that Harry had raised across the corridor. The barrier was several wards that he knew, all woven together to present less weak points. He'd learned it when he was still under the Mind-Healers' care.

One of the few useful things that they ever taught me, Harry thought wryly, and then cast another pain-easing spell, and another that would close the hole slowly from behind. No one knew what Yeary had cast on him, and he *had* cooperated when he described it to them. He was perfectly willing to accept advice from people who knew more than he did. He just didn't want them healing him.

"You've been here how many hours?" Ron asked, in the voice of someone trying a new tactic.

"About five," Harry said, and cast again. Yes, the hole was finally closing now, he could feel it. When he breathed, there were no more burning stabs of agony up the center of his chest, either. That was welcome.

"You could be healed much faster if you went to St. Mungo's," Ron said intently.

"No, I couldn't," Harry said, and met his eyes. "You know why." That was as much as he was willing to reveal in front of a crowd of strangers who didn't know about Laurent. Of course the entire Ministry had turned out to gawk when word spread that Harry Potter had caged himself behind a barrier and wouldn't let anyone close.

Ron groaned. "Mate, you don't need that—that paranoia." The official story about what had

happened when Harry exploded several rooms, and nearly several Healers, in St. Mungo's was that he had become paranoid and didn't want anyone touching him in case he mistook them for Dark wizards. Harry didn't like the way it made some people stare at him from the corners of their eyes and avoid his company, but it was a small price to pay for his secret still being hidden.

"Of course not," Harry said. "And as soon as it stops saving my life, then I won't use it again." The bloody pain was creeping back. He chanted a few charms in a row that should hold it away, and saw Ginny cover her eyes, as if he was doing something particularly disgusting.

A bright flash appeared down the corridor. Harry looked up, blinking, and shaded his eyes with one hand, wondering if he had imagined things. The corridor was so packed with people that he knew some of the wizards who were "watching" him had to be relying on reports from the ones in front, or at least using distance-seeing spells. Certainly no one could get through, the way Harry had thought he'd seen someone doing, short of the Minister himself.

But no, he *hadn't* been imagining things. The flash showed itself again, and the crowd flowed apart, though not, from the looks of things, of its own free will. The person who'd pushed through it so far stepped into the open and revealed himself as Draco.

Harry stared at him, and then bowed his head and looked away, swallowing. He wasn't sure why he found it so hard to meet Draco's eyes. They weren't even *that* accusing.

And he hadn't bled to death. He hadn't made it impossible for Draco to have someone he wanted by dying. There was no reason for the guilt that suddenly hung in his mind like a black cloud. Sure, he'd felt guilt before for drawing Ron and Ginny here, but he'd reasoned it away with the understanding that this was just the way things had to be.

For some reason, he couldn't use the same rationalization with Draco.

"Hullo, Harry," Draco said. He ignored the astonished murmurs from behind him—apparently, some people still didn't understand that Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy might be on friendly terms—and sat down right next to Harry's barrier. He looked at Harry patiently, steadily, until his eyes fastened on the wound that Harry had covered. He nodded. "What happened to you?"

Harry eyed him, wondering what the trick was. Draco's tone was pleasant, even conversational. It didn't sound as though he intended to blame Harry for anything.

But he must, if he showed up here. How did he hear about this, anyway? Did Ron send for him?

"Hullo, Draco," Harry said, deciding that he could act normal, too, if Draco was going to. He raised an eyebrow and pointed at Draco's hand, which had closed into a fist. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, I think you know what's wrong." Draco lowered his voice, and it became obvious that he was speaking through gritted teeth. *Yes, he's angry,* Harry thought, almost relieved to have an

interaction that he understood. "You've been hurt."

"Yes, by the Dark wizard I was tracking." Harry cast two nonverbal spells in quick succession, one to ease the pain and one to Vanish some of the blood on his clothing, and saw the voracious way Draco's eyes tracked his wand movements. He probably knew what the charms were, Harry thought, and didn't approve, either. *Well, too bad. This is the way it has to be. He knew that when he started dating me.* "He has a reputation for using specialized spells that no one has seen before," Harry added, so Draco could know as much as he did. "The Healers have stood around wringing their hands while the victims died or got better on their own before. Usually got better."

Draco bared his teeth. "I can see why you would be reluctant to trust the Healers," he said softly.

Harry stared at him. *I don't get him. He knows that, and yet he's still acting like I've done something wrong. Why?* "Well, good," he said cautiously.

"But you should at least let someone else ease the pain for you," Draco said, his eyes rising back to Harry's. They were so intent that Harry flinched before he could stop himself. He didn't *need* people to look at him as if he was the center of the world. He'd got enough of that at Hogwarts and right after Voldemort's defeat. "Let someone behind the barrier with you. What happens if you collapse and there's no way to reach you?"

"That won't happen," Harry said, and gave him a slight, easy smile. "I promise."

"You don't know that." Draco leaned forwards. "You look like you've lost a lot of blood. Have you taken a Blood-Replenishing Potion? You ought to."

Harry felt his nostrils flare before he could stop himself. "No," he said. "And I don't know the spells for it, either. But I didn't lose *that* much blood before I got the wound on its way to healing. And I'm not losing any more now."

"Lack of blood in your veins can affect your decision-making," Draco said, and his eyes were so stormy and so hard to look away from. But his words were still calm and reasonable. Harry didn't know why. Most Veela would be screeching their heads off by this point if their chosen one had been injured by an unknown spell and locked himself behind a barrier, or at least the books he had read said so. Draco seemed to put all the anger in his face instead, and take it out of his voice. "It can make you weak and dizzy. You might not even notice that you're fainting until you do."

Harry scowled. "So I'm a bit dizzy," he muttered. "I didn't even notice it until you said that. You're probably subconsciously suggesting it to me or something."

Draco gave him a slight smile in return. Harry had never seen its like before. It was sharp enough to cut. Draco reached out, his eyes never leaving Harry's face, and waved his wand, whispering words Harry couldn't hear.

"What was that?" Harry asked, feeling his heart speed up. If he didn't know what the spell was, it would be harder to counter and control, and he was already struggling with the aftereffects of *one* unknown spell.

"A Summoning Charm, nothing more," said Draco, and he did something that was remarkable, at least in Harry's experience, coming from someone who wasn't either Ron or Hermione. He didn't sound as if Harry was stupid for asking such a question. The Mind-Healers certainly had, all the time.

Draco leaned back against the barrier and looked down the corridor. Then he smiled. A vial was zooming towards him. Harry wondered where it had come from. Probably some Auror was missing it about now. Draco caught it neatly and held it up so that Harry could make out the dark red color.

"Blood-Replenishing Potion," Draco said. "You need it. Will you let the barrier down and accept it from my hand?"

Harry looked at him and did his best to loosen his tongue. "You mean—you aren't going to try and force-feed it to me?"

Draco slowly shook his head, eyes never moving from Harry's. "What would that accomplish?" he whispered. He seemed to have forgotten entirely about the audience, and he didn't have Harry's experience in ignoring it. It was almost as if nothing in the world really was important to him *but* Harry. "You wouldn't trust me after that. I understand that you need to have some control." He held out the potion in an iron-steady hand. "And it needs to be your choice about taking down the barrier. Will you?"

Harry licked his lips and tried not to shake in reaction. He didn't think he needed the potion. He could all too easily look at Draco's hair and skin and think about him being *Veela.* He didn't want to lower his barrier, because of the chance that the people watching him would race forwards and force him to keep it down.

But Draco's gaze said that he, at least, could ignore such realities. For him, what mattered was that Harry was healthy.

And he thought Harry needed the potion to be healthy.

Harry shut his eyes and waited, trying to understand the conflicting impulses in his own heart.

Draco sat still. He could stay like this all day if he needed to, hand extended, waiting for Harry to decide to trust him. He had seen the way Harry's eyes flickered as they darted up and down, and the way they squinted almost shut. There was a lot going on there that Draco didn't know about and wouldn't dare try to influence.

He could make his appeal and wait for Harry to take the chance. That was all he had the right to

claim now.

But later…

Later, he would spend time with Harry when he was wounded. He would make sure he had privacy, unlike this position, where he was locked in front of the staring mob. He would count up the holidays that Harry was owed and persuade him to take them. He would, much later when Harry had taken a lot of chances, enfold him in his wings immediately after he had swallowed a potion or cast a complicated healing spell and flood him with the gentle pleasure the wings could give.

He had tamed his own fear when he realized Harry was still alive and not bleeding to death. He even approved of the barrier, if not the way it stood between Harry and *him*. If it kept out Dark wizards, that was all to the good, as far as Draco was concerned. Harry only needed to include one more person for him to be content.

Harry wrapped his arms around his legs and sat still for a minute. Draco wondered if he knew how much like a child it made him look, and then decided that Harry probably wouldn't think about such a thing.

"All right," Harry whispered at last.

Draco gave him a gentle smile, not wanting to show his triumph in case Harry took that as gloating, and nodded. The barrier lowered. Draco held out his hand. He could have tossed the vial to Harry, but he had stretched his Veela instincts as far as he could. He *needed* Harry to take the potion from his hand, to feel his chosen accept his comfort.

Harry edged closer, gaze so dark and concentrated that Draco suspected most people would have seen that alone and not the frantic way his chest heaved, and snatched the potion. Draco got nothing more than the brush of fingertips across his palm, but that caused a thrill of warmth to the depths of his being. He sighed in relief as he lowered his hand and the barrier rose again.

Harry swallowed the potion, never looking away from Draco as he did.

At once his face flushed, and the unhealthy pallor Draco had recognized from other times he had seen someone lose blood retreated. Draco relaxed even further, and managed to smile at Harry. Harry smiled back, looking flustered and confused.

"You—it doesn't take much to satisfy you," he whispered.

"It takes you," Draco said, and leaned in until he was right against the barrier, staring at Harry so that he would get the message.

Harry looked as though someone had slammed him around the head with an axe. Then he nodded, slowly.

It took a few hours after that until Harry had cast all the spells he needed and felt ready to lower the barrier and suffer someone from St. Mungo's to come and examine him. Draco knew he wouldn't have done that unless he felt all danger was past and he had successfully contained the damage by himself.

Draco didn't mind. He spent the time in asking Harry questions about the case, which Harry answered eagerly. From there he passed into descriptions of other Dark wizards he had arrested, and Draco listened, absorbing as much as he could of his chosen's life.

The crowd drifted away, bored now that the Chosen One wasn't going to do any more amazing magic. The male Weasley left, seemingly content that the situation was under control. The female Weasley sat down watchfully nearby, but didn't try to interfere with the conversation.

And Harry, listening for and speaking in response to Draco's questions, happiness beaming through his eyes, never seemed to notice or need her.

By the time Harry came out from behind the barrier, Draco burned—not with the need to touch or comfort or soothe, as so often seemed the case with Harry, but with joy.

There were ways forwards.

And Harry had taken the potion from him alone. It was enough to sate the possessive side of Draco.

For now.

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Chapter: 10

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Ten—Worried

"I don't want to talk about him to you behind his back."

"This isn't really behind his back," Draco said, and then sighed as Weasley scowled at him. They were standing in Harry and Weasley's office. Harry was on what he called a "wanker's holiday" after the case that had wounded him. The wanker in this case, Draco had guessed, was the Minister, who had given Harry no choice.

Harry had rolled his eyes during the firecall which he'd used to tell Draco about the decision. "It's not as though I need the rest," he said. "I'm perfectly fine now."

Draco had nodded and said nothing, because what did one say? But he had gone to Weasley immediately afterwards. It was one of the few times that he could be sure Harry wasn't in the office.

"I mean it," Draco said. "He has to know that I want to know this, but he won't tell me right now." Weasley nodded and opened his mouth, but Draco barreled on. He had one other argument that might convince Weasley, and he didn't want to tell him that he had woken up that morning literally hungry to know more about Harry. "And it's information that's a matter of public record. I *could* find it by searching through the newspaper accounts of his cases, or asking other people."

"You should wait for Harry to tell you," Weasley said stubbornly, eyes narrowed as though he were staring into strong sunlight.

"I *can't*," Draco said, and heard his voice crack. His legs were shaking, and he braced himself on Harry's desk with one hand. He could feel his fingernails writhing as though they would turn into claws. They wouldn't, not without his permission, but it was still a bloody uncomfortable sensation. "Weasley, please."

"Oh," Weasley said. "It's one of *those*, isn't it? The Veela things," he clarified, when Draco looked up at him.

Draco nodded dumbly, glad, for once, that Weasley was a pure-blood and an experienced member of the wizarding world. Harry probably wouldn't have understood as readily, but Weasley was experienced with magical beings and their sometimes undeniable needs.

Weasley looked out into the corridor, as if he thought Harry might return—and Draco couldn't blame him for thinking that, really—and then shut and cast a Silencing Charm on the door. When he turned around, he had his arms folded and his voice was surly. "I'm only telling you this because I think it'll ultimately lead to Harry's happiness, too. Understand?"

Draco leaned forwards and put on his most encouraging expression.

Weasley sighed hard enough to make his lips flap. "Harry's always been a bit reckless," he said. "It's like he thinks that, since he survived You-Know-Who, nothing else can really hurt him. But he used to go to hospital and obey *most* of the instructions the Healers gave him. Not letting anyone else heal him has only happened since—well, you know."

Draco nodded, mildly impressed that Weasley could speak more freely about the Dark Lord than about Laurent. It at least showed how seriously he took what had happened to Harry. "But how has he survived, then? There must be wounds that he can't take care of himself."

Weasley shut his eyes. "There have been," he whispered. "In those cases, we've brought in

Healers to stand near the barrier and give him instructions. He's willing to *listen* to them, just not to let them touch him. It probably doesn't help that the first time he was seriously wounded after—you know, he came in with his magic sparking around him, and they restrained him." Weasley opened one eye in order to give Draco a firm stare. "If you feel the urge to tie Harry up? Don't."

Draco nodded, even though he was already thinking wistfully of the day that he could wrap his wings around Harry. But that really wasn't the same thing.

"What you did yesterday, getting him to take the potion…" Weasley shook his head in wonder. "He hasn't done that for almost three years, Malfoy." He gazed solemnly at Draco. "That's another reason I can tell you this. You might be the means of saving his life."

Draco's fingernails stopped twisting. That had been what he needed, to know that what he could do for Harry was unique, and that he stood a chance of being able to help him. He would have preened his wings were they extended, or lifted the plumage on the back of his neck if it was the Blazing Season. "Does he ever explain what he's done after a case like this, or express any doubt? That is, is he reckless because he genuinely feels he has to be, or does he think he's immortal?"

Weasley smiled sourly and picked up a quill that he tapped along the edge of the desk. "He *always* feels he has to be," he said. "But I think it's a combination of both. He seems to think that as long as he's doing what he does to help other people, then nothing genuinely bad can happen to him."

Draco hissed in displeasure. He couldn't help it. A Veela knew that something bad could always happen to their chosen, or why would *they* be armed with such powerful magic for protecting and defending and soothing in the first bloody place? It did not please him to know that Harry disagreed.

But that had been yet another of the things he had anticipated and knew would happen if he dated Harry, so he tucked the emotion in among all the others he had to worry about and asked, "What most bothers him about having someone else heal him, do you think? Being touched? Being restrained? Drinking potions that other people have brewed?"

"Having someone else interfere with his body." Weasley folded his arms as if he was cold and stared at the far wall. "He doesn't like drinking potions that someone else has made, or eating food that they have, because it's letting ingredients that he didn't watch being prepared inside him. Likewise, he doesn't let people hold him for long, or put their hands in his wounds, or—and I know this sounds strange, but I swear there was justification for it at the time—put their hands in his mouth." Weasley wrung his hand as though he could still feel Harry's teeth. "Nearly took my fingers off."

Draco shut his eyes. "He doesn't want to let people inside him."

"Yes," Weasley said. "That's a crude way to put it, but yes."

Draco thought longingly of the contacts his parents maintained—no longer as extensive as they had been, no, but still present—and their money. If he could just slip into Azkaban and arrange for some time alone with Laurent…

I'd break his wings first. Then I'd take off his cock. Those seem to be the parts of him that have hurt Harry the most.

Draco shook off the fantasy and opened his eyes again. "But he can't take care of himself forever," he said, "or in all circumstances. Does he recognize that?"

"No," Weasley said. "He shrugs off the warnings I've tried to give him, and says that he's lucky and skilled, and both of those things will continue. Like I said, he believes that he's less likely to get wounded if he's acting for someone else's benefit."

"What happens if he breaks a leg?" Draco demanded, getting up and pacing around the office. It felt too small. He had to move. The only good part about it was the scent of Harry that hung around his chair and papers, the photographs and maps on the wall, and a cloak that Harry had evidently brought here and forgotten about. Draco buried his face in it, less shy about doing that than he would have been in front of someone who didn't know his heritage. "If there's an injury to his magical core? You need an expert to heal that. If he loses his wand and can't cast the magic he needs himself?"

"I don't know," Weasley whispered. Draco looked up and saw that his fists were clenched. He still stared at the far wall, but now his expression was deadly hard. "That's the nightmare I live with every day that I'm not with him."

Draco felt a quick flare of empathy, and stepped forwards to lay his hand on Weasley's arm. Weasley blinked at him, then blinked at the hand. Draco squeezed once and let go.

"That's the nightmare I'm going to spare you," he said quietly. "Both of us. All three, if we include your wife. I am going to break Harry free of this, and I'm going to show him that he can rely on other people again. I want him to be mine—there's no denying that—but I want him to be *free,* too."

"If you can do that, Malfoy," Weasley said, his face slowly clearing, "then you deserve every piece of information I've given you today, and more."

Draco smiled, and wondered about the intense, warm feeling glowing in his middle. It probably came from the fact that Weasley could fully accept his Veela side, something Harry couldn't do yet, and could therefore give Draco some company during this part of his struggle. "I'll hold you to that."

"You do that." Weasley was watching him with bright eyes, and Draco decided that he wouldn't

tell his parents about this, yet. There were only so many shocks that they could take since the war.

Draco strode out the door. His mind was already working, searching among the plans that he could come up with and the people he knew for the ones that would best suit Harry. By the time he reached home, he had settled on the one that would work best.

Now he just had to convince *Harry* that it would work best—which, Draco had to admit, was much more of a challenge.

Harry frowned at the file in front of him, then leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers under his chin. When he closed his eyes, he had a momentary smug thought before he plunged into his own mind: Kingsley could send him home for a day, but he couldn't prevent Harry from working.

Then Harry began to consider the case he was currently working on, and frowned. It was an older case, but the facts seemed simple, and on the surface, there was no reason that the Aurors shouldn't have solved it.

Seven years ago, a young witch had been walking—well, staggering—away from Knockturn Alley one night when she had seen two people talking to each other in the middle of Diagon Alley. There was no doubt that one of them was a wizard she'd known at Hogwarts called Arthur Sandys. The other person was a heavyset witch with brilliant red hair, which was long and curly and reached her waist.

The witch claimed that the red-haired one had reached out and touched Sandys. And she said that he had dissolved into a mass of bright, swirling particles, followed a moment later by the red-haired woman.

The Aurors, of course, had assumed that the witch had witnessed the use of a Portkey and was simply too pissed to describe it in a normal manner. It wouldn't have been of any great concern except that they'd discovered the body of Sandys the next morning, lying in the middle of a field two miles away from the nearest wizarding village, covered with multiple deep wounds as if a beast had attacked him.

They had to identify his body from scars on his hands and legs, since his head was missing.

Again, it should have been simple. The Aurors had magic that could analyze the effects and the aftereffects of spells, and if they failed, there were the Unspeakables, who could identify more magic and artifacts than any Auror could learn about in a lifetime, thanks to their extensive files.

Except that no matter what they tried, they couldn't work out what Sandys had died of. The bites weren't familiar, either, but they weren't the cause of death; the Unspeakables had been able to tell the Aurors that much. And whoever had cut his head off had done it without killing him, or else had removed it after he was dead. There was no poison, no bruising as from a beating, no

rupture of the internal organs. And there was no known ritual that would require inflicting bites on a corpse and taking the head. Some might take one, but not both.

They never found the head. They never found the red-haired witch the younger witch had observed. Sandys's death was left a mystery, and his family was left to grieve, and to know that at least one person knew the truth about the murder and would never tell them.

The Aurors had given up investigating the case shortly after they realized they didn't know how Sandys had died, especially because no other victims had turned up. An enterprising trainee had opened the case again a few years ago and taken the notes in the file to the Healers, thinking they might be able to recognize some subtle trace of destructive spells that the Aurors and Unspeakables hadn't, or at least the bites.

Harry snorted. *Healers never know anything except the fastest way to annoy someone.*

And there the case had rested, an unopened, neglected file in the middle of a dozen other neglected files, until Harry had gathered them all up and taken them home for a little light reading. Ron would say that he couldn't solve the case without help, and he certainly couldn't solve the case where so many other people had failed.

But he had no objection to Harry reading about the case, because he thought that. And Harry was accustomed to having more faith in his own powers than other people did.

He rested a hand on his abdomen for a minute. *That wound will barely leave a scar. I healed myself fine.*

He opened his eyes and studied the file thoughtfully again. The best thing he could think of was to go to the place where Sandys's body had been found, and do a bit of looking. Then he would find the witch who had witnessed the abduction, or murder, or whatever it was, but if he talked to her, then word might get back to the Ministry. Harry preferred to look into this on his own for now.

Harry stood up and started to push his chair back. There was no reason not to Apparate to the point where Sandys's body had been discovered today.

Warwickshire, here I come.

The Floo flared up. Harry cast a glare at it. He had almost forgotten it was open, and he considered simply shutting it, or ignoring it and walking out the door.

But Draco's voice said, "Harry?" and Harry sat back down again with a sigh. He owed Draco more than to simply leave when he knew Draco wanted to reach him.

"I'm here," he said, and hoped he didn't sound like he was whinging.

Draco's head appeared in the fire, and he stared at Harry for a long moment, eyes moving slowly over his body. Harry blinked at him. It wasn't the way his friends looked at him, or the way Laurent *had* looked at him, or the way that people who wanted his autograph stared worshipfully at him. It resembled the way other Aurors would evaluate him after some wild charge or raid that had resulted in several captures and injuries, but Harry had no idea why that particular look should enter Draco's eyes right now.

Then he realized it, and held in a sharp sigh. *He's looking to see if I'm hurt.*

It was understandable, perhaps, but really, where was Harry going to go, and how was he going to get injured, when Kingsley had taken him off work for a day?

Then Harry remembered he had been on his way to Warwickshire, and quashed his sense of guilt as hard as he could. He hadn't actually *got* there, and there was no reason that he couldn't do a bit of elementary investigating. The case was seven years old. No murderers would still be lurking about the place.

"Good," Draco said, and then gave him a smile Harry had to admit was dazzling. "Listen, I wanted to know if you would talk to one of my friends."

"Not a Veela," Harry said at once, getting up and pushing away from the fire. He trusted Draco, and it was still hard to be in the same room with him since Harry had seen him spread his wings. A strange Veela was out of the question.

"Not at all," Draco said calmly. "But someone who associates with Veela. He's an expert in magical creatures, and he attended pure-blood families with that heritage for a living, letting them know what to expect."

Harry cocked his head, curious despite himself, and despite the fact that the man sounded distinctly like a Healer. "He attend*ed*? What does he do now?"

"Oh, he's older and retired," Draco said, and smiled at Harry, a mysterious smile that his next words explained. "Besides, he has heart trouble, and a *very* protective consort."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "He's a Veela's partner?"

Draco nodded. "His name's Owen King, and he's one of the more pleasant, polite, and quiet people I've ever met. I think you'd like him."

"Not if I have to meet him in the presence of his partner," Harry said, and folded his arms, and stared at Draco.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Give me credit for knowing you better than that, Harry. Why would I ask you to do something like that?"

Come to think of it, Harry could think of no reason for Draco to force him into a meeting with another Veela, not when he knew what it did to Harry. He settled for shrugging and looking at the floor, hoping that Draco wouldn't notice how red his face was.

"It's all right," Draco said. His voice was softer now, calmer, and infinitely more coaxing. Harry hoped that Draco wasn't about to make a fuss over him. There were things he hated more than that, but none of them were coming to mind right now. "I promise, Harry. Owen didn't accept right away when his Veela chose him, either. He asked her to wait and let him think about it, because he was courting a woman he hoped to marry. He had to make a choice, and he eventually did it, but not for years."

Harry blinked. "I—I didn't know that any Veela would be willing to wait that long," he said. "I didn't know that any Veela *could*."

"It wasn't easy for Lucy," Draco admitted. "That's his consort's name, Lucy Monteverde," he added, as if he thought Harry would be confused by the reference. "But she loved him, and he was willing to let her close enough to him that she could take what she needed and survive. And she tells me that it was worth it because she knows that Owen chose her with all his heart and mind, not just with the first rush of passion through his body. That's one reason many first Veela choices don't last long."

And then his face closed, as if he'd said something he shouldn't have.

"You had one that didn't work out?" Harry asked quietly. There had been rumors that Draco was dating Pansy Parkinson, but that was before Harry had become intimately involved with defending him, and certainly long before he had known Draco was Veela.

"Yes," Draco said. He stared into the distance, as if he saw Parkinson there and regretted what he had lost.

"I'm sorry," Harry said softly. "Is there anything I can do?"
Draco stared and turned his eyes back to him. Then he shook his head and said, "Merlin, Harry, don't do that."

Harry blinked. "Don't do what?"

"I know you're only offering because offering to help people is what you do," Draco said. "But I know exactly what you could do to help me get over Pansy, and I don't want to take advantage of you for more than you intend."

Harry swallowed. "I know," he said. His voice was papery. He tried to make it sound better, and lighter. "You don't want to tie me to the bed."

"That's the problem," Draco said. "I do."

Harry felt a flush work its way along his throat, and at the same time, he knew he flinched back. Draco continued to watch him with burning eyes, his voice so soft that someone listening from a distance and able to hear only the tone never would have guessed the brutal words he was speaking.

"I want to tie you to the bed. I want to hold you tight in my wings. I want to fuck you, and I want to demonstrate my strength to you, and I want to rescue you when you get in trouble on a case. I want to ensure that you have the best healing possible and don't have to rely on your own skills. I want you to trust me and lean your head back on my shoulder and sigh at my sweet words and eat what I prepare. I want to *take care* of you."

Harry clenched his hands together so he wouldn't fly apart. "I thought you understood you might never have that," he said at last.

"I do," Draco said. "But reason has nothing to do with desire."

Harry gritted his teeth. Draco's eyes held the same ravening madness that he had seen consume Laurent. He knew Draco wouldn't go as far as Laurent, he trusted him for that, but he had thought—

He stood up and turned his back on the fire, because it was the only way he would stay sane long enough to finish the conversation. "I don't like people to want me for so much," he said. "I never have."

There was a long pause, and then Draco said, in a voice that held more concern than longing, "Harry?"

Harry shook his head. "People wanted me before Laurent," he said. "They wanted my fame, or my power, or they wanted me to save them, or they wanted me to be evil so that they could hate me. Or they just wanted to pose with me so they could get a photograph taken." He knew his voice was rising, but he hoped Draco would pay more attention to his words than his tone. They were important. "I got exhausted trying to fulfill their demands, but after *him*, it got a lot more intolerable. I can give people what they want, as long as I don't think too much about it. And I wish all the time that they would go away and focus their attention on someone else."

Draco stroked his jaw with one finger and thought for a long time about how to respond. He couldn't stop wanting Harry; he couldn't even apologize for wanting Harry. It was what Veela did, and Harry had to know that. As twisted as Laurent had been, his desire was not the crime. It was what he had done as a result of the desire.

Draco finally said, "I'll try to keep in mind that it'll take you a little while."

"A *long* while," Harry said. His voice was tight.

Draco bowed his head, and said nothing about that. In fact, the things he was hoping Harry

would agree to were steps that would shorten the waiting period, but that wasn't their *only* motive. "But I'm still going to worry about you and want you even if you hold me at a distance. The emotions aren't things you can change. Your friends worry about you a lot more than they let on." He knew that for sure after seeing Weasley in the office this morning.

Harry stood still for a long time. Then he sighed and turned around again. His face was pale and haggard, and Draco's nails twisted with the impulse to go through the fire and touch Harry. "I know," Harry said at last. "I just feel that all the people who want me want to swallow me, consume me, and take my strength for their own, without any thought of what it would cost *me*."

Draco gave him the haughtiest glance he could muster. "I'm not like that. I want you to have your full strength so you can go on satisfying me."

It was a risk, and he knew it from the way Harry stiffened. But it paid off when Harry laughed and slumped against the chair he'd been sitting in when Draco first called, shaking his head. "Arrogant git," he said.

"I know." Draco ducked his head and looked up at Harry through lowered lashes. "But I mean it, Harry. Those desires are there. I'll keep them under control as best I can. But will you do other things that might help? Like visiting Owen?"

Harry bit his lip and considered his fingernails for a minute. Then he looked up, and Draco blinked at the gratitude in his eyes.

"Yes," Harry said. "I—appreciate what you're doing, Draco. I want what you're offering on one level. It's nice knowing that someone's worried about me, that someone finds me attractive, that someone who's not Ron or Hermione would genuinely like to keep me from injuring myself and not just because of the way the morale of the wizarding world would go down if I died." He shrugged, his smile wry. "But another part of me, another level, rejects the notion of having someone care for me."

"I'm going to care for you all the time," Draco said, "when you can tolerate it. But I'll try to back off when it's not the Blazing Season."

"But we've got the Blazing Season to get through first." Harry stared at Draco, his eyes dark. "What *are* we going to do about that?"

"I don't know," Draco said simply, the only honest answer he could give.

Harry sighed and touched his scar with two fingers. Then he said, "All right. I'll visit your friend, and—and you can come with me." He said it in a rush, as if he would give himself time to reconsider if he waited.

The twisting sensation in Draco's fingernails disappeared, and he held back a croon with effort. "Thank you, Harry," he said at last. "That's generous."

Harry smiled at him. "It's normal," he said. "Or normal in a way I want to be, a way I thought I'd healed myself to be at first, and which I'll never get to be if I just stubbornly linger in the same place all my life."

Draco licked his lips. The strength glowing in Harry's green eyes was enough to make him harden. He was glad that Harry wouldn't be able to see it through the flames. "Can we visit Owen tomorrow?"

Harry nodded. "In fact," he added in a dry tone, "I'm sure Kingsley will be *delighted* to give me another day away from work."

Draco laughed, but he was inwardly gloating. *He'll be with me. He'll be in no danger, because I won't let him dash off like that.*

One way or another, both he and Harry would get what they wanted. Draco would see to it, and Harry would join in seeing to it when he could.

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Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eleven—Shamed

"Where are you going today, Draco? You are positively buzzing with excitement."

Draco smiled as he bent down to kiss his mother's cheek. He had stopped by for a swift breakfast with his parents before he accompanied Harry to Owen and Lucy's house. "Going with Harry to see Owen King."

His mother drew back with a little gasp, but it was his father, at the head of the table, who voiced what Draco knew she was probably thinking. "Is that wise? If he reacts to the sight of a Veela he knows in such an extraordinary way—"

I hope his reaction will be extraordinary in other ways soon, Draco thought, but he wouldn't let himself hope too much. This was only the first of several steps to heal Harry, and it might not work. "Lucy won't be there," he reassured his father. "She's agreed to stay away so that Harry can meet Owen in private."

Lucius's eyes narrowed. "I must say, Draco, I find these efforts to coddle Potter and protect him

from whatever he is suffering ridiculous in the extreme. Is it too much to hope that you will be able to do as *you* please at some point?"

He doesn't know what happened to Harry, Draco reminded himself. *And I can't tell him yet.* He was able to speak pleasantly then, once he had got past the temptation to spit or grind his teeth. "I *am* doing as I please, Father. I was the one who came up with the idea of visiting Owen. Harry came close to refusing, but he agreed in the end."

Lucius raised his eyebrows and tapped his fingers against the cane. "I also find myself more and more curious about whether the effort that Potter puts you through can find its equal in any gift that you might receive from him."

Draco gave a little smile and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "You aren't Veela, Father. It's hard for you to understand."

Silence, as Lucius evidently considered whether he could allow that to pass, and then nodded. "Yes, well. Do not back yourself into a corner, Draco, and do not attach yourself too strongly to this one choice. There are others out there who would battle for the honor of your choice, instead of making you do the battling."

Draco bowed and left without another word, but his mind was buzzing with all the things that he could have said in retort to his father. *That's exactly why I don't want them. They would be fighting for the honor of possessing my beauty, or at most the cachet of dating a Veela, and I want someone I can take care of, who needs the care, and who will give back to me in other ways than smiling in a superior fashion at others.*

"I am keeping an eye on the sacrifices I make, Father," he said, and kissed his mother one more time before departing through the Floo. He and Harry had agreed to meet at Harry's house, and the only thing that could have made Draco happier than that gesture of trust was a chance to come with Harry into the house and roll about in the bed until it was clearly marked with their two scents twined together.

His nails twisted, but Draco focused his thoughts sternly on what was possible right now, and the twisting stopped. He would not rush too far or fast and lose what he wanted because of that.

"Hello, Harry."

Harry smiled and nodded at Draco. He couldn't speak for a moment. He had to remind himself that Draco wasn't going to spread his wings and enfold him in them. Just because he had spread them once didn't mean he would do anything like that again. Or at least he would only do it because he was protecting someone dear to him.

And it wouldn't be an issue if I hadn't lost my temper in the first place.

Guilt loosened the clutch of panic, and Harry said, "Hullo, Draco. How far away do Owen and

Lucy live?" He leaned firmly against the locked door and waited for an answer, trying to ignore the way Draco's eyes flickered over his body. He knew Draco was looking for the effect of the wounds, not just sizing him up as a sexual plaything the way Laurent used to.

Draco finally smiled at him and stepped forwards, holding out an arm. "About two hours from here," he said, "and they don't have a connection to the Floo network. They tried, but too many of Owen's old patients contacted him and insisted that he come back and help them, even when Lucy specifically forbade it." Draco rolled his eyes. "People outside a Veela partnership rarely understand how it works."

"Laurent didn't keep me from work," Harry said quietly, concentrating on his words to distract himself from the necessity of laying his hand on Draco's arm. "I reckon he thought it would be too noticeable."

Draco reached out, pausing along the way so that Harry could see the touch was coming, and stroked his hair. His expression was full of wonder, which made Harry glad that he could permit the caress, though he had to hold his breath. "I wouldn't try to keep you from work," Draco said. "I know that it's necessary to you, and you're still young, while Owen is old enough that it was getting dangerous for him to be under that much stress. But I do wish that you took care of yourself more in the line of your work."

Harry sighed, relaxing a bit as Draco removed his hand. "I do what I can. But chasing Dark wizards is inherently more dangerous."

"There are things you could do to make it less dangerous," Draco said, staring at him so commandingly Harry had to look away. "Stay at the Ministry and work on reports the days that Weasley can't be with you, for example."

Harry tensed, and then told himself that he didn't really want an argument with Draco. Besides, what he was saying was a lot more reasonable than the high-handed orders Laurent would have given. "But that means that I'm out a day on a case, Draco," he said quietly. "There are people who need my help, whose lives might end because I decided to take a holiday."

"If that was the case," Draco said, so firmly that Harry blinked, "I'm sure Shacklebolt would send you out with another partner."

"He doesn't, usually," Harry said, thinking as he did so that it was strange. He hadn't bristled at Draco's firmness the way he'd expected to. "He trusts me to handle whatever they throw at me."

Draco opened his mouth, then frowned and leaned in to study Harry. Harry saw his nostrils flare to draw in Harry's scent and had to glance away.

"It's not that I don't trust you," Draco whispered. "But I want you to find a balance between your own safety and doing your job. At the moment, I think the balance is tilted towards your job so much that you can't be objective about your safety."

Harry shrugged. "My job helped a lot after—you know. It consumed so much of my attention that I didn't have to spend as much time thinking about *him*."

"Yes," Draco said softly. "But I'm here now."

Harry sighed. "That's going to take a long time to make a difference."

"As long as you try." Draco sounded more peaceful as he held out his arm again. "Come on, Harry. I have to Side-Along Apparate you. I know Lucy and Owen's house well, but the coordinates tend to change when someone they haven't invited before tries to memorize them."

"How does she do that?" Harry asked, trying to marvel at such a complicated spell rather than worry about his dependency on Draco. He clamped his hand down on Draco's arm. Draco winced, and Harry muttered an apology and tried to relax his grip. He didn't really think Draco would Splinch him, but he had to lean on him, and it was just—it was just *not right.* "I haven't heard of any magic like that."

"It has to do with her and Owen's magic combined." Draco drew Harry closer with a pull of his arm, but Harry gave him a warning look when Draco started to wrap his cloak around him. It wasn't as though he didn't have a Warming Charm. Draco dropped the cloak, but looked more than faintly wistful. "There are many things Veela and their partners can do that they don't share with others."

"And which I probably never learned about," Harry muttered.

Draco turned towards him suddenly and stroked his face so fast that Harry didn't have time to feel afraid. "Among the worst of the crimes that Laurent committed," Draco whispered, "I count his keeping those gifts from you."

Harry blinked, stunned, and then smiled a little. "Thanks," he said, though he really wasn't sure what he was thanking Draco for. For feeling affection? For not touching him too much? Harry didn't understand his own motives sometimes.

That he didn't know didn't appear to matter to Draco. He ducked his head, and a bright, pleased smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "It was my pleasure," he murmured, before his hand tightened and they Apparated.

Harry, pondering what had just happened—how happy Draco was with a few words from him—completely forgot to be frightened of the Apparition until after they had landed.

"Young master Malfoy. How wonderful to see you."

It sometimes disoriented Draco that Owen used the same form of address that his house-elves did. However, Draco would never have dreamed of thinking Owen servile. He was too serene,

too poised, too grand. His white beard flowed down his chin to stop just short of his chest, and his long white hair hung around his head, unbound but nearly combed, and he wore a circlet of silver that contained it. His brown eyes were calm and bright with wisdom. Draco often thought that he was what Dumbledore should have been, or at least that Owen was better-suited to be Headmaster of a school like Hogwarts than Dumbledore.

He saw Harry and smiled slightly, extending one hand. "This is the famous Mr. Potter, then," he said. His voice was deep and rang like someone knocking on a brass bowl. Draco could have listened to it for hours. "I did not think that I would ever meet you. Your problems usually fell outside my purview, and since my dear one diagnosed my weak heart, I do not often leave the house."

Harry's jaw tightened, though he smiled as he shook Owen's hand. Draco could practically hear what he was thinking. *His Veela keeps him confined?*

But no one could have told those thoughts by Harry's tone of voice. At some point, Draco thought, he'd either got training or learned not to express everything that crossed his mind. "Hello, sir," Harry murmured. "Thank you for agreeing to talk to me."

Owen ushered them further into the sitting room he'd walked out of. The room was wide and abundantly open, with windows and glass doors everywhere that let swirling breezes crisscross the space. The scent of the sea came from beyond the nearest door. The walls were white on the bottom, deep green near the top, which led to the impression of standing in a thick, old forest. The furniture, too, was white and green, and Owen took a seat on the nearest chair with a long sigh. "I would have talked to you in any case, if Draco had informed me of your existence," he said, fixing his eyes on Harry's face. "It seems that you are reluctant to choose your chooser for reasons different than existed in my case."

"Yes," Harry said, twisting his hands in front of him. He looked up at the dark green portion of the walls, though, and seemed to relax. Draco, sitting across from him, smiled. It was hard to escape the soothing influence of this room even if you tried. "I was made Veela-struck by the last Veela I dated. He's in prison now for what he did to me while I was under his influence, but I'm not eager to get involved with someone who could do that to me again."

Owen frowned. "This must have happened some time ago? At least a few years. I cannot see the fever in the back of your eyes that being Veela-struck often causes."

Harry nodded and pressed back into the cloth of the chair. His hand on the far side of his body, away from Owen, had clenched into a fist and drummed regularly on the arm. Draco had a hunger-like ache urging him to reach across and touch it, but he couldn't have done that without revealing Harry's nervousness to Owen. "Yes, sir. I broke free of it after I'd been under it for—maybe three days…" His voice trailed off and he stared at the glass door through which the sea roared. Then his eyes shut.

"Harry?" Draco whispered.

He had been so willing. That was the hardest part for Harry to remember afterwards, and it didn't matter how many times he told himself that Laurent had wanted him to be that way, and as long as he was in control, that was the way Harry would be. He hadn't chosen it. He hadn't wanted it.

But that only made him more sick to his stomach, until he had to stop thinking it. Guilt was easier to deal with than helplessness.

Laurent had fucked him and then left Harry lying in the middle of the bed, panting, his arse leaking semen, his body trembling in every limb, while he went to clean himself up. Harry usually took a shower after they were done having sex, no matter how tired he was. He liked the feeling of being clean; he hated waking up with liquid dried and stuck to his skin, whether it was blood or something else.

But with Laurent in control, that simple desire had been destroyed. Instead, Harry wanted what Laurent wanted, which was to sprawl across the bed and look decadent and debauched.

"Look at you." Laurent's voice came from the direction of the bathroom. Harry got up on all fours and looked coyly over his shoulder, because he knew Laurent would like that.

Laurent stood with one hand on the doorframe, eyes fixed on Harry's arse. Harry wriggled again, and sighed in bliss when Laurent stepped across the room and brought his wings down around him like great feathered fans, lightly tickling Harry's sides.

"You're leaking," Laurent whispered, and although Harry knew he was referring to Harry's arse, not his cock, still he instantly got hard. Laurent ran a hand over his hip, found his erection, and laughed fondly, his fingers running back and forth, but nowhere near hard enough to provide satisfaction. "Oh, my beautiful Harry, no one else is ever going to have you. No matter what happens after me, you'll always remember this, always remember how perfect you were for me and with me, and know that no one else can touch that."

Harry whimpered and wriggled, empty the way Laurent had told him to be after they fucked, wanting something in him, and then sighed as Laurent's fingers slid home.

"Always mine," Laurent whispered, and then replaced his fingers with his erection and grasped Harry's shoulders to yank him backwards and inflict long scratches with his claws. "Never anyone else's…always the same…never forget…"

And no, he had never forgotten. The three days didn't blur together. They were separate, long stretches of time in Harry's head, and he remembered them all.

He hated that his own mind still essentially did what Laurent had told it to.

"Harry?"

Harry dragged his mind out of the morass by main force. It had been a long time since a memory had simply ambushed him like that in front of other people, and it had never happened in front of a stranger. He knew his wand was drawn, but at least he kept it down at his side, instead of pointed at anyone, and nodded reassuringly to Draco.

"I'm all right," he said.

"Forgive me, but you are not," King said, leaning forwards in his seat. He fit his name, Harry thought abstractedly, given that silver, crown-like band on the top of his head and his concerned gaze. "I see the sheen in your eyes now. You are still fighting the effects of being Veela-struck, though you had managed to hide them well. How long ago was it now?"

"Two years," Harry said. "Almost three." It was done. He was with friends, and Laurent was in prison. Harry wished he was dead, but if he had ever been going to do that, it would have been in the first few moments, and he had chosen his integrity instead. He slipped the wand back into his pocket.

King sucked in a breath. Then he said, "He raped you?"

Harry nodded tightly. "Among other things."

King nodded back, as though Harry's face had told him more than words could have. "And how did he die?"

Harry smiled grimly at him. He would enjoy surprising King with this revelation, at least. "He didn't. He's still alive."

King clasped his hands together and bowed his head as if in prayer. Then he looked up and said, "I am sorry. I understand now why Draco wanted me to speak with you. I imagine that what happened has left you with very little good feeling towards the Veela."

"I can stand being around Draco," Harry said. "He was my friend before I knew about his Veela heritage." For the first time since he had opened his eyes from the memory, he glanced at Draco. The flame of worry and desire in his face made Harry glance away again immediately. "But when I saw him spread his wings to protect his family, I had to retreat. I thought I wouldn't be able to see him again. It says something about his persistence and his strength that he kept talking to me until I agreed."

King sighed. "You have strength of your own, or you would not have agreed." He was silent for some moments, rubbing at his forehead, and then asked, "Do you wish me to tell you of my life with Lucy?"

Harry licked his lips. He wanted to ask a question that Draco hadn't said he could ask, and he didn't know if he was being too pressing, or if it was too personal. But King was the sort of man

who would probably forgive him asking and simply refuse to answer the question if it was. "I want to know how you stand her allure," he said. "How do you live with someone who has that much power over you?"
King nodded, his eyes showing nothing but sadness and understanding. "She never used it on me until after I had accepted that I wished to be with her," he said. "And then it helped me, because I was under too much stress from day to day. I considered it my fault if one of my patients died, or if someone was so dismayed by their creature heritage that I could not persuade them to accept it. The allure made me feel—far away from the world. When I came back to it, I could deal with the emotions better than if I had been left to recover on my own." He cocked his head to the side, perhaps puzzled by the expression on Harry's face. "The allure is not so different, when used on a Veela's chosen, from the measures that you must take to recover from stressful cases. What do you use?"

Harry shook his head. "My superiors insist that I take short holidays if I'm wounded," he said. "Otherwise, nothing."

King studied him gravely. "If you will excuse my saying so, Mr. Potter, that is wrong in and of itself. I know the sort of work that Aurors do. When I was still working, it was Ministry policy that Aurors speak to Mind-Healers every few months, to clear their heads and make sure that they were not brooding on vengeance or blaming themselves too much."

"I can't trust any Mind-Healers," Harry said bluntly. "Not that I could anyway, because of my fame, but when they were treating me after—after, they didn't believe I could recover. But I did my very best to heal myself. And I didn't have to retire from my job or spend the rest of my life behind wards or do anything else that they said I would." He lifted his chin, because King watched him with wonder and pity, and he *hated* that second emotion. "I didn't do it perfectly. Draco's shown me that. I have a longer way to go than I thought I did. But there's no reason that I should cower and whimper and let Laurent affect my life for the *rest* of my life."

"Without taking time to deal with your wounds," King replied, "you are ignoring some of their effects. Some of the work I did was with humans who had inherited the traits of magical beings without realizing it, and it could take them years to realize that their instinctive desires and needs were simply part of them. There were many young Veela who hated the idea of compelling someone with their allure, for example. But unless they paid attention to it and gained control of it, then they were likely to subtly influence others into giving them promotions, money, or other rewards they sought. It is always better to know the truth and use it to help you in your healing, rather than ignore it."

"But what can I *do*?" Harry asked harshly. He drove his fingers into his arm. He felt dirty and ashamed, the same way he had when Draco had spoken to him through the fire about the Mind-Healers. What he did wasn't good enough. It would never be good enough. But all of the suggestions other people gave him were impossible.

"Calm down, for one."

Harry looked up, startled by the dryness in King's voice, and then realized that subtle ripples were running through the walls from his magic. He smiled sheepishly and concentrated on soothing his temper back into place. He really had spent too much time agitated lately, he thought. It wasn't good for him, or for anyone around him.

King waited until the pictures on the walls had settled back into their proper places. Then he leaned forwards and stared into Harry's eyes from a short distance away, so close that Harry twitched. Draco caught his gaze and smiled at him, and Harry relaxed before he could think about how weird it was, that *Draco* was the means of him doing that.

"Yes," King said, half to himself. "You are still under the influence of the Veela allure, though it has sunk so deep that it is near fading away. I would not answer for your behavior if you came too near the Veela who enslaved you again."

Harry shut his eyes and focused on his breathing. He wanted to destroy things.

"What's the cure?" he asked. His voice did not shake. He was proud of that.

"There are mental disciplines you can train yourself to that would assist in its departure," King said. He spoke slowly, reluctantly. "Occlumency, for example. But that would take months, and I do not know if your job is conducive to your learning them."

Harry shook his head. "I've tried a few times," he admitted. "That was one of the things the Mind-Healers said that sounded sensible. But I was too upset most of the time, and it was better for me to work."

"Or you could allow someone to enter your mind and use Legilimency to destroy the remaining effects of the allure," King continued. "But that would require a trained Mind-Healer."

Harry let his silence speak for him.

"The last solution," King said, "is the most effective. Allow another Veela to exercise his allure on you. The influence of the one who struck you is faint enough now that another exposure to something similar but different—the same magic as wielded by another—could clear it away, like fresh air blowing out stale."

Harry sat still, numb. Then he opened his eyes and whispered, "How could you ever suggest such a thing?"

"I suggest it because it will work," King responded, also in a whisper. "I suggest it because you are much more wounded than I thought you were, and you have a Veela companion already, near at hand, who will stop at nothing needed to make you strong and happy."

Harry made the mistake of looking at Draco. Draco's eyes were enormous, and Harry had the feeling that he was working hard to keep emotion out of them, but there was hunger there. Of

course there was.

"Stop wanting me," Harry told him, his voice unsteady. "I can't put up with people expecting things of me."

"But that is ridiculous," King said.

Harry spun to face him, glad that he had someone who wasn't Draco to take out his frustration on. "What do you *mean*?" he demanded. "Of course I should be able to walk around without someone trying to rape me, or subdue me, or turn me into their perfect boyfriend with the Imperius Curse, the way that's happened sometimes—"

"You should be free of such *actions*," King said sharply. "But no one can be free of expectations. You expect certain things of your colleagues, do you not, that they will back you up on your raids instead of turning traitor and helping the Dark wizards? And you expect certain things of young Master Malfoy, including that he will restrain himself instead of exercising his instincts and that he will do his own soul damage, because he sees the one he has chosen suffering and cannot help him."

Mortified, Harry looked at Draco again. The hunger in his eyes was dimmed, but there was still a yearning that reminded Harry of the kind he had felt when he was eating for the first time in thirty-six hours after a particularly long case.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "I didn't know—" Well, no, that was the problem, he *had*. He had learned enough from Laurent and the books to realize that Veela suffered when they couldn't touch, comfort, defend the people they chose. "I didn't realize," he corrected himself.

"I'll survive," Draco said softly. "But any small concessions that you can make would be appreciated, Harry. And as long as you realize that it's normal for people to want something of you, if not to let their desires run away with them, then I'll be happy."

Harry took a deep breath, and tried, really tried, for the first time since the rape, to think of someone wanting him with something other than horror.

It was an odd feeling. Against the fear that desire might mean the use of more allure appeared his picture of Draco sitting beside the barrier in the Ministry, talking to him for hours and never showing any impatience or stress, or passing him the potion and never claiming more than a delicate touch to his palm.

There was no way that he was ready to let Draco use the allure on him yet, if ever would be. But—

"I trust you," Harry whispered. "And I'm sorry. Your wanting me isn't a horrible thing or an imposition."

Draco moaned in relief as a certain tension he had carried in his shoulders for days faded. Then he stood up and reached out for Harry's hand.

Harry let him take it, looking at Owen with an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry that we took up the time in other things that had nothing to do with learning about you," he said. "I don't try to do that, usually."

"You can come again," Owen said. His eyes lingered on Harry's and Draco's clasped hands, and Draco knew that he didn't imagine the smile of soft satisfaction curving his lips. "You will be more than welcome."

And they left, with Harry walking closer to Draco than he had when they arrived, and not protesting when Draco took his arm to Side-Along him back home. His earlier words hummed in Draco's head like a great bell.

I trust you.

When they reached the door of his home, Harry paused, and sighed, and curled his fingers into the doorframe while he looked over his shoulder.

"I didn't realize Laurent's striking me that way still lingered," he said. "I'm going to work to get rid of it. I don't know if I'm up to the allure, though."

Draco nodded. "I'll put up with it if you aren't." He was so thoroughly sated at the moment that he thought he could promise anything, anything Harry needed, and live with it.

"I'll try meditating tonight," Harry said. "Every little bit helps." He hesitated, then added in a rush, "But if I was going to let any Veela do that to me, it would be you."

Draco purred in spite of himself, a vibration that broke through his lips and into the air in sweet sound. Harry gave him a strained smile and then fled into the house.

Draco sighed, entertained two momentary fantasies—one of tearing Laurent apart, one of touching Harry with the allure and watching his eyes shine—and then went home.

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Chapter: 12

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twelve—Hidden

"You all right, mate?"

Harry started and looked up. He hadn't realized that Ron was watching him so closely, or that he was showing any signs of distress. He had come back to work today and dived into his reports and the files that had accumulated for him. When Ron came in, he'd been reading, and only grunted a little when Ron told him about Hermione and the baby. This was the first time they'd spoken directly to each other.

"Yeah, of course," Harry said, shaking his head a little, so that he wouldn't speak the next words of the report he'd been scribbling. "Why? Do I have dried blood on my face or something?" He touched his cheek and grinned.

Ron smiled back, seeming reluctant but doing it anyway. It was a private joke between them that Ron had gone through an entire case last year, including building wards to keep Harry safe when he broke his leg and then chasing down the criminal, without realizing that he had a streak of dried blood around his eyes that made him look like he was wearing a mask. The Healers who had shown up on the scene had actually been more interested in Ron at first than at Harry, sure he must have a wound somewhere that hadn't stopped bleeding.

Harry snorted softly and rolled his eyes at the memory. That only proved Healers couldn't see what was right in front of them. It had been *dried* blood, and they had still fussed around Ron like bees around a flower.

"No," Ron said. "But sometimes when you come back from a holiday, you're—well, you seem angry or hurt." He shrugged, watching Harry carefully. "Not physically. Just mentally, like you can't imagine separating from work for a minute."

"No," Harry said, though he was trying to think of what Ron meant and couldn't call a coherent picture to mind. *I'm not physically or mentally wounded. I just need to adjust when I'm forced away from work for a while and have to look at old files instead of active ones.*

Then he remembered the Sandys case, and smiled. This was one situation where he thought he could make a difference, and he intended to do a bit of investigating this evening when he was done with his regular workload.

In the meantime, he thought Ron might like to hear about his visit to Owen King.

"Just the opposite of wounded," he said firmly, and told Ron about Apparating to the house and a few of the less personal things King had said to him. As he had thought would happen, Ron relaxed and smiled when Harry talked about letting Draco Side-Along him, and seemed impressed that Harry had entered a house that belonged to a Veela, even if the Veela in question wasn't there right then.

Ron shook his head when Harry finished and said, "It's wonderful, mate. Things are changing for

you, and I'm glad to see it. It's just that—"

"Yeah?" Harry asked. He was surprised. Since Ron had been the one to bring Draco's letter to him and seemed determined that Draco and Harry get together, Harry wouldn't have expected him to be cautious or hesitant about it, the way he looked now.

"I don't want you to go too fast, and strain yourself, and then never muster up the courage to face it again," Ron said quietly. "Tell him if he's making you go too fast. You don't need to see him every day or do everything he likes just because I'm sure he'd want that."

"I know," Harry said, laughing slightly. "If anything, we're going slower than *I* want to. But my stupid reactions control that, not him."

Ron nodded as if half-reassured. "All right. If you're certain."

"Certain," Harry said firmly, and picked up the report. "And now, I have to finish this, or Kingsley will want to know what I did on the days that I spent away from work." He felt a stir of excitement. He *had* been doing something more important than these stupid reports, and if he could find out who had killed Sandys or how, then Kingsley would have to admit that.

Ron laughed, and the rest of the afternoon passed peacefully.

"Hello, darling."

Draco settled back into his chair, staring at the face in the fire and trying to decide how he felt about it. "Pansy," he said at last, which was safe and neutral and true. It was her name, after all. "How are you?"

"Fine." Pansy smiled at him and twirled a lock of hair around her fingers. Then she sighed and seemed to give up the pretense of casualness. "Not really, Draco. I need your help, if you'll give it."

Draco nodded. It made his neck hurt, he was holding himself so stiff.

He didn't fear that he would want Pansy again; he had Harry now, and the presence of another chosen was more than sufficient to hold longings for a wrong former choice at bay. But he still didn't like to think about how stupid he had been. He had been sure that Pansy was all he needed. He had committed himself to her the way only a Veela could commit, pouring his magic and his strength and his time into making her safe and happy.

And he had been an idiot. Pansy hadn't been looking for that from him, and had needed more independence than Draco's instincts wanted to give her.

Well, you've chosen a wonderful target if you want someone who will be able to lean on you and let you do as you like with him.

Draco winced, told his conscience to shut up, and nodded again when he realized that Pansy was waiting for some further confirmation. "If I can. Of course."

"I have a few new friends," Pansy said, her face relaxing into a smile. "They're pure-bloods, but they were raised by an aunt out of England, and they don't know much about their family here. They're trying to track down several relatives who they know lived here at one time. I'd like you to put the Malfoys' genealogical records at their disposal."

Draco relaxed so fast that his muscles felt as if they had melted. "Of course," he said. "I'll go over and fetch them from the Manor." He didn't want Pansy disturbing his parents. There had been a few—unfortunate things said on either side when Draco had let Pansy go. "What names am I looking for?"

"du Michel and Tirannan," said Pansy, looking absurdly grateful. "My friends are searching specifically for a woman named Miranda who would be—oh, in her nineties, I suppose. She's a grandmother's sister or something of the sort. And a cousin named Hugo who would be slightly younger, in his seventies. And a much younger cousin, named Laurent."

Draco froze. He felt as though someone had just turned his eardrums to ice. "Laurent," he repeated softly.

"Yes," Pansy said. "He's the most mysterious one, because they know he was in his twenties, and they assumed that they would have the easiest time locating him, while Miranda and Hugo might have vanished into sharing a house with an older wizard or witch, or died. Miranda might even have married. But apparently Laurent vanished a few years back, and they don't know what happened to him. No recent letters, no one who's seen him. He might have changed his name and appearance. If they can locate him precisely in the family, they're hoping that they can lure him out by telling him he has relatives, or representing their willingness to share the inheritance with him."

Draco's shoulders twitched violently. But he managed to nod, so that Pansy wouldn't think he was too strange. "Of course," he said. "I hope they find him." *Oh, I hope so.*

Then the cold wind of reason blew across his thoughts. *Harry said that he was in Azkaban under an assumed name. It doesn't matter much if you discover who he originally was, if he's not registered under that name.*

But still, the temptation was there inside his mind, glowing like an opal, and Draco barely waited until Pansy's face was out of the fire before he cast a handful of Floo powder into it and called, "Malfoy Manor!"

Harry sighed and leaned against the wall beside the plain wooden door, listening to the fading echoes of his knock.

He'd found nothing at the point where Sandys's body had been discovered. He hadn't really expected to. But unfortunately, it limited what he could do without alerting Kingsley that he was digging about in the old cases.

And he didn't want to alert Kingsley, because, given Harry's recent injury, he might pull him off the case or at least insist that he spend all his leisure time on the cases actually assigned to him. And then Draco might hear about it.

Harry shifted his weight and knocked again. The cottage he stood in front of was a small stone building, with only three windows and probably three rooms at most, certainly no more than one floor. The woman who lived there ought to have heard him by now—unless she was so pissed she was unconscious on the floor. Harry had to admit that was possible.

You dread what might happen if Draco learns about it. That's a good sign that you should stop your research, isn't it?

Harry stubbornly ignored the voice in the back of his head. Draco only wanted Harry's safety, he knew, but if they had strongly differing opinions about that, Harry was still going to trust himself more.

And it wasn't as though this was actually dangerous—probably less dangerous than spending all his free time on active cases. The other Aurors who had tried to reopen it in the past had never received so much as a threatening letter or a hex.

The door opened just when Harry was considering knocking for a third time. A woman's face poked slowly around it, and for a moment they stared at each other. The woman had dark circles so large under her eyes that they looked like reverse glasses, and her hair hung around her face in straggly brown strands.

Harry silently touched his scarlet Auror robes over his heart. They might carry more weight with this particular witness than his scar and face did. "Auror Harry Potter. Are you Hilda Jenkins?"

Jenkins gave a jerky little nod, and then seemed to realize what he'd said. "Oh," she murmured, and then louder, "*Oh!*" She slapped her forehead as if she were ashamed of not having a scar like Harry's and backed away from the door, bobbing her head. "Sorry. Sorry. I didn't know—come in, please, Auror."

Harry stepped into the house. The dimness made him blink and rub his eyes. In front of him was one of the cottage's rooms, or perhaps its only one, sprawling further back than he would have thought it could go. There were signs that someone had knocked out an original wall. The wooden walls were bare except for one shelf filled with books that huddled together as if for protection, and the sunlight didn't seem to get very far. Harry didn't know if that had to do with the griminess of the windows or a deliberate enchantment.

"Have a seat, Auror."

Jenkins was pushing a chair forwards, the legs scraping over the floor and disturbing both the silence and Harry's temper with how loud they squeaked. He nodded and sat down, noticing that there were only two other chairs in the room, and no carpet. Jenkins pulled up another chair and sat down, leaning towards him until Harry thought she would fall over.

"This is about Sandys, isn't it?" she asked. "Poor fellow."

Harry blinked. "Has someone else been asking about him lately?" He was sure he had the original file, but someone could have copied it, he reckoned. It had certainly lain in the Ministry archives for years without any close watch kept on it.

Jenkins laughed. "No, not since that bloke four years ago, but Aurors never ask me about anything else." Harry could believe it. She looked like the kind of person who drifted through her life indulging in petty crimes that mostly harmed herself. She pushed her hair back behind her ears now and gave him her full attention. "What do you want to know?"

Harry hesitated. He had already got most of the details about the disappearance from the file, and he didn't think Jenkins had anything new to add there. "Do you know if he was familiar with the spot where his body was found?" he asked, almost at random.

Jenkins took a deep breath and sat up. "Well," she said. "No one has ever asked me *that* before."

Harry licked his lips and tried to ignore the accelerating beat of his heart. It was silly to believe that he had stumbled on the key to this mystery, when so many Aurors had tried and failed. "Did you tell anyone else this?" he asked.

Jenkins gave him a patient look. "No, because they didn't ask me."

Harry held back the retort he wanted to give, because Jenkins seemed like the kind of person who would clam up and refuse to help the Aurors just because, and she technically wasn't obligated to give any information on a closed case. He waited.

Jenkins nodded impressively. "Not a lot of people know this, but Sandys was always in trouble at Hogwarts," she whispered conspiratorially. "Disappearing into the Forbidden Forest, playing pranks on people that could have hurt them, things like that. His family hushed it up after his death, of course. No need to have people showing up at the funeral and reciting bad things about the deceased."

She looked at Harry as if she expected a response, so Harry nodded and murmured something. He had no idea what it was, and Jenkins didn't seem to care.

"One time, he was out all night," Jenkins said, with a relish that told Harry more about how little she'd had in her life since Hogwarts than words ever could. "He came back the next morning grinning like a lunatic, and none of the professors could make him tell where he'd gone, even

though he got detention for a month." She closed one eye in a slow wink. "I think I'm the only one who remembers that a girl called Mariella from Ravenclaw disappeared at the same time."

"Mariella?" Harry asked, hardly daring to breathe. There had been no hint of any lead like this in the original investigation. *And it might not be a lead,* he rebuked himself sternly in the next moment. *This would have been years before Sandys died.* "What was her last name?"

"I don't remember that," Jenkins said, touching her head and sighing loudly as if to indicate that even the best memories faded. "But you could go and ask the Headmistress. She's a sort of friend of yours, isn't she? And I'm sure that she still has the student records from the years we were there."

Harry nodded and put the idea away for later. "Did they go to the same place?" he asked. "How do you know?"

"Oh, Sandys told me certain things he didn't tell others," Jenkins said, waving one hand. "His family was too hard on him, if you want the truth, and that's the reason he behaved the way he did. I smuggled him Firewhisky, and he would get drunk and maudlin and brag about all the things he'd done that he kept a secret." She nodded impressively at Harry. "He kept them secret, but he had to have *some* audience, you know?"

Harry nodded back, although he was more familiar with the attitude from his fans than for himself, and asked, "And are you sure that it really was the same meadow? In Warwickshire, two miles outside the village of Antimony?"

"Certain," Jenkins said. "He told me all the details about the night they passed there, and he described it well enough that I recognized the description when the papers were full of it and squawking about the body being there." She sighed again. "Poor Sandys."

Harry restrained his exasperation—it would have saved a lot of time if she had just told the first Aurors to work on the case this—and smiled, standing. "Thank you. That was what I came to ask."

"Just be careful," Jenkins said. "Mariella had a bad reputation."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Was she a Dark witch?"

"Oh, no," Jenkins said. "But people she disliked had bad things happen to them—getting bitten by snakes, or falling down stairs, or losing the sight in their right eye. No one ever caught her casting hexes on them, but that doesn't mean she didn't."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He suspected that Jenkins wasn't the most reliable witness, but if he was going to accept some of her advice at face value, he would be a fool to discard the rest simply because it didn't seem likely.

No, you're a fool because you know that you're doing something Draco wouldn't like.

Harry ignored that piece of advice from his conscience. This was much less dangerous than most of the active cases. It had to be. And if Draco didn't know he was investigating it, so what? Draco didn't know the details of most of the crimes that he looked into. If he did, he would probably have a heart attack and demand that Harry stop.

And Harry wasn't going to stop being an Auror, not even for someone who cared for him as deeply as Draco seemed to do. His work was his lifeline, and helping people gave him a deep satisfaction—a conviction that he was doing the right thing—that nothing else could. Besides, he would need it if things worked out badly with Draco and he needed to bury himself in something distant from romance.

"Thank you for coming to see me," Jenkins said, following him to the door. "And thanks for being smart enough to ask the right question."

Harry nodded at her and Apparated home, planning to spend the night writing the right kind of owl to McGonagall, so that she would either let him look through her records or do it herself and owl the results back to him. Hope was pulsing under his heart; he thought he was heading in the right direction now.

Laurent du Michel.

Draco traced the words with one finger, staring hungrily at them. Laurent's parents' names were on the parchment as well, as long with the names of cousins and aunts and uncles—perhaps even the friends Pansy had made—but Draco didn't care about them. It was impossible to tear his eyes away from that first one.

It was impossible not to want to grow claws and shred the paper.

But he folded it and put it away with a tremendous effort of will, and then sank onto the top of the trunk that the house-elves had solicitously cleared of dust before they let him use it as a seat. All around him were the other trunks, sets of drawers, boxes, desks, and other containers that held the Malfoy genealogical records. Generations of past Malfoys had wanted to know how they were connected to other pure-bloods, how marriage and political alliances might play out if they went in different directions…and what blood curses they might need to use on someone who had displeased them.

Now we're above such things, Draco thought automatically, as he often had since the war. It was a matter of pride not to be like the idiots who had thought his parents should vanish from the world.

But his eyes went back to the tray where he had put the papers that he intended to take to Pansy, and he shivered.

It's not as though it's a betrayal of Harry, he reasoned to himself, standing up and striding around the attic to relieve his feelings. He banged his shin on a trunk and swore as he limped, but he wasn't ready to sit down yet. *He doesn't know about it. And it's not as though finding out Laurent's last name would help me find him now. If the Wizengamot kept his trial and disposal in Azkaban secret from the press, then his long-last family probably won't be able to learn what happened or command his release. Why would they think that he's committed a crime? Why would they try to look in Azkaban? There's no harm in passing on the information to Pansy and seeing them try and fail.*

Draco's back itched. He reached back to scratch it, and his face itched in turn, as though it was about to split open and let a beak through, or at least feathers.

But remember that your parents learned at least part of the truth—that Harry's last lover vanished. Surely his family could learn as much. And then they might find out more, and they might visit him in Azkaban.

Draco's mouth watered.

He prowled in another circle and tried to reason with himself. He couldn't stop Pansy's friends from looking for Laurent; if he refused to provide the information, she would only get it somewhere else, from another well-connected family, and Draco would probably lose control of the aftermath. If *he* was the one to give it, then he could at least hear of what happened next. He knew Pansy. She would be willing to talk endlessly about her friends if given half a chance.

What happened after that was up to fate, and these cousins, who might or might not have the money and the cleverness to discover anything about Laurent.

And it's up to justice, Draco thought, flexing his nails once to ease the pressure building up behind them before he scooped up the tray of papers that he planned to take to Pansy.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry looked up and blinked. Draco was in the fire again, no surprise, but the concern in his tone really did seem unwarranted. Harry laid down his report and came to sit in front of the hearth, in concession to Draco's sharp tone. "I'm fine. What's the matter?"

Draco stared at him as if he could see the scar from the healing wound under his clothes. Then his eyes darted away and he muttered something.

"Beg pardon?" Harry asked, though his worry was relaxing into amusement. Draco was probably suffering from some excess of protective Veela instinct, and had had to contact Harry because he couldn't rest until he did.

"I said," Draco murmured now, his face soft as he turned back to regard Harry, "that you were wounded just three days ago. It takes some getting used to, to realize that you're walking about

although you didn't go to St. Mungo's."

Harry rolled a shoulder and said nothing. He didn't understand this obsession people in his life had with making him go to St. Mungo's, or at least lecturing him about how he should go when he had managed to survive just fine on his own. After the way the Healers had treated Draco's own parents, it seemed that he would have known better than to think Healers were always the solution. "I'm fine, yes."

Draco plucked at something invisible from the perspective Harry had on the flames, and then looked up suddenly with wide eyes. "Can I ask you something?" he asked, and when Harry nodded, he blurted, "Are you *sure* that you don't want Laurent dead?"

"Of course I want him dead," Harry said.

Draco's mouth fell open slightly, and Harry could have sworn that he saw his teeth lengthen. He averted his eyes, so that if Draco went Veela, he wouldn't have to see it, and continued in a stronger voice. "But what I *want* is irrelevant in this conversation. What I *want* is for the rape not to have happened. That won't come true. And just because I wanted to kill Laurent in the first moments after I broke free doesn't mean it's the *right* thing to do."

"What if you need it?" Draco insisted in a whisper, his voice so hot that Harry could have sworn he felt it through the more general heat of the fire. "What if you need killing, suffering, a clean end, to move on with your life?"

Harry took a deep breath. "That's a decision I would need to make," he said. "No one else. And I already made it. No."

"You don't know how badly I want to kill him."

Harry blinked. Draco's face wavered, and superimposed over that wasn't the unearthly beauty of a Veela, but the image of a huge raptor, feathers standing on end as it stretched its wings. Harry had never seen Laurent do that. He suspected Laurent hadn't ever gone into a bloodthirsty rage over him.

"I appreciate that," Harry said quietly. "But I've killed Dark wizards, and it really doesn't help, Draco. I promise."

Draco said nothing for so long that Harry wondered if he had vanished completely into his instincts and wasn't listening anymore. Then he was himself again, sitting with his head bowed.

"If you say so," he whispered. Then he looked up, with eyes so fierce that Harry leaned back on his heels. "But *you*. Keep yourself safe, and at least go hunting with Weasley when you're on cases."

Harry winced. He almost wanted to tell Draco everything right then, and listen to what he said,

and accept his scoldings.

But—he couldn't.

I still can't let anyone else control my life. He's already talked as if he'd like me to stop being an Auror. And it isn't dangerous. Not yet. I'll tell him when it is.

"I'll try," he said instead. "Good night, Draco."

Draco sat still, eyes fastened on the last of the smoke dissipating from the hearth, and felt his conscience squirm within him.

I shouldn't be making even vague gestures that might free Laurent.

But there's no guarantee that Pansy's friends are close to finding out what happened to him. Not yet. I'll tell him when they are.

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Chapter: 13

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirteen—Dazzled

"I've been thinking," Harry said.

Draco leaned forwards, intrigued. This had been a normal firecall so far, with Harry giving him a few details of his workday while Draco basked in his presence and asked for nothing else. He felt content and lazy. His parents hadn't pushed him lately to see Harry. Harry hadn't been injured. Harry had agreed to consider a visit to Owen in the next fortnight, and he had spoken with Draco almost every day and spent a few evenings with him.

And Pansy hadn't yet reported anything about her friends' progress. That let Draco ignore the terrible, beautiful vision that the possibility of finding and punishing Laurent held out to him.

"Yes?" Draco encouraged, when Harry did nothing but worry his lip in an adorable manner and wait.

Harry took a deep breath and met his eyes with what Draco thought was immense courage, if the way his hands shook was any indication. Harry seemed to notice where Draco was looking and promptly clasped his hands. "I was thinking that I'm tired of going slowly," Harry said. "I know

that I have to, and Ron warned me about going too fast, and I know that you're patient. But I'd like to do this faster, if we can."

Draco felt a stirring, an unfolding of light, in the middle of his stomach, like the unfolding of a flower. But he refused to get excited yet. He might be mistaking Harry's words. He might *need* to mistake Harry's words, if Harry pushed himself too far to be comfortable and Draco had to rescue him.

"Explain what you mean," Draco said, folding his arms and trying to look calm and patient even as his heart hammered and hummed in his ears.

"Right," Harry said, ears red and face white. "I had another nightmare last night."

Draco promptly sat up straight, his excitement fleeing. "Harry, you should have told me. Do you want to talk about it? Are you sure that—"

"I know what you're going to say," Harry snapped, his eyes very bright. "You're about to ask me whether I'm sure that I want to go through with this, given the nightmare. And the answer is *yes*. I want to, all right? I'm sick of being afraid. I'm getting impatient, and you haven't seen what happens when I get impatient."

Considering the cases that Harry worked and the utterly terrible consequences of too much impatience on them, Draco thought he didn't want to, either. He settled back and nodded, letting Harry control the pace at which he made his revelation.

Harry's hand again shook as he swiped it through his hair, but his eyes were steady as he locked them on Draco. "I'd like you to come to my house," he said. "I'd feel more comfortable doing this in a place that I know and understand."

Draco hoped that he licked away the drool before any of it escaped his lips. He was *almost* sure that he had. He stood up at once, with a nod that he also hoped didn't make his head bob. "Of course, Harry," he said. "At once. Do you want me to use the Floo connection, or would you prefer that I Apparate?"

Harry's jaw worked for a moment, as if he hadn't got that far when he considered having Draco come over. Then he nodded and said firmly, "Floo."

"Very well." Draco kept his voice low and warm, and met Harry's eyes in such a way that it would be difficult for Harry to mistake his meaning. "Thank you, Harry. Thank you very much."

His stomach burned with desire as Harry nodded tensely to him and then vanished from the flames. Draco backed away and stood there for a few moments, taking deep breaths, until he was sure that he wouldn't simply try to jump Harry when he reached his destination. Then he reached for the Floo powder.

For the first time since he had started dating Harry, or trying to, the tightness in his stomach had vanished, giving way to the wonderful, melting-butter sensation that he had felt when he was still sure Pansy was the right chosen for him.

Yes. He understands how much I need this, and maybe how much he does. For right now, that's more than enough.

Harry's heartbeat was making the room blur around him, and he was dangerously close to hyperventilating. He was glad Draco had waited a little while to come through. He strode around the room, trying to use up the excess energy, darting glances at the fireplace and then whirling away again.

He had meant what he had said. It seemed as if his life had crawled this past week. He hadn't made any progress on the Sandys case, one of the cases he and Ron had investigated had been utterly routine but had involved a lot of paperwork, and another had ended when the Dark wizard grew too nervous to continue running and turned himself in. Only the talks with Draco and visits to Hermione and Rose had made Harry not dive into some other old case out of sheer boredom.

He wanted—

He wanted something different. He wanted something new. He wanted to prove that Laurent didn't control him anymore. He wanted to be able to give Draco something he knew his Veela side probably desperately craved, desperately needed.

He just wasn't sure if he wanted Draco in the same way that Draco wanted him.

Then he shrugged and wrapped his arms around himself, shivering as the Floo flared green and let Draco through. Draco *knew* that. He was willing to date Harry anyway, and to let Harry slowly move towards the state he needed to reach before he could reach out. He knew.

It still made Harry's stomach squirm with a heavy, nauseating mixture of guilt and panic, and he found it difficult to smile at Draco.

Draco halted at once, head tilting slightly and eyes brilliant with concern. "Harry," he said. "I can go home, if you want me to."

His voice was heavy with need, but that wasn't the only reason Harry lifted his head, took a deep breath, and said, "No. I'll deal with it. It's just overwhelming, right now. I haven't let anyone touch me that way in years."

"So you're attaching much more importance to this gesture than you would have otherwise," Draco said softly. His voice was pure and perfect, luckily different enough from Laurent's that Harry didn't spiral straight into a panic attack. "I would protect you from your fear if I could, Harry."

Harry smiled in spite of himself, and nodded. "I know that," he said. "Well. Is there anything—I mean, any particular kind of touch that you need first? I don't really know much about this," he confessed with a half-laugh.

Draco's eyes shone as if they were full of moonlight. Then he murmured, "I don't think that you want to give me blanket permission like that, Harry."

"Maybe not," Harry said, and hesitated. "But I can if I want to," he added, reckless suddenly, feeling defiant, as though Laurent were there in the room with him, murmuring *again* about how Harry would always belong to him and never anyone else. "So. I'm going to sit down on that couch and turn around, and I want you to touch my shoulders and my neck and my back any way that you need to. All right?"

He moved before Draco could even agree, sitting down on the couch and facing away from Draco. His hands shook. The desire to turn once more and keep Draco in sight, and hopefully within reach of a curse, was so great that he had a headache in seconds from disobeying it.

But other desires were stronger. He shut his eyes, bowed his head, and tried to keep from otherwise reacting.

I need this.

Draco meant what he had said. He would always want to protect Harry from any fear he ever felt. But that longing disappeared before the white-hot need stabbing him apart from the inside, like a living bolt of lightning.

Draco leaned over the couch behind Harry. Harry's throat bobbed as he swallowed, but he didn't turn around.

"I want to make you feel so good," Draco whispered as he reached out and drew his fingers in light lines around the shell of Harry's ear. Then he touched Harry's hair, separating out two pieces and twining them around his wrist. He didn't tug; although he wanted to, that wasn't the same thing as the need. He leaned over and buried his nose in Harry's scalp, sniffing deeply until the scent was imprinted on his mind and memory. "Tell me the way you like to be touched. Firmly? Gently?"

Harry was silent. Draco wondered if this was too much too soon, or if he was embarrassed. His feelings about that last thought danced around his mind, warring. On the one hand, he could understand why Harry might not want to speak; on the other hand, he was bewildered that Harry thought Draco might think less of him for answering a question that *he* had asked.

"Gently," Harry finally said, voice so hoarse that Draco was glad he stood as close as he did. He might not have heard him otherwise. "Hover your fingers—I mean, that's not proper English, I know—I mean—don't quite touch me, but keep your fingers just above my skin and move them—"

"I know exactly what you mean," Draco said in a soft, sweet voice, remembering in time not to croon. "Hush, Harry. Relax. I'll be here, and I won't do anything that you don't want me to do."

Harry nodded. Draco poised his fingers an inch above Harry's neck and moved them down, letting Harry feel that he was there without any direct contact. A line of gooseflesh followed his touch, and Harry was shivering convulsively now, shifting in place. Draco knew, as clearly as if Harry had spoken it in words, the mixture of discomfort and pleasure he would be feeling. It was a Veela's job to read their chosen's body language and know such things, so that they could react without needing to be asked.

"Marvelous, Harry," Draco said, and was startled by how deep and languid his tone had become. "You're doing so well."

He pushed Harry's shirt gently away from his shoulder and moved his fingers in the same way above the curve of Harry's shoulder blade, down over his collarbone, and up and around in circles on the front of his chest. Harry, by this time, was sighing constantly, and the tight hunch of his shoulders had relaxed a bit. Draco could hear his breath catching in the back of his throat, as if he didn't know whether he should moan.

"You can make noise, for all of me," Draco said, and leaned down so that he could sniff Harry more closely. There were new places to touch, now, as Harry unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it back from his shoulders, and Draco saw the naked skin over his spine for the first time. It was marked with scars and long lines that Draco suspected were the remains of recent cuts and scrapes, but his wonder in seeing it unveiled was too great to permit him to scold. He breathed on it and watched it ripple under his distant touch, more gooseflesh rising, the tiny hairs standing up to point at him.

Draco swallowed. "I'm going to touch you more fully now, Harry," he whispered. The pressure was building up in him to do so, behind his eyes and ears and groin, as if it would simply break forth in a flood if he refused. Draco wanted to act before it became painful. "Will you let me do that?"

Silence for so long that Draco was sure he was going to receive a glance of outrage at any moment. But Harry finally whispered, "Yes. But don't use the allure." He dropped his head forwards on his crossed arms and remained like that, accepting.

Draco moaned the way he knew Harry had fought against doing. "Of course," he said, though he didn't know if Harry heard him, the words were so faint with desire. "Never without your permission. Never, never…"

And then he was touching Harry, and the answering pressure of skin and flesh, muscle and tendon, against his palms rendered him unable to speak.

Harry wondered if Draco knew how many of the shivers breaking across his body were fear and

how many were the restlessness that was the closest he had come to arousal since Laurent made him Veela-struck.

He wondered if Draco knew, because Harry didn't know himself.

It was so *strange.* He hadn't had anyone touch him this intimately in almost three years, and he really hadn't thought he missed it. After all, letting someone touch him this way would have been unthinkable; it meant giving up so much of his control. He had agreed to let Draco do this partially because it was one of the greatest risks he could conceive of, and maybe it would make him remember how much he had to fear and so cure his longing for change.

But, *oh*...

Laurent had never touched Harry so caringly, so expertly, leaning so much on what Harry wanted and what Harry had told him to do. He had never trembled when he was touching Harry. He had never seemed as if he might burst apart any second, unless he could have Harry. Most of the time, they had ended up in bed together long before the foreplay got this far.

Draco was different.

Some of the images of Veela that Harry had carried in his mind over the years shattered with small sparking, cracking sounds, like dull lights going out. He had thought, after Laurent, after the Veela who had looked at him with hostile eyes during the trial and denied that any magical creature would *ever* abuse their powers in such a way, that Veela saw themselves as above humans. Sure, they chose one of them, but that human "chosen" was more like a carefully picked pet than anything else.

Draco touched him with desire, yes, but also reverence. Harry couldn't imagine that he would ever hurt Harry intentionally.

What about unintentionally?

The thought twisted through Harry's body like a coiling dragon, and he gritted his teeth to avoid starting out from under Draco's hands. He wanted to stay here and see what other differences there might be between Draco and Laurent. Separate them enough in his mind, and then maybe he could stand to go further with Draco.

Maybe he could stand to think about the clear, dazzling component to the sludge that seemed to fill his belly, the strange thrum of sensations he had almost forgotten and longings he had no desire to awaken.

I don't want to be—

He knew what he felt. He knew it from the way his skin reacted to Draco's touch and the way his cock was stiffening. But he *couldn't* think about it, not right now. It was—it was beyond him. He

had thought about letting Draco touch him so that he could ease the anxiety King had said he was suffering, but he really hadn't expected to respond this strongly. Why should he, when he still had nightmares about Laurent doing less than this to him?

But they are different.

Harry gritted his teeth and shifted away from Draco's touch. It stopped at once, though Harry could feel Draco's hands hovering above his back, the way they had already, for a few moments before Draco withdrew them. Harry sat up and tugged his shirt back on, doing up the buttons with stiff fingers.

Draco said softly behind him, "I don't think you know what a gift you've given me. One I never expected to have this early in the process."

Harry glanced cautiously back at him, shrugging with one shoulder. "I knew you needed it, and I wanted to see if I could stand it," he said. "That's all. It wasn't that big a deal."

Draco's eyes shone, and Harry swallowed, suddenly realizing the argument that had sounded convincing to him might sound less so to Draco.

"It was more than that," Draco said, and his voice was soft and so thick that Harry found himself moving his arms to make sure he still could. That voice enfolded him like a cloak made of velvet. "And you have no idea," Draco went on in the same tone, starting to walk slowly around the couch. "This was an ordinary occurrence to you, wasn't it?"

"Knowing what you do about my past," Harry said, and was grateful to hear that his voice sounded cold and commanding, "how can you think this didn't mean anything to me?"

Draco paused, blinked as if he hadn't expected the reminder, and then bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. But it meant something different to you than it did to me, even if it was as profound."

Harry had no problem nodding agreement to that. He knew he wasn't Veela, and he had no wish to be. "Yes, it did. But so what?"

Draco stepped around the couch and came closer to him. Harry swallowed back the bile and reminded himself that Draco had spent the last ten minutes touching him without any harm coming to Harry, or without his hands closing and clamping down the way Harry knew Laurent's hands would have.

Don't think about Laurent right now.

"Because," Draco said, "I always knew on an intellectual level that you intended to date me. You promised. But there are levels on which it's harder to convince someone, whether that person is human or Veela. I am more…stubborn than some, you might say, precisely because of that. Until

the gift you gave me just now, part of me was hanging back, doubting whether you would keep your word. And now that part is fully engaged." He sounded like someone who had eaten a wonderful meal and was still a bit stunned by how good it had tasted.

Harry nodded, cautious but grateful that he understood. "You're welcome."

"That part of me," Draco whispered, halting a foot away, "and the rest of me as well, wants to make you happy. What can I do for you?"

Harry frowned in confusion. There was nothing, was there? He didn't think he could explain the confused brewing of arousal and disgust in his belly to anyone yet, and Draco was probably the worst choice if he did want to. Draco would try to reason it away, or tell him it was natural, and Harry wasn't in the mood to hear that right now.

He could ask Draco to leave, but that wasn't something that would make him happy, simply relieved. And Draco would know the difference between the two emotions.

"I don't know," Harry said at last. He sounded stupid and felt helpless, and he made a sharp little gesture when Draco acted as if he would step forwards and open his mouth. "I really *don't.* There's nothing that would make me feel any happier right now than I already do."

"Think about it," Draco said, his voice deepening. Harry gripped his wand. Was this a Veela trick as well? But Laurent's voice had always risen higher when he began a croon, and Draco's voice had tended in the same direction during the dangerous moments he and Harry had shared. "Let me—I *want* to." He gave a wriggle that reminded Harry of the way Bill's little girl, Victoire, acted when she was trying to contain her anticipation over a promised treat. "Is there nothing? Nothing I can provide for you, fetch you, give you?"

Harry hesitated. Now that Draco put it that way, he could think of one thing. He was running into shut doors on the Sandys case, and he thought that Draco's company might enable him to open them. As it had turned out, Mariella's family was pure-blood, and Voldemort sympathizers at that, and they had steadfastly refused to talk to the man who had destroyed "their Lord."

A Malfoy accompanying him might change that, and finally allow Sandys's family to have some peace.

But for that to work, Harry would have to tell Draco about the Sandys case, and probably endure a scolding. And he didn't want to use Draco that way, for his blood instead of for his abilities. How was he any better than Voldemort if he did?

"Tell me."

Harry looked up and blinked. Draco was an inch away, but Harry had been so deeply involved in his thoughts, or Draco had been so silent, that he hadn't heard him come closer. Now Draco's mouth was open and yearning, one hand extended to the side as if he was trying to ease the

desire thrumming through him without frightening Harry, and his eyes so round and wet that Harry wouldn't have been surprised if he started weeping.

"It's all right," Harry said, startled into gentleness despite himself. He had seen victims who looked like that after Dark wizards tortured them or killed their loved ones, and he couldn't allow Draco to suffer the same way. He reached out and wound his fingers gently around the extended hand, massaging it, moving it back towards him. "Will you go mad or something if I don't let you make me happy?"

Draco shuddered. Harry's touch on his hand cut through the rising mist of desperation and yearning to restore him to something like sanity.

Merlin help me, that was a mind-cloud.

Draco honestly hadn't expected to have that particular problem. A Veela mind-cloud happened when two intense emotions gripped them at once, or two natural instincts came into conflict. In this case, it had been the instinct to make Harry happy and the instinct to protect him by backing off.

It hurt, leaving an aching feeling in his jaw as if he'd held it open too long, and a similar ache in his mind. Draco badly wanted to cuddle up to Harry, lay his head on his shoulder, and go to sleep until he felt better.

But already Harry was beginning to look ill at ease where he held Draco's hand, although his voice never rose above soft and soothing, and Draco knew he had to pull himself back together. He coughed to clear his throat and squeezed Harry's hand for a moment before he pulled his hand free. "I'll be all right," he mumbled as Harry scanned him narrowly. "Honest. I didn't expect that, but I have my breath back now."

Harry accepted it with a small smile. "I'm sorry, Draco," he said. "I don't think there's anything you can do that would make me happier than what you're doing now. Visit me, talk with me, help me grow again into the sort of person who can take charge of his own life and relax around other people. You make me happy just the way you are."

Draco worked so hard at that moment not to burst out into a croon that he felt his jaw ache again. But it didn't matter. Harry had just said that the greatest gift Draco could give him was the gift of himself.

"Do you realize how romantic that is?" he whispered, and reached out, slowly, to cup Harry's face.

Harry rolled his eyes down to Draco's hand, and then back up, looking bewildered. "Um," he said. "No?"

"It was," Draco said, and then pulled back reluctantly, because Harry's breathing was getting

faster, and not in a good way. "I'll do my best to make you happy. I promise. I *swear*."

"You don't have to do that," Harry said, his voice wary. "I believe you."

"I know," Draco said, "but I want to."

His world warmed again when Harry smiled at him, even if the smile held no real understanding. "If you want to," Harry agreed. "I'll see you tomorrow."

It was a blunt dismissal, but Draco knew that Harry was probably trying to get him to leave before he lashed out or backed away or did something else that would make them both regret their time together. Draco nodded, murmured, "Sleep well," and then departed back through the fireplace.

He called for a house-elf to make him ice-cream as soon as he got home. If he couldn't yet have one bit of sweetness, he would have another.

Besides, this evening needed a proper celebration.

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Chapter: 14

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fourteen—Astounded

"Happy Christmas, Harry!"

Harry, stepping out of the fire, barely caught the present that Hermione tossed at him in time. He bent around it, grunted, and slammed his elbow into the mantle as he tried not to fall in the fire. Laughter rose from around him, indicating that his attempt had been noticed and thought less than successful by more than a few people.

"Look, it's Hermione's annual attempt to murder Harry!" George held up his glass of Firewhisky in a toast to Hermione. "Quite good, Hermione. Full marks, except for the part where he didn't die."

Hermione flushed, but laughed instead of glaring, especially when Harry straightened up and gave her a melancholy shake of his head. "Watch out, George," Harry told him. "She's secretly betting on me *not* dying, and that's how she makes her money out of you."

George turned his own fake glare on Hermione, and the room broke apart in laughter again. Harry smiled and moved away from the fireplace, receiving a clap on his shoulder from Ron, a nod from Bill, and a hug from Mrs. Weasley all in a few paces.

Coming to the Burrow for Christmas was something special in his year, Harry thought, as Mr. Weasley handed him his own glass of Firewhisky and Harry pretended to sip. The Weasleys had gatherings on Easter and on birthdays, too, but Christmas had its own unique atmosphere. The house was full of children—Bill and Fleur's son and daughters, Percy and Audrey's toddlers Lucy and Molly, George and Angelina's son Fred, and now Rose—and the air full of excitement looking for a place to land. It wasn't always *comfortable,* but he could tolerate the more distressing parts of it, and in the meantime his own spirits were raised and shaken about until it was hard to remember what had last hurt him.

"How's your shoulder doing, mate?" Ron asked, pausing behind Harry's chair to lean over and yell in his ear. Harry rolled his eyes good-naturedly. From the fumes, Ron was already halfway to drunk.

"Fine." Harry rolled and straightened it, to prove he could. He'd had a run-in with one of the tougher Dark wizards he and Ron had fought this year, and the bastard had got a curse in at Harry's shoulder that shredded the muscle before they took him down. But a few careful healing spells and some advice from Hermione had set the shoulder more than right. It barely ached at all.

"Good, that's good," Ron muttered, and then stood there swaying, as if he had forgotten that he had somewhere else to be. Harry turned around and raised an eyebrow at him, wondering what he wanted now.

"How're you getting along with Malfoy?" Ron asked suddenly, and not more quietly than he had the last time.

Several people fell silent and turned to stare, Percy among them. His lips were tight with disapproval, and Harry tried to smile diplomatically at him while privately wishing that Ron would shut up. "Uh, fine," he said, trying to remember if Percy had any grudge against Draco. He didn't think so, but it was possible that Percy, like other members of the Ministry, disapproved of the acquittal the Wizengamot had given the Malfoys. "We're taking it one day at a time."

"Taken *what* one day at a time?" Percy asked, moving a step forwards. His wife, delicate and pretty red-haired Audrey, looked interested as well, and Bill, and Fleur, and Ginny, who raised an eyebrow as if encouraging Harry to tell the truth.

"Nothing important," Harry started to say.

"A friendship," Hermione said, with a sharp glance at Harry as if to say that she would let him call his relationship with Draco a lot of things, but never unimportant. "Malfoy approached

Harry about letting old grudges fade completely and starting over. Harry's accepted his hand in friendship."

Bill and Audrey nodded and turned back to their children, who were currently trying to murder each other and needed supervision. Percy watched doubtfully a moment longer, but grunted and went to fetch more Firewhisky. Ginny and Fleur moved closer.

"Sorry," Ron mumbled at Harry. His face and his hair looked like one giant blob of contrasting color with his newest blue Weasley jumper.

Harry sighed and punched him in the arm. "I know, mate. It's all right. Considering what you've done for me and him, making me answer a few questions isn't a big deal."

Ron, restored to grins and smugness, went lumbering across the room to break up a struggle for toys between Fred and Victoire. Harry rolled his eyes and settled into the chair, sipping at his Firewhisky as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"You know, I wondered what Malfoy was doing there," Ginny said, leaning a hip against Harry's chair as she bent to peck his cheek. Harry tilted his head up to receive it, smiling at her. If he hadn't been gay and Ginny hadn't needed someone in her life who was there more often than an Auror could be, they would have made a good couple.

"Last month, when you were wounded," Ginny continued, as if there was a chance that Harry could misunderstand her. "I didn't think your schoolboy rival was high on the list of people you would have chosen to comfort you."

"Not *chosen*," Harry said. "Not as such. He was the one to offer me his hand first. I accepted." Those were careful words that told the truth without actually telling the truth about his and Draco's relationship. A tug low in his stomach warned Harry, for whatever reason, that he shouldn't lie about it.

"It eez more than that," Fleur said, so suddenly and softly that it took Harry a moment to hear her and longer to understand what she was implying. "Eez it not?"

Harry caught his breath and looked at her. She was watching him with calm, sad blue eyes, one hand reaching out to instinctively stop Louis as he hurtled past her, yelling, to the other side of the room. The little boy looked up at his mother, nodded, and then walked off at a more sedate pace. Harry understood why. There was something about Fleur that was commanding without being harsh. Her children all obeyed her better than they did Bill.

Harry had had fewer problems around her than he would have imagined after Laurent's arrest, but it was still—hard. She didn't look as much like a full Veela as Laurent had or Draco could, and her allure doubly had no effect on him, given his orientation as well as his natural resistance. She couldn't really hurt him. Not *really*.

But this was the closest he had been to her in three years, and it was one thing to have a shouted conversation from the other side of the room and another to sit in a chair right below her. Especially when it seemed that she might be near guessing the truth of his and Draco's relationship. Harry looked down, toying with his glass.

"More than that?" Ginny asked, bright suspicion in her tone. "What does she mean, Harry?"

Harry shut his eyes and tried not to throw up. Ron and Hermione were the only Weasleys who knew all the gory details of what Laurent had done to him. Ginny and her parents knew that Laurent had been arrested, tried, and quietly sentenced because of something he had done to Harry that meant Harry couldn't continue dating him; the other Weasley siblings and spouses knew less than that. But he had never confessed…he had never…

You don't have to, said a voice in the back of his head, reassuring and calm. Harry had trained himself to hear that voice in the really bad situations, after he realized the Mind-Healers would be less than useless to him. The voice usually sounded like Hermione, but now it had some of Draco's force and attitude. *You only have to tell them what they need to know. They're not going to push for or suspect more.*

Harry took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and managed to smile. "Draco and I are dating," he said. "Taking it slowly. There's a lot between us. A lot of history to overcome." *Especially on my side,* he thought wryly. "But it's building."

Ginny had a soft, slow smile that she gave sometimes when she was really pleased. She used it now. "Harry, I'm so glad," she said, taking and squeezing his hand. "I didn't know if you would ever date again."

Fleur nodded her congratulations, too, but there was an alertness in her eyes that told Harry she didn't completely believe him. Or perhaps that she knew something about Draco that Ginny didn't. Could Veela smell other Veela, or sense the touch of them somehow? It was only last week that Draco had run his fingers over Harry's skin.

Come to think of it, Fleur was looking absently at Harry's back and shoulders, where Draco had touched him. It might only be coincidence, but…

"Gin!" Hermione called from across the room. "Do you want to come and hold Rosie?"

Ginny was across the room in a flash. Hermione laughed and then raised her voice again. "Fleur! I think Rose misses you. You know you're her favorite."

"In a moment," Fleur said, never taking her eyes from Harry's. Harry had started to smile at Hermione's efforts to protect him, but he let his face freeze now, and returned Fleur's gaze as evenly as he could. Fleur bent closer to him and whispered, "He eez a Veela, thees Draco of yours. Are you his chosen?"

It wasn't the question Harry had been afraid she would ask, and he was able to relax a little as he replied. "Yeah," he said. "But I don't—that is, I never asked a Veela to come along and choose me like that. I'm a little skittish about not having my own life after Voldemort and the prophecy and the people who wanted to control me, you know? And so we're slowly building our trust so that I can make sure I don't take off on him and he can make sure I'm what he really wants."

Fleur looked steadily at him for some time longer, the compassion in her eyes wide and enormous. Then she bowed her head and murmured, "If thees will help you, then I have nothink to say against it."

Harry managed a smile. "Why should you? He's been gentle with me. And he understands why I might not want to date a magical creature who could control me with the allure."

Fleur waited a second, smoothing a hand down the arm of the chair as if that would help her understand things better, and then looked up.

"I know what happened," she said. "With Laurent. I could sense it when I next saw you."

Harry froze. It felt as though his eyelashes, his eyeballs, his mouth were all part of one glittering mask of ice. Someone could have slapped him and he would have shattered, he was sure of it. But within him, his emotions weren't frozen. They ran in circles, screaming.

"I am hopink that you are done with that," Fleur said, and Harry had the impression that she was picking her way across a field of shattered eggshells, moving as delicately as she could. "But thees…to be with a Veela eez *enormous,* Harry. Responsibility, time, work. You do not tend to him as he will tend to you, but you must let go and let him take care of you, or it will be impossible. It will be painful." She touched Harry's shoulder. "Can you do thees? I fear for you and I fear for him."

Harry looked down, his fists clenched so tightly that his hands hurt, and didn't answer. What in the world *could* he answer? There was no response that wouldn't condemn him somehow.

And besides, his emotions still circled, and screamed, around that one central point. Fleur had *known*. Someone Harry didn't want to tell the secret to knew what had happened between him and Laurent.

"Can you do thees?" Fleur repeated, her accent thicker with agitation. Her hand pressed down as if she would wear through his shoulder, and her eyes darted over Harry's face, seeing and absorbing God knew what and drawing God knew what conclusions.

Control, control, Harry chanted to himself, a chant that he rarely needed to say anymore, so ingrained had the need for control become in him. He licked his lips, met Fleur's gaze, and said, "I don't know. We're—it's a trial basis for now. He knows that, and he knows that it's hard for me to let a Veela near me at all, let alone in the position of a lover." He glanced expressively at Fleur's hand on his shoulder.

She drew it back at once, face more flushed than Harry had ever seen it. "Pardon me, Harry," she said, and then her expression grew cooler. "But for most Veela, there *ees* no trial. The choosing, it ees a serious thing, yes? You must treat it seriously."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I know. But Draco knows the risks, like I told you. And I know that Veela can recover and make the choice again if it turns out that the first one is the wrong one for them. Draco told me that he already chose wrong once before. He probably *wouldn't* have tried with me if he had known what happened with Laurent."

Fleur pulled back from the arm of the chair, but continued to pin Harry with intense eyes. "Veela can make another choice, yes," she said. "But it ees very hard on them, so hard that some are—what ees the right word?—depressed ees perhaps best. Yes, depressed, and very hard for them to recover."

Harry flinched. "I didn't—I don't want that. But I don't know what else to do. I know he needs me, but there's only so much I can give him."

Fleur was silent for a little, hand ticking back and forth by her side like a metronome. Then she said, "He will need you, almost more than you need him. He will need you to be there for him, to touch and soothe and defend him."

Harry sat up in his chair, new energy flooding his muscles It felt as if he had taken a drink from the almost-forgotten glass of Firewhisky in his hand. "Why didn't you *say* that?" he demanded. "I've felt that, but I haven't ever heard anyone say it."

Fleur stared at him, her face a mask of puzzlement. "What?"

"That he needs me to defend him," Harry said. "I can do that. I can give him that. It's what I can do best."

Fleur squinted at him this time. "It ees not the only thing he needs, Harry," she said very gently. "And you must not urge yourself so far that you fall over the cliff, or cannot stand to be near him."

Harry waved that away. He wasn't near that yet. He knew he wasn't. If he could bear to have Draco touch him all over the other night and still not rear up and drive him away, then he was close to other things as well. And those things *must* be inherently less difficult for him, because he was doing them to protect Draco.

"Thanks, Fleur," he said, grinning at her. "Among other things, I know what to get Draco for Christmas now."

Tentative, looking unsure if she had done a good thing or not, Fleur smiled back.

"Happy Christmas, Draco."

Draco inclined his head, not wanting to trust his voice when he was so happy. Harry had agreed to spend Boxing Day at his house, and though he had had to explain gently that he didn't want to go to the Manor and see Lucius and Narcissa yet, Draco had spent the last week in joyful dreams of what would happen when he came.

But dreaming of it was not the same as seeing it happen, and Harry climbed out of the fire and walked towards him now, real, firm, *there*, with a box in his hand wrapped in silver paper and a smile on his face that was joined by a blush when Draco took his free hand.

"You're here," Draco said dazedly. He felt almost drunk. He clasped his hands into a ring and ran them up and down Harry's arm, delighting in the different feel of the muscles, in the bends and folds and ripples of his shirt. Then he paused, wondering fearfully if he should have asked permission.

But Harry laughed aloud, face shining, and then leaned towards Draco, touched his hand firmly to the back of his neck, and kissed him.

Draco froze. He knew a response was called for, but he couldn't give one, he *couldn't* His whole being was focused on his lips, and the way that Harry turned his head gently back and forth, as if he wanted to taste what flavor Draco's mouth had from each angle. Draco's fingers trembled and opened, and he leaned forwards, melting against Harry's chest.

"Easy, easy," Harry said, perhaps because Draco was half-collapsing against him. Even the puffs of breath from his words on Draco's ear were a wonder and a miracle. "It's all right. I would have done this long since if I had known what you wanted. It's all right." And then he *nuzzled Draco's ear with his lips.*

Draco turned his head and kissed passionately back, darting his tongue out, moaning continually. He would have been ashamed of that, but why should he? He was a Veela, he was with his chosen, and his chosen had chosen *him*, had finally responded and started to mark him the way Draco felt he should be marked. His hands clamped down on the back of Harry's neck, and he pulled him impatiently closer.

Harry cried out suddenly into his mouth, and the cry was not one that could be mistaken for desire. Draco let him go at once, his muscles locked tight with knowledge of the distress that he had caused him. Harry stumbled back, raising one hand to his mouth as if surprised to find that he still possessed lips.

"You went too far," Draco said. His voice was low, and he almost didn't recognize it. When he glanced down, he saw that claws had replaced his nails, giving him weapons to defend his chosen if needed. He unobtrusively changed them back. This was not an enemy that could be fought, except in the confines of Harry's mind.

"Yeah." Harry bent over, bracing his hands on his knees as if he had run a long distance, and continued to breathe for a time without meeting Draco's eyes. When he did straighten back up, his whole body shook, though he controlled that after a massive flinch. "I didn't—I wanted to comfort you, but it didn't work."

Draco stood still, licking the taste of disappointment away from his lips as he would lick the salt from seawater. "So you didn't do this because you *wanted* to," he said, "because you were suddenly overcome with desire for me. You did this because you thought I needed it, and it's your way to protect people."

Harry's eyes flickered with complicated emotions, of which guilt was only one. Then he ducked his head and sighed. "I wanted to," he said. "I wanted to because I thought you needed it, but it wasn't—*only* that. I wanted to see what would happen if I kissed you. I hoped I could bear it longer than that." His voice thinned. "I want Laurent's effect on me to be gone so, so much."

Draco couldn't help himself. It was an instinct as strong as the need to breathe, and he stepped forwards, crooning.

Harry's face went white. But he gripped the box in his hand so hard that Draco feared he would crush it and didn't back away. He even closed his eyes and visibly forced himself to listen to the croon, the soothing sound that was meant for defense of one's chosen, bowing his head to it, engaging in a surrender as fierce as any battle.

More tension eased from Draco's shoulders as he stepped up beside Harry and sang softly into his ear. The tension seemed to flow into Harry, who swallowed and, once, gasped as if something had stung him, but kept listening. He even let Draco put his hands on his shoulders and work to massage some of the tightness out, though Draco was doubtful about how much good that did.

The need to croon eased as Harry stopped flinching, and finally Draco clamped his mouth down on the noise and strangled the last few puffs. Harry raised his head, blinking, and smiled weakly at Draco.

"You don't need to do that again simply because you think I want it," Draco murmured. He would have been happiest, of course, if he could have enfolded his chosen in his wings and held him close, forcing healing sleep on him, but at least Harry didn't back away from him or pace around the room. "I'll get by fine without it. It's *you* I'm worried about, *you* I want to focus on."

Harry made a peculiar choking noise. It took Draco a moment to realize he was laughing.

"Isn't that perfect, then?" Harry gasped through the laughter. "A fine pair we make."

Draco stared at him, and tried not to get lost in how perfect he found everything from the shine in Harry's eyes to the arch of his eyebrows. "I don't understand."

"I need to do what you want," Harry said. He rested his hands on Draco's arms and smiled, and

Draco was entranced; he thought it was the most honest look Harry had ever given him. "And you need to do what I want. We're so busy sacrificing ourselves for each other and scolding when it turns out that the other person is forcing himself past his boundaries that we don't realize we're doing the *exact same fucking thing*."

Draco felt his mouth fall open. How in the world had Harry noticed that? It was the sort of thing that Veela were supposed to be good at noticing.

"I just want you to really want me," he muttered, not knowing what else to say.

"I know," Harry said. "But it's going to take me the longest to get to that. I'm barely comfortable with the arousal I felt when you touched me last week."

"You were *aroused*?" Draco could feel his neck pulsing as if the silver feathers that only grew there in the Blazing Season would force themselves out now.

Harry smiled softly at him and nodded. "Yes. You're very—convincing. But accept what I can give you for now, all right? It'll be more in time. I promise, Draco, it'll be more than that. I like you a lot. I'll get comfortable with wanting you, because I can't imagine anything else." He offered the box he held. "Happy Christmas, again."

Draco shredded the silver paper on the box with the claws that had once again replaced his nails. Harry raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Inside the box was a silver bracelet of thick, flat, jointed links that fell apart into two halves when Draco touched it. He blinked at Harry, seeking some explanation, even as his hand closed down on it because Harry had given it to him.

"It's enchanted," Harry said unnecessarily, and picked up the half that lay nearer him on Draco's palm—or tried. He had to wrestle with it for a moment, as Draco's fingers didn't want to let it go. Harry smiled at him and laid the bracelet half against his wrist. It gleamed, writhed, and closed into a whole circle. "Put on the other one."

Draco did. For a moment, he felt only cool metal against his skin, gradually warming as it picked up his body heat.

And then he heard a steady, muffled noise. He glanced over his shoulder; it sounded so close that it might have been right behind him.

"That's my heartbeat," Harry said quietly. "As long as you can hear it, and how fast it's beating, then you'll know I'm still alive."

Draco couldn't speak. He moved slowly towards Harry again, wary of frightening him off, but Harry had obviously braced himself to bear this, and Draco could hug him. He burrowed his head into Harry's neck, sniffing, and listening all the while to the noise of his heart, like someone

pounding a hammer inside a tunnel of velvet.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, physically incapable of raising his voice. "I only got you a book on Veela, the most accurate one I know. I thought that would help you understand me better. But I didn't get you anything like this. I thought it was presumptuous."

"I know." Harry hesitated for long moments, then wound his arms slowly around Draco. "It's all right. I'm the one who has to make those sort of decisions. It's all right."

Draco stiffened suddenly. A faint, chill trace clung to Harry, the trace of another Veela. Draco raised his head. "Have you been near someone else?" he asked. "You didn't—tell me that you didn't go to Azkaban to visit Laurent."

Harry laughed, a bark that cut through Draco. "No. Fleur Delacour—do you remember her?—married Bill Weasley. I was over there yesterday." He paused. "She was the one who warned me that you might need more from me than you'd got so far, and gave me the idea for your gift."

"Then she's brilliant," Draco said firmly, and hugged Harry again, luxuriating in the ability to hold Harry and have Harry hold him back.

Even when Harry stepped away again, his face caught somewhere between wariness and wonder, Draco felt relaxed and calm. The dinner that followed was the happiest he could ever remember, and the tentative kiss that Harry brushed across his cheek before he vanished back through the fire was the best he'd ever had.

He went to bed that night with the bracelet close to his cheek and the sound of his chosen's heart in his ears.

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Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fifteen—Marked

"Harry!"

Ron's voice shouted down the corridor, but Harry couldn't turn around and face him, couldn't do more than give a hurried shout back. He was working with fierce concentration on the wound in his leg, which Yvonne Mullins had cut with a well-placed curse before he could subdue her.

Mullins moaned in ropes now, her legs twitching feebly, but that didn't mean Harry could relax. *No one,* in his experience, relaxed when hit in the femoral artery. He was glad that the battle-rage hadn't been so fierce this time that he hadn't felt the pain until later, the way it sometimes happened.

"Mate!"

Ron skidded to a stop beside him and fell to one knee, staring at the wound in horror. Harry nodded at him in acknowledgment but didn't stop wrapping the bandage he'd conjured around and around his leg. He'd already cut off the legs of his robes and his trousers so that he could reach the injury without distraction.

"Here, let me help," Ron whispered, sounding heartbroken, as if he thought Harry was really going to die. He reached out.

"No," Harry said sharply, slapping at his wrist without stopping. Ron looked stricken, but Harry didn't much care. Pausing to let Ron interfere would probably doom him, because it would be a moment of no pressure on the wound. "I'll be all right. But I have to stop the bleeding *now*, and there's nothing you can do that I can't do for myself."

"Except carry you, right?" Ron looked over at Mullins and shook his head when she still managed to give him a defiant look, although Harry had gagged her and bound her hands so that she couldn't cast a spell. "There's no way you're going to manage walking by yourself, and I'd think it was my partnerly duty to knock you down if you tried." He smiled, but a swift glimpse told Harry that the expression was sick and wan.

"Sure," Harry said. "You can use *Mobilicorpus* and conjure a stretcher to get me out of here."

"Here" was the house not far from Hogsmeade where an anonymous owl had led them. It had been loaded with traps, but Harry and Ron had worked together to disarm them, and then Harry had seen Mullins fleeing down a narrow corridor and chased her. Harry hoped he wasn't going to die here. This particular room was dim—the main reason he hadn't seen Mullins leveling her wand at him—and had dingy walls. It would be a depressing last memory.

But I'm not going to die, he reminded himself. The bandages were finally complete, as tight as he could wrap them, and he took the time to reach out and squeeze Ron's hand in reassurance. The shivers that were breaking out over his body were problematic, but it was time to cast the spells that would ease his pain and shock. He did, chanting the incantations without a pause, without a falter. He had done this many, many times before. Being an Auror was not an easy job, and had become harder since Laurent, when he had so few other people he could trust.

"This looks really bad," Ron whispered. Harry knew without glancing at him that he was staring at the blood spilled on the floor.

"I know," Harry said briskly. "But it looks worse than it is. Remember that head wound I had last year that you thought was going to be fatal? Same principle here. Lots of blood, but not much actual damage."

"If you got it wrapped right," Ron said, his body shifting as he probably turned to look at the bandages.

"There's no particular reason to think I don't." Again Harry cast a charm that would ease the pain, because it was starting to crawl up his leg and distract him, and then reached out a commanding hand. Ron hastily took it and let him hop up to his feet. Harry gritted his teeth. No, there was no way that he could walk out of here, and Ron had to take Mullins, too. *Mobilicorpus* and a stretcher it was.

"Mate." Ron was speaking in a whisper, as if the wound would hear him and magically get worse if he talked too loud. "This needs—you need to go to the Healers."

"No," Harry said, and hoped that firm word and his freezing look combined would destroy Ron's idiocy.

"*Yes*," Ron said, and his face was filled with rising color and his voice was short. Harry sighed. He had hoped that Ron wouldn't be tiresome like this. He needed Ron to transport him, after all, and he needed to know that he could trust him. "There's no—you don't fool around with something like this, Harry. You give me permission to take you to the Healers, now, or I'll Stun you and do it against your will."

Harry shut his eyes. "Ron," he said. "They'll want to restrain or drug me if you take me there. They'll give me painkilling potions at the very least."

"And what's wrong with painkilling potions?" Ron had his jaw stuck out.

"Because I don't k now what else they'll give me while I'm under them," Harry snapped.

Ron shook his head. "I don't want to betray you trust, Harry," he said. "But I'm more worried about your life. You can always hate me afterwards, but this time, there might not be an afterwards for you to hate or forgive me."

"That doesn't change my feeling," Harry said. He knew he sounded stubborn and childish, but Ron simply didn't understand how much he hated Healers. They thought they knew better. They had thought it was best to restrain him last time. And they would give him all sorts of *orders*, and impose their will. The thought made Harry's skin crawl.

Ron rubbed his face, then suddenly sat bolt upright like someone who had had a sudden inspiration. "What about Malfoy?" he asked. "What if I take you to him?"

Harry's head was spinning now. He wondered if it was pain or blood loss, and had to think about

Ron's words before he could answer.

Draco. Absently, Harry shifted his wrist so that he could feel the weight of the heartbeat bracelet. Draco was probably frantic, if he had felt the way that Harry was sure his heartbeat had changed when he confronted Mullins and then his wound. It would probably be for the best if Harry went and soothed him.

Fleur's words about responsibility rang in his head. What he had taken on, allowing the Veela in Malfoy to choose and court him, was a larger task than any single desire he might have to take care of this on his own. Yes, he should go to Draco and allow him to share in this burden. It was the only way to protect him.

"All right," he said, and then realized he had slurred the words. He glared at Ron, but Ron was so busy conjuring a stretcher and Summoning Floo powder that Harry decided he couldn't have done anything to make Harry more tired. It probably was just the injury.

Just the injury.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned against the wall to keep himself upright. Mullins's house had to have a working Floo, he heard Ron mutter, and he was inclined to agree. She had been kidnapping victims and experimenting on them almost undetectably; it would have been easier to use the Floo for some of the interior locations that the victims had disappeared from than Apparition, which the wards around those houses would prevent.

He felt as if he were still caught up in the excitement of solving the case, and wondered whether he should be worried about that. Then he tilted, and then he was flat on his back in a stretcher, and then his world was dancing and he was sure that he had other things than Mullins to worry about.

Though he still didn't like the way Ron had just left her lying on the floor like that. It was their duty as Aurors to take their captured criminals in immediately.

"Malfoy?"

Draco stepped forwards at once. Ten minutes ago, Harry's heartbeat in his ears had surged erratically. It still wasn't settled, though sometimes it beat faster than other times. Draco had been biting his cheek as hard as he could, and holding back the temptation to firecall Harry. After all, he wouldn't be at home anyway if he was hard at work on a case. It was needless worry. Harry would talk to him that evening and tell him that it had been normal and everything was all right, and they would laugh over Draco's worry together.

It should have been that way. It should have been.

Instead, Weasley was calling for him, and he looked so strained and anxious that Draco knew what the question would be before he asked it.

"Harry's losing blood fast," Weasley said. "Or else he's already lost enough to put him in danger. He refuses to go to St. Mungo's. Can I bring him through?"

"Yes, of course," Draco said. "Anything to keep him safe. Anything—" He realized he was babbling and cut himself off. Both Weasley and Harry would need him to be stronger than that. He moved out of the way, caught his breath, and made sure that his voice was calm and as smooth as ice when he spoke again.

"Bring him through."

Weasley's head vanished briefly. When he stepped into the room, Draco had his hands clasped behind his back—easier to hide his twisting claws that way—and his gaze fixed straight ahead, so that he would see Harry immediately.

Weasley had had the good sense to conjure a stretcher. Harry was lying on it, his face so pale that Draco couldn't look at it for long. He looked down instead.

Harry had cut away most of the cloth he wore, but Draco could take no pleasure in the unexpected sight of bare skin. He saw, too quickly, the thick white bandage with a thicker spot of blood soaking it through.

The femoral artery.

Draco held back his immediate desire to screech and attack the one who had hurt Harry like this. It wasn't Weasley. He had to push aside the Veela's protective instincts and replace them with the ones more likely to matter to this situation: the instincts that would let him heal and comfort his chosen.

"What has been done so far?" he asked, drawing his wand and elongating the couch so that Weasley could put Harry on it. He willed his movements towards the swift, his voice towards the brisk. If he started crooning and didn't stop, he wouldn't be able to cast spells.

"Harry bound the wound, and I think he was using spells to reduce the pain," Weasley said. His voice was thick, his gaze fixed on Harry's face as if nailed there, and Draco remembered the way he had spoken about his nightmares of Harry dying the day they conversed in Harry and Weasley's office. "I'm not sure whether he collapsed from blood loss. He ran ahead of me to attack the woman we were hunting, and she cast the curse, I know, but I'm not sure how long it was before I got there."

Draco nodded and bent over Harry, letting his claws grow. He couldn't hide that level of agitation, and they didn't badly damage his grip on his wand. He studied the bandage, and shook his head. "It needs to be tightened, and the blood clotted," he said. "*Adstringo. Adstringo cruorem.*"

The red patch might have faded a bit, though Draco didn't have much hope of that. He licked his lips, allowed himself a moment to stare at Harry's shut eyes, and then reached out and caressed his shoulder. It was a liberty Harry wouldn't have allowed Draco had he been awake, which made Draco rather shamefully glad he wasn't.

There are other reasons to be glad of that, he thought a moment later, beating back the guilt. *He would get in the way and insist on doing things that he shouldn't be doing in the first place if he was awake.*

He pulled back and nodded to Weasley. "I think he will survive now, but we have to get the bandage undone and see the wound. Whether we're going to bind it more firmly or do something else, the bandage is doing no good as it is now."

Weasley nodded heavily and murmured a charm. The bandage unwound itself. Despite the Blood-Clotting Spell he had used, Draco hovered, ready to clap his hand down in an instant if the wound spurted.

His spells had done their work, thank Merlin. Draco hated to think of his own reaction if they hadn't. But the cut made by the curse had a nasty, dark red rim to it that Draco recognized at once, and which explained why Harry had fainted. He hissed under his breath, and his nails twisted fully into claws. Weasley seemed to notice for the first time and looked back and forth between them and Draco's face for a moment.

"Weasley." Draco made sure he kept his voice cool. Nothing to be gained by shrieking. "I need you to go into my potions lab and fetch the small vial filled with green crystals that you'll find on the left edge of the topmost shelf to the right of the door."

"Where's your lab?" Weasley asked, though with some lingering suspicion, as if he thought that Draco might have gone to all these lengths to poison Harry.

Or perhaps he's only thinking about Harry's reaction when he wakes up and finds out that we fed him a potion without his permission, Draco told himself, in an effort to be charitable. He fixed his smile on his face and said, "Down the corridor behind you, the second door."

Weasley nodded and ran off with commendable speed—which left Draco alone with Harry and with privacy to say many of the things that he couldn't have said with an audience.

"Fucking *idiot,*" Draco whispered harshly. He didn't shake Harry, but only because that might have started the blood flowing again. "What were you thinking? Do you really not care about your life? Or do you have a death wish?"

"Neither. I was only thinking that I can take care of myself."

Draco started. He hadn't seen the gleam of green beneath Harry's eyelids that indicated he was awake. He swallowed and sat down on the couch beside Harry, shaking his head and thinking

that Weasley was taking an egregiously long time with the potion. "I don't think you can, if the result is this. Two near-fatal wounds in as many months?"

Harry's half-smile promptly faded. "The first one wasn't nearly fatal," he said.

"A hole in your stomach," Draco said. "*A hole in your stomach.*" His voice was lowering, he knew, but that wasn't a Veela trait in and of itself, and it shouldn't set Harry off. Indeed, he looked more indignant than anything, if the way he folded his arms and tried to stare Draco down was an indication.

"A hole in my stomach that I didn't die of," Harry said evenly. "And I—" He shifted his leg just then, and gasped. One of his hands tried to reach down and touch the wound, but even that much exertion was beyond him. He shook his head. "I can't—what happened? It shouldn't hurt that much after all the spells I cast on myself."

"She cast the Repeating Hex along with the spell that cut this hole in you," Draco said, and thought he did remarkably well in speaking those words like a rational adult.

Harry's mouth fell open. "But I didn't hear her do that," he said, as though it was unfair for such a thing to have happened.

"Well, she did." Draco leaned forwards. "Now, tell me something, Harry. If you don't have a death wish and you do care about your life, how is it that you end up with near-fatal wounds so much more often than any other Auror? What *happens* to make it this way?"

He was shaking by the time he hissed the last words. Panic that he hadn't permitted to rise so far made his head dim and sticky, his thoughts slow. He clenched one hand in front of him and imagined driving the fist into Harry's attacker. But since she was probably going on to a long life in Azkaban, he wouldn't even have that satisfaction.

"Nothing happens," Harry said, his face withdrawn and his eyes sulky. Even that, though, was an improvement over the cheerfulness he had affected when Draco saw him behind the barrier in the Ministry. "I just do my job. It's a dangerous job. Do you know how many Aurors are killed on duty every year?"

"And yet some of them, like Weasley, manage to escape unscathed," Draco said. "Tell me what the difference is."

"Here's the potion."

Weasley seemed to have timed his return well. Draco started and reached out for the vial, which Weasley—good man—made sure not to give him until Draco's hand stopped shaking with anger. Draco nodded shortly and then held up the vial so that Harry could see the light spark off the green crystals inside.

"You can take them all at once and get rid of the Repeating Hex," Draco said evenly, "and the risk that it carries of ripping open old wounds as well as that one. Or you can struggle and fight us and pout, and we'll take you to St. Mungo's."

Beside him, Weasley sucked in one enormous breath and was still. Harry clenched his fists and whispered, "I trusted you."

"And you still trust me, I hope," Draco said. "But I will see you safe at any cost. You know that you don't have the magical strength right now to handle the countercurses to the Repeating Hex." *If you ever did,* he thought, but he made sure to keep that part to himself. He had already seen how Harry responded to the suggestion that he might not be able to do something. "I won't let you have the time to make up your mind when that time would lead to your death."

Harry clenched his jaw and seemed unable to respond for a minute. Then he said, "I don't trust the Healers to take care of me."

"I know," Draco said, doing his best to soften his voice. He could be gentle with Harry when he had to, and he didn't want to alienate him. On the other hand, this was not the moment to let him think that he could do exactly as he liked. "I'll respect your wishes if I can. But if you don't trust *me* to take care of you, either, then it's them."

As he had hoped it would, the reference to Harry's trust in him weakened Harry's sheer contrariness. Harry swallowed, nodded, and reached out a hand to accept the vial. Draco gave it to him.

"This is a potion that Professor Snape developed to forestall the Repeating Hex when he was still alive," Draco told Harry. He suspected this would be easier for his chosen if Harry knew what the potion did. "The crystals interact with the magic better than a liquid form would. They'll strip away the flesh that contains the spell before it can anchor itself to you."

Harry set his jaw. "It'll hurt?"

Draco nodded. Weasley shifted from foot to foot and sucked nosily at his teeth, but he had the sense not to say anything.

Harry appeared a bit more cheerful as he opened the vial and poured the crystals into his mouth. *He seems to think everything that happens to him should hurt,* Draco thought sadly, although he knew the reality was both more complex and simpler than that.

A moment later, Harry's eyes shut and his hands stiffened, trembling, at his sides. Draco took hold of the nearest one and caressed his claws gently up and down Harry's palm. There was no way for his claws to harm his chosen, or he would have spent some time concentrating to turn them back into nails.

Harry audibly ground his teeth. Draco heard a series of popping sounds and looked back at the

wound in Harry's leg.

The Repeating Hex, which would cause the wound to reopen again and again as long as it stayed attached to Harry's skin, was ripping loose slowly, reluctantly. The dark red flesh that represented its holding place curled off Harry's injury like a picked scab. Draco hissed at it, the only way he could express his revulsion right now.

"Thank Merlin you saw that," Weasley said in a low voice. "If it had ripped itself open again tonight, when he was alone, he might have bled to death."

Draco nodded, although he had no intentions of letting Harry be alone tonight.

They continued to wait until the circle of flesh was entirely free and lying on the floor beside the couch. Then Weasley burned it while Draco cast the spells that would tell them whether any trace of the hex remained in Harry's body. There were none, a piece of good fortune which made Draco want to fall on his knees.

Harry finally relaxed with a groan. His hand in Draco's went limp, and Draco spent a few more minutes rubbing mindlessly at it until Harry drew it back. "Thanks," he said.

"Will you tell me now," Draco asked softly, "why you get wounded so much more than most other Aurors?"

"Part of it was my fault," Weasley said, and Draco knew from the tone of his voice that this was one of a long series of excuses that he had made up for Harry's sake. "If I had run faster when I saw Harry start running after Mullins, then I would have been there when he confronted her, and that would have meant that she had two of us to curse."

Draco raised his hand. "There are two sides to every story, Weasley," he said. "Why did Harry run so fast that you couldn't keep up with him, instead of waiting for you to catch up?"

Harry stared at him. "She might have escaped."

"Or she could have circled around behind Weasley and ambushed him," Draco said. *If he won't listen to reason about himself, he ought to listen to it about his friends.* "Did you think of that? Really? Or was it something else that got pushed out of your mind in your haste to protect the innocent?"

Harry stared at his hands for a moment. Then he said, "It's not that I don't care about my life. Or my friends' lives." He gave Weasley a guilty look that Draco resolved to remember. "Or you." Now Harry lifted his head and looked straight at Draco, and Draco did his best not to be charmed by the sheer brilliance of Harry's eyes. "It's just that—I take risks, and they don't always pay off."

"I want to take care of you tonight," Draco said. He knew he had won a victory, and shouldn't push for more than Harry was willing to offer. Now was the time for gentleness, the time when

his Veela qualities could most thrive. "Will you let me? Stay here, so I can give you a bed, food, and someone to be nearby in case the Repeating Hex returns, your wound opens again, or you need something else."

Harry hesitated. Then he said, "As long as you're not in the same room all night."

Draco winced. He had hoped for that. But… "I won't be," he said.

Weasley cleared his throat. "Then I'll go back and pick up Mullins," he said. "It's time that she goes to a secure cell in Azkaban." He hesitated, then touched Draco on the shoulder. "Thanks for saving his life."

He was gone into the Floo in an instant, leaving Harry and Draco to look at each other.

"Yes," Harry finally said, "thank you."

Draco nodded at him. He didn't think he could say anything right now.

There has to be a way to let him work as an Auror and yet make him stop risking himself all the time. There has to be.

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Chapter: 16

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Sixteen—Damaged

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He knew that he wasn't in his own bed, but he didn't know where he *was*. At the same time, pain clouded his mind, which made him lie still for long, dangerous moments before the full impact of that thought hit him.

He promptly surged to his elbows when it did, reaching for his wand with one hand and his glasses with the other. Yes, he could use his wand to Summon his glasses, but he would probably need the ability to cast a spell that would fend off his enemies more than he needed a free hand.

"You're awake. That's good."

Draco's voice was soft and filled with so much relief that Harry paused. He blinked, trying to focus his eyes. What would Draco be doing here, if it was dangerous?

Draco sat on a chair across from the bed, hands folded in his lap. His eyes were bright as they focused on Harry, but not at all calm. "Do you always wake up that way?" he asked. "Or only when you have nightmares? Which I heard you having, a few times during the night. But by the time I came into the room, they were always over."

Harry lowered his eyes. He had remembered what had happened to him now, and Draco's promise not to spend last night in the same room. Harry felt a blend of relief that he had kept the promise, shame that Draco had overheard his screams, and annoyance that he had had to stay here after all.

"I would have been all right by myself," he muttered, a sentiment that he didn't intend for Draco to hear.

Draco slammed his hand down, so hard that Harry heard the wood of the chair he was sitting on crack. There was a brief whirlwind of action, and then Harry found himself pushed up against the pillow, his wand aimed at Draco. Draco stared at him through half-lidded eyes, breath panting slowly in and out of his lungs.

"You would *not* have," Draco said. "You could have bled to death. Or you might have forced yourself into going back to work too quickly. I firecalled Weasley after you slept, when something occurred to me. He said that you often go to work the next day after a major wound like this. The *next day.* The only times that doesn't happen is when Shacklebolt forces you to take some time off, and then you whinge so much and inundate his office with so many owls that he lets you come back sooner than he should. How long have you been abusing yourself like this, Harry? And why? Is it connected to Laurent?"

"Not everything in my life leads back to that bastard," Harry said, flushing and wishing that Draco had chosen a different question. Harry knew the answer to this one, but it was never an answer that anyone liked to hear, and he wasn't looking forwards to yet *more* mockery and complaints that that couldn't really be the way he felt.

"I understand that," Draco said. His tone had softened. He stood up and prowled towards the bed. Harry flinched, and he stopped, head cocked to one side like a curious cat. "But I want to understand why this is happening to you, why you don't wait for your partner when you dash into danger the way Auror training says you're supposed to, why you shrug off wounds as if they don't matter when you have to know they *could*." His voice lowered. "Do you know what would happen to me if you died, Harry?"

"I didn't die." Harry hated the way he felt right now, and he refused to look at Draco. He felt as though he were wrong and deserved to suffer because of it. There was no bitterer guilt than the guilt that his friends inflicted on him, he thought, and the worst thing was, they wouldn't let him make up for it in the ways he knew best.

"You could have," Draco said. "And that would have hit me as nothing else could, even your refusing to have anything more to do with me. I would have mourned for a year, at least. It was

almost that long after I realized that Pansy was the wrong choice. I would recover, but I don't enjoy the notion of that pain at all."

Harry flinched. "You're doing this on purpose," he accused, looking up and staring into Draco's eyes. "And after I've already gone fast for your sake, pushed the boundaries, *kissed* you when I didn't have to—"

Draco knew what he was doing. He was sorry for it. He didn't know how well he could tread the boundary, how he could keep Harry safe and win what he needed from him while at the same time not hurting him too much.

But Harry was going to die if he kept on. And what he had done so far would only recoil on him if he persisted. He had come so far, so fast, and now that Draco thought about it, such progress was unnatural. It had happened only because Harry *willed* it, and if he regretted it or if his will faltered for a second, then they might turn backwards again.

"I know you've gone fast," Draco said, in a low voice that he hoped would force Harry to shut up and listen. Harry scowled at him, but did. "I probably pressured you into it. For *that* part, I'm sorry."

Harry was good at listening for nuance even when he was bedridden. His eyes narrowed. "For that part only?"

Draco nodded and sat down on the edge of the bed, which was big enough that Harry could be quite a distance from him even while he was here. "I won't apologize for caring about you, for wanting to see you healed, or for wanting you to date me. Emotions aren't crimes. Deeds are. I'll try to be as patient as I can, so that you can give in to me when you're ready." He toyed with the heartbeat bracelet on his wrist, a lovely gift that, still, was a product of Harry's charging ahead before he was really ready.

"I want to see you healed," he repeated. "I told you that from the first. I didn't realize how literal it was going to be, but I still want it."

Harry's eyes were so enormous, the pupils so dilated, that Draco would have thought he was drugged with some kind of potion if he didn't know better. The potion that he had fed Harry yesterday would have dissipated by now. "I can tell you the truth," Harry said. "But you'll just laugh at it. Everyone else did."

"I can't see Weasley or Granger doing that," Draco said.

Harry flushed and looked away. "Well, maybe they didn't. But they still didn't understand."

Draco folded his arms so that he wouldn't be tempted to reach out and touch Harry before he had permission. "Tell me."

Harry shut his eyes and seemed to hold his breath for a long moment. Then he jerked his head in a swift nod and opened his eyes so that he could look at Draco.

"I want to help people," he said. "That's really all it is. I see a chance and I have to take it. If I'd waited for Ron last night, then Mullins might have escaped, and other people might have died. I have the high capture ratio that I do because I take chances. And then people can sleep more easily in their beds at night, and other families have justice, and I can remember that I've done what I like best."

Draco shook his head. It wasn't that he didn't understand, he thought, but that Harry was ignoring some fairly obvious flaws in what he was saying. "Why is the only way that you can help people to capture criminals?" he asked.

Harry gave him a sharp look. "Because I'm an Auror," he said, with strained patience, "and that's my job."

"But you could do it just as well if you were more patient, if you worked with your partner to set up ambushes that would let you capture these people without endangering yourselves," Draco said. "And then you know that you'll live and go on to make more captures. What happens if you die young? A lot of your good deeds will go undone."

"I can't think about that," Harry said. "I can only do the task that's in front of me. And what would happen if someone got away because I was cautious and killed another victim? I would be placing my own life above that person's. I would never forgive myself." From the dark, liquid look of his eyes, Draco knew he wasn't exaggerating.

"But you *need* to think about the future," Draco said. "What would happen if you ended up not dead but so badly wounded that you couldn't be an Auror anymore?"

Harry's nostrils flared. "I can't—that won't happen, Draco. It's not like I try to get wounded *on purpose.*"

"But you don't guard yourself, either." Draco could feel his patience crumbling. He glanced down, watched his nails twist into claws, and counted the gleams of light from their crystalline tips before he trusted himself to go on. "You were always good at *Defense* Against the Dark Arts when we were in Hogwarts. When did you give up practicing defensive magic? That was something else Weasley said when I asked him. That you barely defend yourself, that you don't try unless someone else manages to get in the fight on your side. It's always offensive. You focus on bringing them down before anything else. Why?"

"Because that's what I *like* to do." Harry's voice was soft and dry. "Because it contents me, the same way that being near me contents your Veela. I knew that trying to explain this to you wouldn't work."

"But it would make more sense for you to take precautions so that you could go on doing what you like to for longer," Draco said.

Harry only looked at him in stubborn silence.

Draco sighed and cast around for another tactic that would help him. "How often do you see the people you help?" he asked. "The families of the victims, or the ones that you rescue before the Dark wizards can kill them?"

Harry blinked. He couldn't remember anyone asking him this question before. Of course, Ron was the one who had most often talked it over with him, and he knew the answer, since he was present for this part of Harry's work.

"Sometimes," he said guardedly. "When I interview the families for information about the victims. Or when we get there before the Dark wizards can kill someone they're torturing." He grimaced. Unfortunately, most of the people he hunted were the kind who would kill their victims when they realized the Aurors were arriving.

"But not often?" Draco pressed. "You don't often have to stare into their eyes and hear them praise you or rage at you?"

Harry frowned. "No. What are you getting at?"

"That these staring eyes of your victims are more your imagination than anything else," Draco said. "The same way you imagined more people dying during the war than actually did. Yes, the people who died were terrible losses, I'm not denying that." His voice softened; Harry didn't know if that was in response to memories of his own or because of the expression on Harry's face. "But you're driving yourself mad, you're hurting yourself and your friends and *me*, for the sake of people who may not know you exist, or might think of you fleetingly and be grateful, or who might worship you but whom you never meet. What in that is right, Harry? What's sensible?"

Harry shook his head. He felt as if he were wearing a robe that was too tight, the collar constricting around his throat. "That's not—you don't understand, Draco."

"Then tell me." Draco leaned closer, his eyes haunted by a watery flicker that Harry made sure to look away from in time. "I want to understand everything about you. Tell me."

"I don't care about what's *sensible,*" Harry said, which wasn't completely true but the only way he could put it. "Not in comparison to what I can do to help people. Being an Auror is the only thing that gives me meaning in life. I don't have a big family, like Ron does, or a sense of burning justice, like Hermione, or children. I probably never will have children," he added, because he was thinking of how easy it would be for some of the criminals he hunted to strike at him if they could kidnap his children. "I don't have a tradition of family pride like you do, or if I

did, I never knew about it. I only have what I can cling to, my friends, and what I'm good at, rescuing people. That's *it*. I know that other people can give me friendship and love and so on, but that's not something I inherited or that's part of me. It depends on the goodness of other people. But if I'm good at being an Auror, that's something I *am* good at, something that makes me meaningful. You see?"

Draco was still for long moments, staring so hard that Harry thought he would sprain something. Then he dipped his head and said, "While I'm not convinced that you can only be good at this, I do see."

Harry's relief was short-lived. Draco reached out and took his hand, and Harry gave it to him after a moment's hesitation. Draco had claws right now, but at least he didn't look as if he would grip Harry's shoulders and tear his skin to shreds the way Laurent had liked to when he rode Harry.

"But I also see that you can't keep going like this," Draco whispered. Harry tried to jerk his hand away, but Draco pressed his nails absently against the vein in Harry's wrist, and he froze. Draco continued to speak, his words soft but so intense that it was like being pummeled by hail. "Sooner or later, you're going to become so badly wounded that you can't continue. Or you'll get older and not be able to work as well as you can now. Or the Ministry will finally take notice and make you obey all the rules that the other Aurors do. I wonder that you don't obey them on your own, since I thought you wanted a normal life when we were in school," he added.

That was another thing no one had ever said to him before. Harry felt as though someone had opened a slow, burning pit of shame and strangeness beneath him and then tossed him into it.

"I don't want those things to happen to you," Draco said. "I would defend you from them if I could. But they'll happen because you don't take care of yourself, and then you'll be left maimed or helpless or slowly growing bitter, and *you will have no meaning in your life anymore.*"

Harry felt his breath click in his throat. He shook his head. "I don't—"

"I don't want to speculate too much," Draco said, and he let Harry's hand go, but only so he could take both at once and turn them over to caress the palms, "but I almost wonder if you're trying to die before age or a crippling wound finds you, so that at least you never have to face the loss of what you've pinned everything on."

Harry shut his eyes. He didn't speak. He was going to say something completely inappropriate if he did. Or just sob.

He couldn't accuse Draco of misunderstanding him now, though he still would have argued that he didn't really have a death wish. But he could wish that the words were unspoken, that Draco had been less ruthless in tearing down his illusions, that he had been allowed to walk out of here with his confidence unshattered.

Now that he knew this, how could he act as thoughtlessly as he had so far? He knew Ron and Draco and Hermione would say that he couldn't and that was a good thing, but it also meant that he would forever be hesitating, distrusting himself, wondering if *this* was the time that he lost the ability to do what he loved.

Or it meant that he would have to find another meaning.

He shivered. "My meaning can't be you," he whispered. "Not just you. For the same reason that you can't lean on your chosen for every scrap of importance in *your* life."

Draco sagged, his grip on Harry's hands faltering. Relief made him feel as if he stood under a shower of icy water.

Oh. He had wondered. He had doubted. He had been sure, at one point, that he wouldn't manage to persuade Harry of the madness of letting everything hinge on being an Auror.

But he had. And though he understood—he thought it best, in fact—that this might stymie the progress of their relationship for a time, at least he would be the one who could help Harry to move on and find something else to attach meaning to. He could help Harry heal and grow, as he had wanted from the beginning.

The mental contact would take the place of physical contact for a time. Harry was right. Draco couldn't be his meaning, and so Harry would want to withdraw and stand on his own. But Draco thought he would still welcome suggestions and advice, if not an attempt to pull him onto a certain path.

I can live with this. I can. And when Harry comes back to me and kisses and touches me again, I can be sure it's of his own free will.

"I know that," Draco said, when he realized Harry was staring at him with desperate eyes and he still hadn't responded to the declaration that he couldn't be Harry's meaning. "I don't want to take the place of your Auror work, because, seeing how obsessive you are about *that*, I'm not sure I could survive being the focus."

Harry smiled, but the smile was mechanical, and he looked around. "What am I going to do?" he asked. "If I really have to change my whole life…"

"I never said that," Draco said. "There's no reason that you can't keep being an Auror. We just need to wean you from being so dependent on it that you'll endanger your life to keep doing it."

Harry snorted, a gleam already returning to his eyes. "Wean me? I'm not a child."

"I know," Draco said, and decided that he could dare a joke, since Harry looked as if he could smile. "A child doesn't have problems this complex."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You know what's strangest?" he added reflectively. "You're speaking to me almost the same way a Mind-Healer would, but I don't feel the panic and the resentment about it that I did when they were haranguing me." He looked at Draco as if he were studying him for glasses and a Healer's emblem this time, instead of for Veela features. Draco smiled. By itself, this was a step forwards; Harry was no longer acting as if Draco wasn't human. "What makes you different?"

"I care about your welfare more than they do," Draco said, which was honestly what he believed. He also thought the Mind-Healers who had tried to "help" Harry couldn't find their arses with a map, but Harry didn't need help to hate them for that.

Harry made that little clicking noise in his throat again as his breath caught. He stared at Draco, and then said, "You do. You really do. And I don't—that's not overwhelming. It doesn't make me fight to stand on my own in response just because. That's—you're remarkable, Draco." He looked dazed.

Draco relaxed again. If he couldn't touch his chosen as freely as he would have liked for a while, at least this meant Harry was paying him compliments and singling him out from all the other people in his life. Draco had been able to do something they hadn't.

It also told him what worked with Harry. Reason, or as close to it as he could stick, would be listened to as long as Draco kept up with his arguments and the situation wasn't desperate. And from the intensely thoughtful expression in Harry's eyes, Draco could at least *hope* the desperate situations wouldn't arise as often now.

They sat there for a moment, smiling at each other, and then Draco heard a whoosh from the other room. He rolled his eyes and stood up. "That's probably Weasley, wanting to know how you are," he said. "Excuse me a moment?"

Harry nodded. Draco stepped out of his room, shut the door gently behind him—he didn't want their conversation to disturb Harry in case he decided to go back to sleep—and went to answer the firecall.

Harry wanted to lie back in his bed and think. There were so many new thoughts and insights stirring in his head that it would take ages to sort them out. He might as well start now, so he could have something intelligent to say when Draco came back.

But his gaze focused on the closed door and couldn't move away. Why would Draco shut it? Surely Harry had the right to hear anything that Draco said to Ron.

The longer he lay there, the more it bothered him. So he got up at last, opened the door, and stepped out into the corridor that led to the room where he had lain last night.

Draco was speaking in a whisper to someone; Harry could hear the rasping sound of his voice if not make out the words. Harry padded towards it, hesitating next to the corner. He knew the other person's voice wasn't Ron's, and he wasn't sure if he wanted to appear half-naked in front of someone he didn't know.

"No, Pansy," Draco said then. "I already told you everything I knew, gave you all the information I had. If that's not sufficient for them to find him, how is that my fault?"

Harry grinned. *What's this, Draco? Are you investigating a little side venture of your own? Who wants to be an Auror now?* He listened in more closely, hoping that Parkinson would reveal what Draco had helped her with.

"You haven't held out on us?" Parkinson was disgruntled. From what Harry could remember of her during Hogwarts, that wouldn't be a new experience for her.

"Why would I?" Draco said. "I have no particular interest in whether or not your friends find this—Laurent, did you call him? I don't."

Harry had experienced moments in the past when he felt as if all the air in his chest turned cool and he had time to think through what would follow, if not act. It usually happened when he was staring down someone's wand and knew this might be his last moment. The last time it had happened, Ron had been wounded and Harry had been able to envision all the bad consequences of not moving fast.

This was a moment like that. It lasted longer than normal.

When he returned to himself, Draco was finishing the firecall. Parkinson still sounded out of sorts when she pulled her head back.

And she has reason to sound that way, Harry thought as he stepped forwards to meet him.

Draco looked startled when he saw Harry, and then annoyed. "You'll tear open your wound again," he scolded, coming towards him.

"Much like you've just torn open the wounds of mine that concern Laurent?" Harry asked.

Draco froze in turn. Harry watched him and waited, not really expecting an answer. It would be a denial at worst, a stammered excuse at best.

He wondered if he should thank Draco for giving him a new experience.

Is this how losing the potential love of your life feels?

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Chapter: 17

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seventeen—Chosen

Draco's world was ending.

Not literally, of course. But it felt that way, as if the floor were tilting beneath his feet and the ceiling ready to crack and fall in.

He couldn't meet the accusation in Harry's harsh gaze. He turned his eyes to the floor and wiped at his mouth. Then he did it again. His body was twitching and flexing; at one moment his nails started to form into claws and then turned back, and his shoulders rippled as if they would give way to wings, but didn't. His instincts dashed back and forth in conflict with each other, not knowing where to turn.

I must—I must—

He must do something, but he didn't know what.

He lifted his head at last. Harry still waited, and Draco tried to find some hope in the fact that he hadn't simply walked away. Harry would listen to an answer if he could find the words to frame one, Draco was sure.

The problem was finding those words.

"I never meant for this to happen," Draco said at last, which was the only thing he could say that would make any kind of sense. He had thought Pansy's friends would take more time to find Laurent, and indeed, they were running into problems. He hadn't thought Pansy would contact him with a report while Harry was here. He had thought Harry was drowsing, not listening in on private conversations.

The expression on Harry's face, however, killed any objection Draco might have made on that score long before he made it. He had known Harry would hate what he was doing if he ever found out, and he had still encouraged Pansy to make the search and decided to help her do so. Draco swallowed and shuffled his foot in place, watching it intently.

"You knew how I felt about Laurent," Harry said, voice so low that it seemed to rise out of the floor to Draco's ears. "I told you that I would prefer he survived because his survival meant I had some control, that he hadn't made me into a monster by raping me. And you did this *anyway*."

"I'm sorry," Draco whispered. That was the only defense he could offer. If he tried to talk about the Veela instincts and how badly he wanted to see Harry safe, he had the feeling that Harry wouldn't understand.

"No more than that?" Harry asked. "That's all you have to say for yourself?"

Draco licked his lips and looked up into Harry's eyes. Panic twisted through his middle when he saw how merciless they were. He had to explain, he realized, or try, because being in danger of losing Harry forced him to. As he had fought for the chance to date Harry when he was confronted with the specter of rape, he would fight for this. If he lost, then at least it wouldn't be due to his own indifference.

"I want to punish Laurent so badly," Draco whispered. "As long as he was still alive, he was a danger to you. What if the Wizengamot reconsidered his sentence and released him early? What if he managed to break free? Veela are capable of feats like that, sometimes, if their chosen is in danger. What if someone else broke him free because they found out the connection between him and you and decided to use him as a weapon against you? I could imagine all sorts of scenarios. I want him *dead*." He dared to hold Harry's eyes as he spoke the last sentence. "So I gave Pansy the information to pass along about Laurent's last name and relationship to a certain family. And I know that you didn't want to kill him, but I thought you might not mind so much if someone else did it."

Harry was motionless for long moments. Then he said, "I think of scenarios like that, too, Draco. In my nightmares. I can accept how unlikely they are to happen when I'm awake, and after a few moments of wrestling with them, I put them aside and go on with my life."

"I just want to end your nightmares," Draco whispered. "To see you whole. That's all I've wanted for these last few months."

Harry shuddered, for some reason, and his gaze focused on the wall behind Draco. "Months," he muttered. "Yes, the months are passing, aren't they? It'll be March soon."

Draco licked his lips. "You're thinking of the Blazing Season," he said. "I swear, Harry, I'll leave you alone then."

Harry looked back at him coldly. "Why should I think so? I already told you clearly that I wanted you not to seek out Laurent, that I didn't want to see him again or think about him. You thought you knew better than me, and so you interfered. What will keep you from doing the same thing with the Blazing Season?"

Draco whined under his breath. He was wounded. He was bleeding internally. Or at least it felt like that. For his chosen to make a declaration of distrust in him this open *hurt*. Once again, he tried to repair it.

"I promise," he said fervently. "From now on, you can trust me, Harry. It doesn't matter what the

temptation is, I won't listen to it, and I'll tell you the moment I feel as if I might hurt you. I promise—"

Harry shook his head.

Something about that weary gesture, as if this was the end of the line and not even worth fighting for anymore, sparked Draco's anger. He narrowed his eyes and snarled, "It's not as though you've been completely honest with me, either!"

"No, I haven't," Harry said, and his eyes were deep and his voice solemn. "I was investigating a case on my own, outside the Auror Department, that might have led to me getting hurt or killed. I reckon you wouldn't like that."

"See?" Draco stepped closer. The gesture would have been more impressive if he could have had his wings billowing around him, but that would be counterproductive, so he kept them tucked beneath the surface of his skin. "That would hurt me as much as my trying to find Laurent hurt you—"

"I doubt that," Harry said, and his voice was a low hiss. His eyes had darkened until he looked as inhuman as some Veela that Draco had seen during the Blazing Season. Then a shudder ran through the walls, and they shook as if they might fall in. "Oh, I *doubt* it."

Draco took a step back, his hands raised. "Harry," he said. "you know me. You don't need to kill me with your magic."

Harry smiled, and the smile was as bitter as his voice. "Why is it that you think I'm about to kill you when I'm angry, but I'm not allowed to fear you when you are?"

Draco wanted to answer that accusation in a number of ways, but Harry wasn't finished. "I am *done* with Laurent. I don't want anyone to seek him out. I don't want anyone to hunt him down. What were you thinking would happen, Draco? That Pansy and her friends would free Laurent, and that would mean he could hunt me, and *that* would mean you could kill him? What about me in all this? Did you care about what I would feel when I received the notice that he was free?"

Draco shook his head. He was struggling with so many feelings that he wasn't sure what words would emerge from his mouth first, but he was sure that they would be the wrong ones no matter what he said, so he might as well say them and get the first hurt over with. "I think you need to face him and know that he's dead, Harry. You need the control that comes with putting him down."

Harry's eyes turned black.

A heavy force slammed Draco to the ground and sat on his back. Draco groaned and rolled over, attempting to rise. The force moved with him, letting him roll but not letting him stand. Draco stared at air—he *knew* there was nothing present—but he still felt the weight and heard

something growl right beside his ear.

"Understand me," Harry whispered. "I could have destroyed Laurent—I nearly did—because he attempted to make decisions for me and change the direction my life was taking. I'll do the same thing for you, Draco, if you try to control me, if you try to dictate what I should do, and if you think you know me better than I know myself. *You wanted to free someone who raped me.* Do you know what that *means*?"

Draco licked his lips, and tasted salt and blood on them. There was no way forwards from here that he could see, nothing that he could do to make up to Harry what had happened.

Except that there had to be. And what he did, the way he was helping Harry heal, was never about making up for what had happened, but all about making sure that he could live in the future, if not now.

Draco kept himself calm, or forced himself back to it, despite the fact that now his wings were trapped and Harry's magic was still breathing into his ear. "I'm sorry, Harry," he said. "I'm sorry. I never meant for it to turn out like this."

Harry grunted, and the pressure eased enough that Draco could sit up, though Draco could feel a claw rolling idly along the line of his shoulder now. "Explain what you meant, then," Harry said. "Tell me why you thought this was a good idea."

Draco turned to look at him. Difficult, but not impossible, he noted, which meant Harry's control over his magic was even firmer than he thought it was. *Impressive.* Part of him reached out longing hands, because to be close to that much power was part of what he had admired and adored about Harry from the beginning.

But he had to concentrate on the man in front of him right now, the man who stood with his arms folded and his eyes too dark and was partially right about Draco and his motivations and partially wrong. Draco would have to soothe him, or he stood a high chance of being exiled from his presence.

And as threatening as that presence was sometimes, it was still the presence of his chosen. Draco could not forget that.

"I remember thinking that you would disapprove," Draco admitted. "I hesitated a long time before I gave information about Laurent's family to Pansy. When she named Laurent, I thought about saying that I couldn't help her."

"Why didn't you?" Harry might have been making idle conversation, from the tone of his voice, but the claw ground down into Draco. In this case, Draco was inclined to trust the state of the magic more than Harry's words.

"Because I let my own desires overpower me," Draco whispered. "I wanted you healed, yes, but I

think I was seeking an easier way to do it than actually going through the slow process of teaching you to trust me. If I could make you face your fears in one fell swoop, then who knew what might happen? I was careless and thoughtless, Harry, and I'm sorry." He leaned back against the pressure of the magic, and as he had thought, it let him move it, though it tightened again a moment later. "But while it might lessen your trust in me, I don't think that it should make you abandon me completely. At the very least, you know what my motivations were." He held Harry's gaze and took a chance. "You know that I'm in love with you."

The words passed through Harry like a cold wind. He sagged back, only to realize there was no wall there and he'd been trying to catch himself against thin air. He stuck out an arm, which luckily *did* hit the wall and prevent him from falling to the floor.

He was so *tired.* It seemed that every moment since he had agreed to let Draco into his life was only another challenge, another chance for his memories to ambush him or for Draco to make some movement that would probably destroy his trust altogether.

Or for Harry to take a risk that had felt increasingly frantic, as if he had to reach the end of building up trust in Draco before a deadline came to pass.

Only a moment of thought let him realize what deadline he'd been trying to beat.

The Blazing Season.

Harry shook his head. Had he really thought that he could become comfortable enough to be with Draco before then? But nothing else made sense. He had kissed Draco when he hadn't had to. He had let Draco touch him as a gift for Draco, he had thought at the time, but he could have done something less drastic, something less frightening for himself. Instead, he had acted as though Draco really would die, the way that some books about the Veela claimed he would, if he didn't get enough of his chosen's touch, and he had set aside his tension and tried to pretend afterwards that everything was comfortable.

Except that it wasn't. He still hadn't talked to Draco about the arousal he felt that first night Draco touched him extensively, and he hadn't explained about the way he'd been forcing himself to continue during the kiss.

And now…

Now Draco had handed Harry what should have been a gift, the thing he had hoped to hear from several men he had dated before Laurent, and it was like being given a mixed handful of thorns and knives.

Not to mention Draco's betrayal in the matter of Laurent.

Harry would have liked to go cast his magic at the walls of his quiet room until he was wearied,

but that wouldn't solve the problems; it would just make him sleep more deeply before he faced them. So he clenched one hand into a fist, concentrated on the beat of blood in his ears until he was calmer, and then faced Draco and gestured. His magic withdrew, spiraling lazily along the walls and into his body. Harry watched as Draco rose to his feet, his eyes dropping first to check the wound in Harry's leg.

Strange that he can be so worried about my physical health and yet cause wounds to my mind, Harry thought with a sigh.

"I don't know what to do," he told Draco directly, quietly. "Walking away isn't an option, because of the pain it would cause you."

"What about the pain that it would cause *you*?" Draco asked the question in a yearning voice, straining forwards as though he stood behind an invisible barrier that parted them.

At least he has the sense to see that the barrier is there. Harry rubbed the corners of his eyes up and down comprehensively, in the hope that that would give him better answers. It didn't, but made yellow stars explode in the corners of his vision. He watched them until they faded, and then answered the question.

"That would be less than the pain you're causing me right now."

Draco flinched, head hanging as he hunched in on himself. And that made Harry feel bad, again, and long to move forwards and comfort him, if only so he would stop looking like that.

No.

It was hard to think, but Harry tore himself away from the impulse to smile and say he forgave everything now, all so that Draco would feel better. For one thing, this insult and attempt to control him was just too deep for that. For another, it wouldn't make things right in the end, not if Draco demanded some genuine emotion from him and Harry was only able to respond with a counterfeit that he had made up for Draco's sake.

That's what I have to do, he thought. *He said it himself, earlier. I have to stop thinking of all the people who could be hurt by what I do and do things for myself, too, because they make me happy or because they'll protect me.*

And it was hard, again, and tiring, again. But if Harry had loved relaxation that much, he wouldn't have chosen to become an Auror. Besides, there was no one he could simply let go of his control with. Ron and Hermione would both want to know why, and Harry didn't feel like explaining. Not right now. That Draco knew about it was enough.

"Here's what we're going to do about this," he told Draco. Draco promptly snapped to attention, his lips quivering and his head eagerly nodding, and Harry felt a stab of pity. *Doesn't he hate that I can affect him like that?*

But maybe it was different for a Veela. Harry thought more sternly about the things that mattered right now; he wouldn't tolerate irrelevant thoughts. "I'll stay here until my wound heals fully and we're sure the Repeating Hex isn't coming back."

"*Thank you*, Harry," Draco said, the words seeming to twist out of his mouth despite himself. His eyes shone as if he had a fever.

God. Harry shuddered. *How can someone endure to be that dependent on someone else? And how am I going to stay stern with him when I'll be wanting to give in just so that he can have some of his pride back?*

Well, if he kept to his plan and did his best, then maybe they would end up depending on each other just enough in the future—or maybe Draco would get tired of Harry, finally drop him, and find someone more amenable to be his chosen.

"Then I'm going to go home," Harry said. "I want you to write a letter to Parkinson, explaining that your information about Laurent was false. I don't care what you have to say, whether you'll say that you were playing a joke on her or something else. But I want to see the letter before you send it, and it had better be acceptable."

Draco nodded, his expression rapt. Harry stared at him and wondered why, then knew. *I'm letting him do something for me. And that's all he wants.*

"And then," Harry said, "I'd like some time alone to figure things out. Ron can report on what's happening to you, if he'll do it, but I don't want to see or speak directly to you for two days."

Draco reached out in spite of himself, then withdrew his hand when Harry stared at him. "You're that angry," he said. His voice was subdued.

Harry snorted and looked at one of the pictures that had fallen off the wall. Draco had a nicer house than he would have suspected, with more decorations but not as much grandeur as Harry had seen at Malfoy Manor. "Yes, of course I am. This is the biggest fear of my life, and you mocked the knowledge I gave you—the knowledge I entrusted you with because I thought you deserved to know about it if you really were going to try and date me." He could feel the anger moving again through him, slow, deep, as he spoke. Then he shook his head and decided that the stricken look on Draco's face was reason enough to stop mentioning it for right now. "If I have to spend that much time in your presence over the next few days, I'll think more about your expression rather than getting over the anger."

"My expression?" Draco's eyes crossed as if he would try to look at his own face without the benefit of a mirror.

Harry nodded. "You look guilty, or tragic, or as if you can only survive on my approval. It tempts me forgive you sooner than I should." He paused, and then added, because he was truly curious,

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Doesn't what bother me?" Draco was studying Harry now in an apparent attempt to store up memories against the time when he wouldn't be able to see him.

"Being so dependent on me," Harry said. "Caring so much about my slightest word. You didn't defend yourself much before you gave in and admitted that you were wrong, even though you really believed that you were acting for the best motives." *Even though I told you over and over again that Laurent can rot, and I don't want to see him again under any circumstances.* "Why? I just—I would hate that, to feel as though I were incomplete except when someone was paying attention to me."

Draco's spine straightened and some of the fire came back into his eyes, to Harry's pleasure. "What?" Draco demanded. "Do you really think that I feel that way?"

"Your expression says so," Harry said. "And I don't want to be responsible for hurting you, Draco, but I'm not going to let you get away with manipulating me because you look at me with large eyes, either. And I'd like the man I date to have some pride."

"I do," Draco said. "And if it would please you to see me acting more proud, then I can do that. I can *certainly* do that." His voice deepened. Harry thought he probably would have received a haughty insult at that point if he had been anyone else and had any other relationship with Draco.

"That's the problem," Harry said. "I want you to do it of your own free will, because your pride is important to you, the same way you want me to touch and kiss you because I really desire you. It's no good if you're doing it because that's what I'd like. I don't want you draped over me like a wet rag."

"It's not that way," Draco said, seeming to try several different expressions before he settled on an earnest one. "For a Veela, it's really not."

"Then explain to me what it's like." Harry rested one hip on the wall and waited. He was getting a bit tired, but he wouldn't go back to bed now, not when it would change the subject of the conversation from Draco's pride to his health.

At least his wound isn't opening again. Draco's keen eyes had noted his chosen's tiredness, but that didn't matter. This was more important, and he would herd Harry back into bed once he had finished it.

"For me," Draco said, and searched for words to express the deepest truth of his soul, the one he had broken up with Pansy before he had a need to explain, "it's like sex." Harry raised an eyebrow, as if to ask what wasn't around a Veela, and Draco hastened to explain. "Yes, maybe something outside your pure free will forces you into having the sex. Maybe it's partially obligation, maybe it's desires that are roused by another person's actions, maybe it's just sheer

randiness." Harry smiled at that. "But once the sex begins, most people don't find it a tiresome chore. It's a pleasure for its own sake. And it's a pleasure to me to tend to you, to be with you, to do what you ask, to—have you trust me." He finished the last words in a tiny whisper.

Harry raised another cool eyebrow, and said, "Well, you *did* mess up on that one, didn't you?"

Draco nodded, eyes on the floor.

Harry sighed. "Well. Will you accept the terms I gave you?"

"Yes." Because he had to, because his desire was prodding him like a sore tooth, Draco added, "What will happen when the two days are up?"

"We'll see," Harry said, as infuriating as always, and then turned to walk back to his bed. Draco hastened forwards, but Harry froze him in place with a single glance and limped back down the corridor by himself.

Draco followed tamely, sating his pain with the sight of Harry's back and the truth sounding over and over again in his thoughts like a trumpet. *He's not going to leave me. He's not.*

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Chapter: 18

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eighteen—Shuddered

The resentment began while Draco was working on the letter to Pansy that Harry had asked him to write.

You didn't tell him the whole truth. You agreed that you meant to kill Laurent when it was something you dreamed about but something you know you never had a chance of doing. You gave in and admitted you were wrong when he said you were. You could have defended yourself, and you would have been within your rights.

Draco hunched his shoulders and kept writing. Thoughts like those weren't important right now. What *was* important was doing as his chosen had asked him to do, which would result in peace between them.

And then?

Then there will be another argument, one when he asks me to give in about everything so that he can have all he wants. And still he'll hold himself aloof from me and say that he doesn't know when he'll be able to give me what I need. Or he'll look past me and ask for more time alone, and if I've set a precedent of giving in to him, what am I supposed to do?

The quill Draco was writing with broke, luckily not in such a way that it sprayed ink all over his letter and made him have to restart it. Draco tugged the parchment towards him and sat there for a moment, eyes shut, thinking the most soothing thoughts he could, before he opened his eyes and reached for another quill. He would dip it in the ink, which could be accomplished with a smooth, economical motion, and then he would begin.

As long as he could write down the words that he actually needed to write and not the ones that buzzed, like loud gnats, close to the surface of his skin.

So, you see, I was mistaken about the genealogy, and what I gave you no conclusive evidence, Draco wrote. Rather than try for a joke, which Pansy would never forgive and which would cause a rupture in their friendship, Draco was pretending that one of his ancestors had changed several things about the older records to suit his preferences—something that had actually happened in the Malfoy family more than once—and that consequences of that change had affected the recent papers, too. *I hope you can forgive me, and apologize to your friends for my having wasted their time.*

He signed his name and sat back, eyes shut. It occurred to him after a moment that he was waiting for something, and then to wonder what that something was.

When it didn't arrive, he knew. He had expected the warm buzz of satisfaction that came from following his chosen's orders, and it refused to show up.

Because you don't know if you did the right thing. Because you don't know if it's gone too far, and Harry is trying to control things that can't be controlled. Because you feel unfairly accused, and a Veela can be just as angry and discontent about that as someone fully human can.

Draco licked his lips and opened his eyes to stare at the letter again. He had to send it, because that was part of the terms of his bargain with Harry, and he wouldn't see Harry again for two days. So that part of it couldn't change.

You worry about what happens when he tries to control his own health and how he treats his wounds too much. You had no compunction about giving him potions or insisting that he rest instead of standing up and walking around on that leg. You kept him near you instead of letting him go home. Why is it that you're more sensitive about his physical health than his mental, more concerned there *about asserting your right not to be unfairly treated, when a great part of what you will become together originates in the mind and spirit?*

Draco touched his temple. He hadn't thought of it that way before, and wished that he could have. Such words, thrown at Harry, would at least have obliged him to listen. Draco thought he

could still respect reason when he heard it.

Well. Most of the time.

But a moment later, he understood why he hadn't protested, any more than Harry hadn't spent a lot of time asking whether Draco would survive those two days. They had both been reeling under the impact of intense emotions, their hearts crowded with them. It wasn't the best of times in which to keep a clear head.

Well, maybe it was impossible to do anything then. But all that meant was that Draco would have to keep a clearer head in the future, and do the best he could to keep himself from being taken advantage of.

I want him. I want him so much.

But I want him on terms that will be equal to the both of us.

Draco smiled wryly as he started folding up the letter to send to Harry for his approval. He thought he could see, now, where some of Harry's concerns over Draco's potentially lost pride came from.

Harry shoved the book away from him so hard that it spun off the table and fell on the floor. Then he picked up his glass of Firewhisky and started to sip it, keeping his gaze on the fire and off the book, as if that would somehow change what he had read there.

But it did no good. He'd stared at the page so long that the words had branded his memory, and there they were, staring at flames or at pages, eyes open or closed.

Though abuse of their gifts by Veela is not unknown, it is rare because, among other things, few Veela can overcome their need for their chosen in order to do such things. They must make their chosen safe and happy. They must do what they can to fulfill their needs, assuming that such is not entirely impossible—and more than one Veela has been driven to misery or madness by demands that are impossible to fulfill in space or time. As such, Veela are easy targets for abuse, and will often give in and sustain their lives under such conditions without protest, if that is the only way they can gain attention from their chosen.

Harry closed his eyes, and waited until the only sound in the room was the crackle and leap of the fire, which at least meant his own breathing had calmed down.

Fuck.

He had known that, vaguely, before. He had read that, he remembered vaguely, in books on Veela before. But he had never understood or absorbed the impact of the words until now, because Draco was so different from Laurent. Laurent had never cringed around Harry or acted less than

confident that he could do what Harry wanted.

Great. Another thing I have to worry about, that I'll hurt Draco as badly as Laurent hurt me.

Harry rubbed at his eyes so furiously that he scratched his left eyelid, and spent the next two minutes cursing and trying out minor healing charms. At least it gave him something different to think about.

But then the worries returned, gnawing around the edges of his mind, snickering in his ear and crawling up and down his shoulder like rats.

I could cause him so much pain. And he can do the same to me just by looking at me in a certain way, or speaking words that he knows I'll go mad about but which he may not be able to help, or spreading his wings.

Harry experienced another complex shiver of longing, fear, regret, and determination. It would be so much simpler if he could end things now, if he could break free of this trap that it seemed he had caught both himself and Draco in. Leave Draco behind, and that would mean he could find someone he truly cared for, someone who wasn't as badly damaged as Harry was and could return his love without a problem. And Harry could have peace as he never would when he had to doubt his own behavior like this.

But leaving would hurt Draco, too.

Harry wished irritably that it was possible to live in the world and have relationships with people without causing them pain. It would be so much *easier.*

But he had been in situations like this before. Hunting Voldemort's Horcruxes. Standing in front of the Wizengamot and hearing that smug Veela say that Veela never abused their chosen, that it was *impossible* and Harry must be lying. Facing down a Dark witch who had taken Ron hostage and who would be able to incinerate him, as well as another helpless victim, if Harry touched his wand.

The only way out is through.

And to get through, I need help.

Harry closed his eyes and sat still so that he wouldn't immediately have the urge to vomit in disgust. To let someone else help him, to confess that he was weak, that he couldn't do this on his own, hit at the center of everything that he had brought away from Laurent's abuse of him. He *should* have been able to stand it on his own. He *should* have known something was wrong the instant that Laurent tried to start using the allure on him, and making frustrated comments because Harry wasn't affected by the ordinary allure. He should have—

There were so many things he should have. But they were in the past, and the only thing he could

do now was acknowledge his stupid mistakes and get the help he needed.

And that help could not come solely from Draco, though Harry didn't doubt that he would protest he could offer it. Harry was too tempted to be inconsistent with Draco, gentle one moment in the hope that he could be what Draco needed—because his desire to save people said he had to—and then harsh because Draco had transgressed on Harry's boundaries without realizing he had done so.

No, he knew someone who could help him, or two people, and he would have to go to them first.

He sat down to write a letter to Owen King.

Draco clenched his fists in his lap. It was only the first of the two days that Harry had said he wanted to spend by himself, and it was already hard for Draco not to drop a pinch of Floo powder in the fire and pretend that he had called for a different reason.

But that would only lose him Harry in the end. Draco would have to put up with this and hope that he could *continue* putting up with it for the next thirty-six hours.

Then the fire puffed to life. Draco leaped to his feet, nearly spreading his wings in surprise, and then paused, raking his fingers frantically through his hair. Had he combed it this morning? Suddenly he couldn't remember.

And suddenly his head hurt with the clash of his instincts and his emotions. He wanted to talk to Harry, of course he did, but would he have to talk about the conclusions that had come to him yesterday? Would he have to admit that he was angry, and that he didn't think Harry could control everything and was a fool to try? What would Harry say to that? Would he even allow Draco to finish before he shut down the Floo connection? Maybe he'd called accidentally.

"Malfoy?"

Draco suddenly slumped back on the couch, feeling as if his energy was gone. That was Weasley's voice, not Harry's.

"What?" he asked without enthusiasm, watching as the flames shaped Weasley's face. Then he sucked in his breath again and sat up. "What happened? Did something happen to Harry? Did he faint from the wound? Is he in St. Mungo's, or is he refusing to go there even though he really needed to?"

"No," Weasley said, and studied Draco for a moment with something uncomfortably like pity in his eyes before he said, "He wasn't at work today. I thought you had kept him over, which I would approve of, by the way," he added, as if he assumed that Draco had been waiting breathlessly for his blessing.

Draco shook his head. "No. Have you firecalled his house?" Jealousy that Weasley was allowed to do such a thing tried to rear its head, but Draco knew that Harry probably wouldn't appreciate Draco tearing his best friend's face off.

"Yes," Weasley said. "No answer. And, well, he *did* owl me, but I assumed it might have been a letter that you encouraged him to write. He just said that he was getting help from someone you knew and *he* knew could help him, and that I wasn't to worry."

Draco blinked. There was one person they both knew, yes, but he could hardly believe that Harry would have gone to him.

"Perhaps Owen King?" he said. "I assume that Harry did tell you about visiting him."

"Not much, but a little." Weasley rubbed the back of his neck, frowning. "It just seems out of character for Harry to go to someone like that, alone, given how much he distrusts the Mind-Healers."

Draco nodded. "On the other hand, has he ever written you a letter like that before when he was going to go do something dangerous?"

Weasley snorted, obviously taking his point. "No. He raced into the danger and informed me about it afterwards, when he bothered to inform me at all. He did that even before—before. He would go to hospital then, of course, but I was usually only hearing about it secondhand." Weasley rolled his eyes. "He never seemed to understand that I'd like to *join* him in those adventures, sometimes."

"He doesn't understand that at all," Draco said, sulkily enough that Weasley gave him an odd look. Draco didn't care. He was tired of his chosen trying to leave him out of his life, and although two days without Harry might seem like something small in the scheme of things, it combined with the questions he had asked himself the other day to put him in a thoroughly bad mood. "I wish he would."

"Someone's going to have to make him, yeah," Weasley agreed. "He just can't control *everything*, no matter how much he wants to."

Draco nodded. "And since he's willing to do things like let you have half the office to decorate as you like, why can't he do other things?"

Weasley frowned. "Well, there I understand it better. Some of his boundaries begin and end with his own body. What he does to it, what he puts in it, who touches it, all of those are his business. And most people would think that's all right. *I* think it's all right. But I can give permission to someone to help me or touch me *without* my permission if I really need to, and I don't think Harry can."

Draco muttered under his breath and folded his arms, not caring if Weasley thought him childish.

Harry was the one he needed to impress, and Harry wasn't here to see him right now.

If Harry really *was* with Owen, then that might be progress.

But at the same time, Draco felt bad asking him to *make* progress because of the trauma he'd been through. Maybe Harry was doing the best he could under the circumstances. Maybe Draco should have heeded the warning that Harry had tried to give him back at the beginning and simply avoided trying to date him.

Then Draco shrugged off the thought. Too bad. He hadn't heeded the warning, Harry had given him permission, and they had to live with what they had, not make up imaginary alternative lives where things were easier.

And I want to explain to Harry what really happened between me and Pansy, and how unlikely it is that they would have managed to find and free Laurent even without my help, and the fact that I had an excuse to keep an eye on her search as long as she was getting her information from me.

"We have to do something," Draco said aloud. Perhaps saying it like that would convince him that he was getting somewhere.

"I agree. But what?"

Draco started. He hadn't realized Weasley was still in the room. He battled down a blush that his father would have had no trouble conquering and said, "Harry needs something in his life that will matter more than the Auror program does to him right now. He values his career too much, which is one reason that he takes all those risks for it. But his meaning can't be me, either. Can you offer any help with that? Is there a hobby that Harry likes, something he does to relax?"

Weasley shook his head helplessly, and Draco wondered with a sinking heart whether Weasley had already tried this tactic and had no success with it. "Harry used to love Quidditch," he said. "But he hasn't played in a long time. And I'm not sure that he *could* love something, have it mean a lot to him, without becoming obsessive about it, honestly. That seems to be the way he is."

"And Quidditch isn't much less dangerous than Auror work if you play professionally," Draco said. He tapped his fingers against his lips. "Perhaps we're going about this the wrong way. Having a single meaningful thing in his life hasn't done Harry much good so far, after all. He needs balance. Maybe we can find a way for him to concentrate more on those things he already has, like his friendship with you and with me, without making any of them exclusive of the others."

"I'm ready to try it if you are," Weasley said.

Draco smiled at him, and then wondered if Weasley was going to faint. It was probably better for Draco, since he couldn't see his own smile. "He must be something special, to have inspired a friendship like yours," Draco said quietly.

Weasley's ears burned. "Let's not talk about it," he said quickly. "What are you going to do?"

"He doesn't want to see me until after tomorrow," Draco said. "After that, we'll see. But he and I need to have an honest conversation before we do anything else. There are some things that we need to clear up."

Weasley made a face. Draco blinked at him, startled and offended, until he realized that Weasley was probably envisioning sexual information as a part of that conversation. "I hope it works," Weasley said. "And I'll send him an invitation to spend the evening with me and Hermione, all right? Usually he and I just go drinking after work, or he comes over to the Burrow to be with the whole family. It hasn't been just him and us alone since a long time before Rose was born. I think he thought Hermione had enough to worry about, with the pregnancy."

"And he wanted to be with his work whenever he could," Draco said, aware that he was thinking aloud, feeling utterly strange doing it with a Weasley in the house, and determined to go on doing it anyway. "Good. That should start moving us down the path."

Weasley exhaled a troubled breath. "I sort of feel as if we're plotting about him behind his back."

"We'll tell him what we intend," Draco said. "You can tell him why you're inviting him over, not just try to make it a casual, subtle thing. I have this idea that you don't do subtle well," he added, because he had to.

Weasley rolled his eyes and vanished into the flames. Draco leaned back against the couch, folded his hands behind his head, and pondered what he would say to Harry when he next saw him.

I want him. I need him. I want him to heal.

But I can't indulge him forever, no more than he can me. And I will tell him the truth this time.

Harry shut his eyes. He had come this far, and was he going to back out now? He couldn't imagine doing so.

He absorbed the calming, peaceful atmosphere of King's home for endless moments before he knocked. The door in front of him, which he knew led to a room he hadn't been before, was made of dark green wood, and Harry studied it in silence, filling his eyes with the smoothness of it before it swung open.

King stood on the other side, gravely smiling at him. He gestured Harry into the room with a sweep of his arm, and Harry gave a shaky nod and stepped past him. He looked around, and up. This room mimicked the others he had seen, with alternating bands of color on the walls and large windows that let in a smell of the sea, but the colors this time were black and silver. Harry

might have been standing in a winter woods, under branches laden with snow.

Many chairs filled this room in several different clumps, all of them arranged in squares or circles so that everyone would sit facing each other. Harry counted twelve before he turned and faced the person he had sensed waiting for him from the beginning.

She was a tall woman with a sharp face and long pale hair that hung to touch the middle of her back, though if Harry hadn't known she was a Veela he would have thought that just meant she was old. Her eyes were so bright and piercing a blue that Harry would have wanted to fall back a step without his private, personal fear. She sat with her legs crossed and her hands clasped in her lap, and watched him.

"Miss—" Harry started, not even sure if that was the right title.

"Lucy will do," she said.

She smiled, but even that didn't reassure Harry, because it was a sharp gesture. Lucy smiled as if she knew what she was doing; she gestured with one hand towards the chair in front of her as if she knew what her presence did to him and wanted him to get over it. Harry knew it was an unfair impression, but he'd got so used to Draco and Fleur, who both went out of their ways to make him feel comfortable, that he recoiled, unnerved.

King came up beside him and pressed his palm flat against Harry's shoulder. "She will not harm you," he said gently.

Harry caught his breath and looked away. "I know," he whispered. He also knew that King's reasons for refusing another private meeting—he had been sick recently, and his Veela didn't want to leave him—were perfectly valid. But being in the same room with Lucy had already made the walls start to spin, slowly.

King had suggested that they meet in a different room of the house, with Lucy outside the door, but Harry had refused that. He would rather be able to see her and know where she was at all times, if she had to be there.

Just because she's in front of you doesn't mean you can control her, though.

That was something Harry was trying to remember, to *make* himself remember. He didn't want to control Draco, really he didn't, but that was what it could turn into if Draco's need to please him made him too subservient.

I'm here to avoid causing pain to Draco.

That made it easier to be here than thinking about being weak and needing help did. Harry forced his nerveless legs to move forwards one step at a time, until he dropped into the chair across from Lucy.

"Let's start," he said.

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Chapter: 19

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nineteen—Broken

Draco scowled and sat back, staring at the parchment on his desk. He'd been doing this for the last half-hour. By now, if he had held true to his intentions when he first sat down, he should have filled the parchment with a list of things that he was going to talk to Harry about the next time he saw him.

And then he would think that it was ridiculous, even childish, to make a list like that, and he should sit down with Harry, start talking, and let the words come naturally.

But when he did that, he only seemed to get himself into further trouble, either lying or saying things that hurt Harry. So he should make the list.

But that wasn't the sort of thing he had envisioned ever needing to do once he had found his chosen. It seemed stupid and artificial. He wanted a pure bond of the kind that he'd dreamed of and read about in his ancestors' diaries and observed in action between Owen and Lucy.

So the end result was that he had nothing written yet, and the conflicting thoughts in his head were strong enough to make his hand shake.

Draco hissed and tossed his quill on the table. If he couldn't make a list on parchment, then he would start one in his head and see what luck he had.

The truth. That was the first thing, Draco thought. It had to be. He *hadn't* lied to Harry until they actually had the confrontation. All he had done was provide Pansy with information that she could have got elsewhere, from any pure-blood family who kept the common records of the marriages and exchanges between them. So he would tell Harry that Harry couldn't fairly accuse him of trying to release Laurent.

Draco would have liked to, yes. That was not the same thing.

And next, that he never wanted to be held down by Harry's magic again. He understood Harry got angry and resorted to his magic in an attempt to defend himself, but Draco hadn't approached

him, hurt him, or even tried to touch him. He hadn't spread his wings or showed any other Veela features, either. There was no *need* for that kind of thing.

And next, that he needed…

That was where he ran into problems, because his need was Harry's nightmare.

Draco massaged his forehead and tried to decide what he could reasonably ask of Harry. Time spent with him. Honest conversation, and honesty when Harry was wounded and needed help. More attention to his own life, which Harry had practically agreed to give already. Gentle touches. Unquestioning defense, the kind of thing that would be easy for Harry, because he gave it to everyone who crossed his path or who asked him to defend them.

He wanted more than that. He wanted Harry to touch him, kiss him, and let Draco sleep in the same bed. Invitations to Harry's house and eating food that Draco had prepared were next on the list. And there was the problem of the Blazing Season, but Draco set that looming specter aside for now, because he literally couldn't think of a solution so far, and it would only distress him.

How far can I go in asking for the things I want?

Draco sighed. He had wanted to come to a certainty, as he had about the things he would tell Harry, but there wasn't a way to do that. He would ask Harry to stretch his limits and go as far as he comfortably could. This part of their relationship had to depend a lot more on Harry's willingness to act than on Draco's willingness to speak.

I knew the parchment wasn't the right way to do this, Draco thought triumphantly, and crushed it into a ball, flinging it in a corner of the room.

A house-elf appeared at once, picked it up, and vanished with it, but it was the *principle* of the thing.

Lucy spread her wings.

Harry had expected it, and it was still a shock. He stared at the feathers and found himself clutching his wand. He *knew* he had put it away when he first came into the house. But there it was, and it felt like the only shield between him and being seized and held securely in a prison that he couldn't escape.

Such a fragile shield, he thought, and then Lucy leaned towards him.

Harry felt his mind fracture with panic. He leaped to his feet and retreated behind the chair. Lucy's lips tightened in exasperation, and she lifted her hands as if she wanted to show him that she still had human fingernails instead of claws.

It didn't matter. Harry was gasping and shaking, and he would start whimpering in a minute.

"I am not hurting you," Lucy said. She had drained all emotion from her voice, so Harry couldn't hear the contempt he was sure she felt for him. "I have a chosen of my own, and don't want to hold you. I only spread my wings now because you asked, and I'm sure Draco would say the same thing. What pleasure would he have in frightening his chosen out of his wits? You are here to *learn*, remember."

Harry lowered his wand with a gigantic effort. Then he stepped out from behind the chair and walked closer to Lucy.

It hurt. The fear manifested in his chest as the inability to breathe, and he huffed and heaved and stopped a foot away, swaying. He could feel his lungs working without producing any effect. He would faint in a moment from sheer lack of air.

King moved behind him and clapped him on the back.

Harry gasped, and that made new air flood his chest. He looked into Lucy's eyes and focused on them, narrowing his vision to exclude everything else, until he was sure that he would continue to breathe on his own. Then he turned to the wings again.

They were—intimidating. They shimmered, and Harry felt as if the haze of light they shed had moved into his eyes and was trying to blind him, but he forced himself to squint past it and concentrate on the structure of the wings themselves, using his Auror skills.

They were made of layered silver feathers, fading to white at the very tips. Here and there was a spot of black or deep blue. Harry didn't know what that meant. Laurent hadn't been interested in *explaining* the wings to Harry, just in using them on him.

Harry's teeth chattered and a cold shudder crawled up his spine, which made it try to curve. He wanted to fall on the floor and hide his face. He wanted to wrap his arms around himself and stay there until this went away.

He wanted to use his magic to remove the menace in front of him, and the glass in the windows was shivering from the force of that desire.

"You can do this," King said from right beside Harry's ear. His voice was so steady and calm that Harry's throat ached. "I have faith in you, and so does my Lucy, or she never would have volunteered for this in the first place."

Harry nodded, exhaled, and focused on the wings again. The pattern of blue and black dots was regular, he noted. It formed a fan-pattern around the central point of Lucy. The wings trembled and flexed, and he thought he could see how Lucy would fly, how they would hurl her upwards and she would circle overhead on light vanes, swifter and more gracefully than anyone could fly on a broom.

A pang of envy struck him. Harry wasn't proud of that, but he closed his eyes, soaking in the emotion, reveling in it. It was the first time since Laurent that he had felt something other than fear when looking at a Veela's wings.

King tapped him on the shoulder. "Open your eyes," he said. "Looking away like this accomplishes no purpose."

Shivering, helpless between the forces of his fear and his determination, Harry looked again. Lucy arched her head back and expanded the wings still further. They blazed around her body like a peacock's tail.

Blazed…

Harry sagged to his knees, vomiting. The bolts of rage and shame and fear that traveled through him felt like random electric impulses, appearing and vanishing again so quickly that he didn't really have time to *feel* them before they were gone.

He curled up when they were done and knelt there, hugging his knees, his head hanging.

Hatred curled through him in black tendrils so thick that they threatened to strangle him. It was hatred for himself, though the hatred for Laurent was mixed in there and formed no small part of it. He should have been able to stand on his own feet. He shouldn't need help in the first place. He shouldn't be afraid of something as small as a pair of spread wings, not when he had faced down Voldemort and the Dark magical creatures and wizards that he hunted without blinking.

It was hatred, and not the love that Draco would probably say that it was, which forced him back to his feet. King, who had been holding out a hand as if he would touch Harry's shoulder, stepped back, eyes narrowed as they focused on him. Harry glanced to the side and noticed that someone had already Vanished his vomit. Good. He fixed his gaze on Lucy, who had retracted her wings, and said, "Let's try again."

"You are shaky on your feet," King said, in the tone of someone only making an observation, but it still made Harry grit his teeth. "We should wait."

"I don't want to," Harry said. "I want to get *through* as much of this stupid fear as I possibly can."

"This is not a perfect cure," Lucy said, studying him as if she didn't know whether he was brave or an idiot. "You will still be uncomfortable around Veela and tend to start when your consort suddenly reveals himself."

"I know that," Harry said. "But coddling myself for the last few years has done no good at all. I thought I was mostly over it, and then I realized that I could think that way because I just didn't *see* any Veela. Spread your wings again. Please," he added begrudgingly, when he realized that Lucy's stare had sharpened.

For some moments, she stood there and seemed to debate whether or not they should continue. Then she said, "Understand that I am doing this more for Draco's sake than yours."

Harry laughed grimly. "You think I'd *want* you to do it for mine? I'd be happy to stay away from all Veela for the rest of my life, if it was up to me. But it's not."

"So this healing is for Draco?" King's voice asked swiftly from behind him. "Not for yourself?"

"Yes," Harry said. "Oh, I want to not get sick to my stomach every time I look at a Veela's wings. *That* part is for me. But if I didn't have a Veela lover, I wouldn't feel such a pressing need to get used to this."

King opened his mouth, and then shut it again. He was frowning, but he didn't say anything. Lucy said, "I am going to grow my claws as well as my wings. Look at me, please."

It was the most polite she'd been to him since he got there. Harry focused on that and not on the sense memories that abruptly swarmed over him, the memories of Laurent's claws parting his skin and gripping his hips. He stepped back until he was sure he would be able to see all of Lucy and then nodded.

He watched the way the wings slid out of her body this time, which was something he hadn't been able to think about since Laurent was arrested. He watched her shoulders hunch and the skin there part into bloodless slits, from which the wings extended and unfurled like new leaves. He didn't get to watch the transformation of her nails into claws in the same way; when he looked at them, they were already long, slender, spiky things, tipped with hooks and looking as if they were made of glowing crystal.

Harry swallowed. Then he swallowed again. His throat was so dry that it clicked when he did so.

Lucy moved a step nearer to him. Cloaked in those silvery wings, she looked unearthly, inhuman. Harry shivered and fought the urge to back away, or strike out at her with his magic.

The window behind her shattered as his power sought some other outlet. King stepped around Harry, but Lucy shook her head and held up one hand. It was a perfect tool to grip someone, Harry thought, staring at her thin fingers and her claws as if hypnotized. And to rip them open.

"No," Lucy said. "He did not hurt me. And I think this is what he needs—the ability to defend himself as a Veela walks towards him. To *choose.*"

She went on moving, lifting and placing her feet slowly, delicately, taking short steps. But she was advancing, and the distance between her and Harry was becoming smaller and smaller, a matter of inches rather than feet now.

And still, Harry hadn't destroyed her.

There were glass slivers in her hair and cold sweat all over his body. But she was still there.

Lucy smiled. Harry didn't think the smile was for him, but for something more abstract. For how much he cared about Draco, perhaps, or his self-control. "Good," she said. Her voice was higher-pitched than it had been when she was speaking to King, and Harry felt his breathing speed up. Lucy nodded to him, proving she had noticed, and said, "I am going to trill now. This is something necessary to Veela."

"Is it?" Harry asked, his voice bitter and foreign to him. He didn't know he was going to say the next words until he had spoken them. "Laurent only used it when he wanted to make me fall asleep or do what he wanted."

"It is an expression of love," said Lucy. "The more I hear of your Laurent, the more I want to kill him." It was softly said, but Harry blinked. Lucy was already going on by the time he thought of trying to say something—not that he really knew what he would have said. "It is meant to soothe the chosen, yes, but more than that. It *reassures* the chosen, tells him that he will always be protected." For a moment, she gave a private smile in King's direction. By the time she faced Harry, her face was cool and remote once more. "It forms a bond between them, and ties them together all the more strongly."

Harry squared his shoulders and shifted his feet. He hated the thought of being tied to and dependent on someone else.

Then he reminded himself that was the kind of thing that made him afraid he might abuse Draco. Being tied to someone could mean any number of things, and it didn't *necessarily* make him the childlike one that Draco could rape. But neither could it make Draco into a slave who did only what Harry wanted.

"All right," he said.

He didn't hear himself say it, and tried to repeat the words, but his voice was strangled. Luckily, either from the movement of his lips or from something else, Lucy understood. She nodded and opened her mouth.

The trill was what Harry remembered: a high, piercing, shrill sound that turned indefinably sweet as it continued, reminding Harry of lost childhood dreams of home and family. He had wanted someone to reassure him like that when he was a boy on Privet Drive, trying to believe that things would be different someday and yet not quite believing no matter how hard he labored.

But I'm not a child, and I don't need this now!

Harry shuddered and reminded himself that he might need it in a different way. Draco needed it; that should be enough.

And if he could only forget the way Laurent had used it to soothe him back into bed during those three days when he had awakened, dazed and confused, and nearly walked out of the room, remembering his job—

The trill stopped, but the sound didn't. Harry was screaming, he thought, and clapped his hand over his mouth, biting his fingers to make himself stop.

"I can't," he said, when he took his hand away and immediately began to babble. "I can't, I can't, it's too soon, this is too hard, I can't listen to that—"

"No one expected you to be able to do everything all at once," King told him, eyes kind. Harry was glad he'd interrupted; he thought it was the only reason he was able to shut up. "Your progress so far is wonderful."

Harry bowed his head and rubbed at his aching neck and the sweat that had gathered there. "But is it enough for Draco?" he asked.

"I cannot answer that question," Lucy said, sounding as offended as though Harry had tried to shake the answers out of her. "Different Veela need different things from their chosen." Harry concealed a sigh. *Of course.* "But you might ask what he needs before you spring to the conclusion that you cannot be it."

"In some ways," Harry said, deciding that he would tell Lucy this since there was no way he could tell Draco, "it would have been easier if he never chose me. He would never have been subjected to what he's had to go through, and neither would I."

Lucy looked at him the way a hawk would look at a mouse. A confused hawk, Harry corrected himself in his mind. She was puzzled behind the haughtiness. "His not choosing you would not have prevented the rape."

"No," Harry said. "But it would have prevented…this." He looked at the place on the floor where he had vomited.

"That is nonsense," Lucy said, and now she was moving towards him, and she still had the wings and the claws even if she had put the trill away, and Harry instinctively raised his wand. Lucy didn't seem to notice, or to be inclined to stop. Her eyes were fierce and furious. "You would rather go unhealed? You would rather Draco suffer the loss of the person he most wanted? You would rather that you, yourself, be without someone who will love you and protect you?"

"I could do without the protection, yes!" Harry snarled. Another window shattered, and King stepped up behind Lucy, resting his hands between her wings. Harry hoped that would calm her. "Stay back!"

"No," Lucy said, and she didn't shout. Her voice was low and cold. "Why should I? You are a *coward,* your great reputation nothing but a lie. You would have hidden within yourself if Draco

hadn't chosen you, and shivered, and wondered why everyone always avoided you. You would have ended up driving your friends away at last, because you could let no one in, and you were obsessed with controlling all around you. And you *dare* to lament that someone chose you who did not have to, that a Veela will give you the blessing of his companionship? You are a limited man, a coward, cringing back from the consequences of the rape and making no attempt to build a life for yourself, determined to bleed out before you would allow someone to lift a hand to help, curled around the rape as if it were the only defining thing that ever happened to you—"

Harry snarled.

He very nearly killed Lucy. He very nearly did.

But he remembered, at the last moment, the words in the book about how the consorts of Veela could become their abusers, and the way Draco's eyes had looked when Harry used his magic to pin him to the floor.

He raised his power to create walls around him instead, shimmering transparent shields that turned into walls of white marble, stronger than any Veela's wings. A brief storm raged there, spikes of sharp rain falling on Harry's head.

Because it was magical rain, it did not simply wet his hair. The water trickled into his ears, and with it came Lucy's words and the nearly identical ones he had whispered to himself over and over since those three days he had spent under Laurent's control.

You're a coward.

You should have done something to stop him before it got that far.

You should never have allowed him near you in the first place. You should have seen what was false behind his smile and his pretty words. You should have known that he could never have wanted to date you.

You should have been stronger. You should have been wiser. You should have been faster. You're not deserving of Draco's love.

You don't deserve to be healed.

The rain went on and on, the words searing across and scarring Harry's brain, and Harry could do nothing but curl under the pounding. He was weeping, or so he thought, but the tears mingled with the magic washing down his face and lost their identity in it. He was screaming, because his throat hurt, but the walls trapped the sound and made sure that he was the only one who heard it.

As it should be. Harry did not want relative strangers to see his breakdown, especially not one stranger who had contributed to it.

It went on and on, waves of words and waves of magic, hitting him and folding into his body and becoming a part of him. Harry had thought some of those things before, but never all at once. He had hidden them under his consuming need for independence and his anger at Laurent, and then at Draco. He had kept them imprisoned because he knew they could damage him. He had scabbed the wound over and forbore to pick at the scab.

He had done the best he could. But his best wasn't enough.

In a place where no one else could intrude and see that, Harry was able to admit that, finally. He *had* tried. He hadn't deserved what happened. He had been careful around Laurent at first, concerned that here was someone else who only wanted him for his fame and the rewards that would come from hanging around him. But Laurent had acted differently, and Harry could accept and trust him, for a time.

Then he had raped Harry.

It had happened. There was no going back or getting over it. That much, Harry knew he had accepted a long time ago.

But he had not accepted the other part of the truth: that there was no saying it wouldn't happen again, that there was no way of making himself safe forever from another Laurent. Unless he simply shut down and refused to date at all, and even then, an enemy could subdue him with magic and hurt him. His efforts had hurt him, and sometimes other people, without protecting him.

His magic hovered over his shoulders and sang in his ears. Great power, yes. But it couldn't deal with all threats.

No matter how many healing spells he learned, he could never heal all his wounds. There would always, possibly, be a Dark wizard just a little bit faster with his wand, and that would mean he could die.

No matter how careful he was with his food, someone could still poison the ingredients he bought, or enchant them, or drug them.

No matter how much he refused to let someone touch him, no matter how many embraces he threw off, that wouldn't erase the possibility that someone could pin his arms to his sides, or hit him with *Incarcerous,* take his wand away, and do whatever they wanted.

No matter how hard he tried, there was no way that he could be absolutely safe.

Harry didn't know how long it took him to stop shaking. Long enough for both the tears and the magic to fade from his face, at least. He stood up, stretched, and gestured, knocking back the marble walls that had sprung up around him with the flex of a thought.

They were paper walls, anyway. His real strength would have to come from others.

Lucy and King stood waiting for him, apprehensive. Lucy was still clad in her wings and claws. Harry shuddered when he looked at her, but at least he managed not to run away screaming, and he knew that was a real accomplishment.

"All right," he said quietly. "I know that I'm not going to be able to do this all at once. But the more I look at the wings and the claws, the more indifferent to them I'll be. So we'll keep trying that, shall we?"

Lucy exchanged looks with her consort and then bowed her head to him. "Forgive me, Auror Potter. I had no right to say the words I did."

"Maybe not," Harry said calmly. "But they made me think, so thank you for that, at least. And now, I want to continue with these lessons. When would be the best time for me to come back and talk with you again?"

Hesitantly, looking as if she couldn't believe that he wasn't upset, Lucy named a time. Harry nodded.

King walked him to the door, where he stopped him with a hand on his arm. "You know that this is not a permanent solution," King said quietly. "There is newfound courage in your eyes, now, but it will not last forever."

Harry grimaced. "I know." That was the worst thing he had to deal with: the knowledge that his feeling of determination right now would fade and have to be renewed. "I'll just have to take advantage of it while it does."

King nodded cautiously, studying Harry all the while. "You do not need to hammer every single flaw in you into submission," he said. "People are allowed to make mistakes, even mistakes that hurt others."

"Yeah, but I'd like not to make the ones that kill people or depress them for years," Harry said, thinking of what Draco had told him would happen if he had to give up Harry as his chosen. "I've accepted that it'll take more than one session like this, though. I'll come back when she said I should." He nodded to King. "Thank you again."

King looked as if he'd have liked to say something, but Harry stepped firmly out the door and shut it behind him. Then he leaned against it for a few moments, head bowed.

It was time to do another thing he must, before his courage ran out and he would have to start leaning on others.

It was time to go talk with Draco.

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Chapter: 20

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty—Spoken

Draco turned his head sharply. Someone had knocked on his door, but he hadn't felt that person's passage through the wards. And he hadn't heard their approach, either, which spoke of trained silence.

He rose quickly to his feet, letting his claws grow in place of his nails. Yes, there were people attuned to his wards, such as his parents, but they would have called ahead to tell him they were coming. And with Lucius's cane, they couldn't make their way through the wards that quietly.

"Draco?"

The voice staggered Draco. He grabbed onto the back of his chair and stood there with his eyes shut. There was one other person he had keyed into the wards, on the wild, blazing off-chance that he might someday take advantage of the implied invitation.

But he had never expected that that person would actually do so. Like so much else in the past few months, it had seemed a wild dream, a fantasy that would never be fulfilled.

"Yes, come in, Harry," he said, when he could speak. "Against you, the door's not warded."

And never will be, he whispered in his mind, but he didn't think that it would be in his best interests to say that aloud. Beneath the prickling excitement down his spine and in his head, he was remembering his anger.

The door swung open, and Harry stepped inside, nodding to him. Draco stood up and examined him more carefully. There was a gleam in Harry's eyes that he had sometimes seen in newspaper photographs, when Harry was chasing down a criminal who had committed some particular evil, but he hadn't thought Harry capable of looking at *him* like that.

It was different, and Draco wondered if he should fear that. But at the moment, any difference promised newness, which promised excitement, which promised a change from the status quo they found themselves locked into.

"I needed to talk to you," Harry said bluntly. Then he hesitated, touching his hand to his forehead as if his scar could support him. "That is, if you don't mind. I know the full two days we were

going to spend apart aren't up yet."

"Do you think I mind that?" Draco asked, locking his eyes on Harry's face. "You don't know me as well as you'll need to, if you do."

Harry gave him a grim smile and stepped closer. "Yes, that's the problem, isn't it?" he asked. "That I think one thing and you think another. That I don't know you that well. I've been to Lucy and Owen now, and Lucy said a number of things that made me think. So I wanted to come to you."

"She didn't suggest this, then?" Draco was finding it hard to breathe through the sweetness in his lungs. If Harry had made the decision on his own, it was the first step he had taken, of his own free will, that might really bring him close to Draco.

Harry shook his head. "She simply suggested that I was a coward and had spent too much of my time obsessively making sure I was safe, instead of facing up to what had happened to me and to what the people around me really needed." He paused meditatively. "I wouldn't have put it *quite* like that to myself, but that's why I needed her to point it out."

Draco felt as though someone had squeezed his throat. "You're not a coward," he rasped. "She had no right to say that."

"Didn't she?" Harry looked up, his eyes seeming to glow as if a fire lit them from within instead of from the hearth across the room. "She saw me hurting a friend—and I think she does consider you a friend. I would say worse than that if I saw someone hurting Ron, or Hermione, or you."

Draco preened a little. Even the fact that he came at the end of that particular list didn't trouble him. The shine in Harry's eyes was too promising.

"I still wouldn't call you a coward," he said, recalling his attention to the subject of the conversation with an effort. "You did the best you could. And a lot of people would just have killed Laurent. You were brave when you fought the desire to do so, even though Pensieve memories would have cleared you."

Harry folded his arms across his chest. "The way that you wanted to kill him?"

Draco stepped closer. He had intended just to tell Harry that he admired him, and that he was right about leaving Laurent alive, but why not take up his main complaint, since the conversation had arrived here so soon? "I never intended to kill Laurent. That was only a wild dream. I provided information about his family to Pansy, but she could have got that anywhere. I never did anything else."

Harry narrowed his eyes as if against a strong wind. "But you said—"

"I was saying anything I could to make sure you wouldn't leave me," Draco snapped. "And no,

I'm not proud of that, but that's the way it *is*. Are you surprised that we *both* gave in to emotion and said lots of things that we wouldn't have said otherwise? Does it tell you how badly I was feeling, that I would humble myself to you like that, as long as you would promise not to leave me forever?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair and sighed out loud. He had known this would be hard. So far, the conversation was happening the way it probably should be, he thought wryly.

He just hadn't known it would be *this* hard, and that he would have to confront yet another mistake he had made.

His head ached, and his mouth felt fuzzy, as though he had been drinking for a long time. He ran his tongue around his lips before he tried to answer.

"It does," he said quietly. "I'm sorry, Draco. I should have thought about it longer and harder, and asked why you would do something like that, when retaining my trust was important to you."

"Yes. You should have."

Draco was staring at him with eyes so bright that Harry found it hard to meet them. His fingers were curled into talons, making the actual claws at the end of them stand out even more. He half-crouched, as though he was going to spring on Harry and tackle him to the floor, marking him…

Harry recognized the spiraling, falling sensation in the middle of his chest that signaled a panic attack. He gulped and turned his head to the side, forcing his eyes shut and his breathing smooth until it passed. He had seen Lucy's claws, and she hadn't hurt him, even though she disliked him a lot more than Draco did. He could do this.

And someone else could tackle him to the floor and mark him, too, even if they didn't have Veela claws.

"I wanted to believe you were going to hurt me, I think," Harry said. "Because that way, I wouldn't have to deal with having you as a lover, or getting hurt again—except in the most obvious ways. Lucy said I was trying to shove everyone away and someday I would wake up alone and lonely and wondering where my friends went, and I believe her."

Draco paused, as though evaluating the apology, and then nodded. "I probably should have come to you when I realized what Pansy was asking for," he said, like a peace offering. "But I thought that she would only get the information somewhere else if I didn't give it to her, and then we wouldn't know what was happening at all. At least this way, Pansy will gossip about the search, and we can know if anyone is getting close."

Harry felt that his smile was more genuine this time. "That was good thinking," he said.

"Practical thinking. The kind of thinking that I would have been incapable of if she had come to me about it." He paused a minute, struggled with the words, and then added, "Thank you. This is the kind of thing I need you for. You can do things I can't."

Draco's eyes flared. The hunger in them was so obvious that Harry had to look aside again.

But he didn't back away, and he tried not to panic or feel scorn as he thought about Draco desiring him. Just because he felt stained and soiled by Laurent's touch, or felt as though he were weak for not standing alone, didn't mean other people thought the same. One of the valuable things Lucy had reminded him of was that other people had different perspectives than Harry did.

"You said you needed me." Draco's voice was soft and eager, as if he wanted to hear more. As if he needed to.

Harry licked his lips and did the best he could to give him more. "Yes. You're teaching me that I didn't really heal myself. I thought it wasn't a big deal, because as long as I was functioning, who could say that I wasn't doing well? But I wasn't, and you taught me that. And you're waking me up, making me think about—dating again, and romance, and other things." Harry had the impression that he was babbling by now, but Draco's eyes kept getting brighter, and as long as that happened, Harry would try to relax his mental filters. "And you're strong, intelligent, compassionate when you want to be. You would be a wonderful friend even if you weren't my lover."

Draco made a strange, throbbing sound that seemed to break out from the center of his chest, like a cross between a chirp and a purr. He moved a step forwards, his shoulders trembling and burning at the edges.

Harry knew what he needed. And he still had some of the courage that Lucy's words had inspired in him. He braced himself.

"You can spread your wings," he whispered.

Draco did hesitate even when he heard the words. He knew that spreading his wings in the Manor had startled Harry into panic and flight, and he never wanted that to happen again.

But if Harry had given permission, then keeping his wings hidden would make it seem as if Draco thought him weak. And Draco believed the long-term consequences of that would be more devastating. Harry had come back to him after he unexpectedly spread his wings, after all.

Trying to ignore the memory that Weasley's intervention had been necessary to bring Harry back, Draco unbuttoned his robes and shirt in a few moments and let them fall to his waist. Then he relaxed the skin that stretched over his wings.

They burst out, making Draco feel more confident, stronger, happier, lighter. He had forgotten how wonderful it was when he could spread them for some reason other than defending his family or others he cared about who were threatened. A Veela's wings *could* be shields, but they were meant even more as decorative ornaments, sources of delight and joy for their chosen.

Harry's breath stuttered. Draco faced him and spread his wings to their widest possible extent, making Harry look at all of him, what he was. Part of him wasn't human, and if Harry couldn't acknowledge that, they would never get anywhere.

Harry clenched his fists and stood there for a moment as if in silent argument with himself. Then he moved forwards, his feet screeching slowly across the floor. Draco fluttered his wings in agitation, then did his best to steady them and stand there with them invitingly extended.

Harry halted a foot away. Draco could see him sweating, straining, fighting to move closer, but it wasn't working.

"It's all right," Draco said softly. "Don't force yourself into doing something you're not comfortable with."

Harry laughed, a high sound that he luckily cut off before it got too hysterical. "I'm already doing *that*," he said. "But I want to do this. My fears are just going to have to shut up and go away for a minute." He hesitated. Draco waited patiently for the next question, letting his wings move a tiny amount. Harry would be startled, possibly frightened, if he flapped, but even a slight motion could make the feathers shine and attract the eye.

"I can't let you touch me with your wings yet," Harry said carefully. "Laurent did that, and I'm not ready to be protected or sheltered or wrapped up like I'm some kind of—of prize or gift." His face turned red, and Draco told himself, through the haze of his rage at Laurent, to remember that. Harry might not have a problem with possessive words or gestures so much as he did with being treated like an object. "But can I touch them, myself?"

Draco couldn't speak, so intense was his agreement. He settled for nodding in an exaggerated fashion several times, instead, and then moving his left wing as near to Harry as he could.

Harry laughed again, though this time it was choked. Then, with his eyes on Draco as if he assumed that anything he could do right now would cause pain, he reached out and laid his fingertips on the edges of Draco's feathers.

Draco trembled, closing his eyes. The pleasure that traveled through him seemed to originate several feet from his body and then slam into him like a beam of sunlight. He hardened, and his muscles went tight with the need to move. But he stood still, because he wanted to please his chosen more than he wanted anything else.

When he opened his eyes, there was a look of wonder on Harry's face, and that made all his self-control worth it.

Harry hadn't been sure what he expected when he touched Draco's feathers. He remembered the feel of Laurent's wings, of course. They had hung around him like heavy, warm mist, cradling, smothering, *preventing.* Harry had braced himself to touch Draco's wings the way he would have braced himself to plunge his hand into a fire.

But this wasn't like that at all. The feathers were smooth and soft to the touch, silken enough that he didn't notice when his fingers slid from one to another, but solid. They could form a wall, yes, but they weren't doing it around him.

And when he looked at Draco's face, it became perfectly obvious what effect touching them had on him.

Harry stood quite still then, because he felt a new sensation. If he had felt it before, when he was with Laurent or another of the men he had dated, it had been so small that he hadn't experienced it separately from desire. But this—

This was *power*. And smugness, that he could make someone like Draco feel something like this.

The notion unnerved Harry, and he ended up pulling his hand back from the wing, closing it into a fist. Draco blinked, jarred awake as if from a dream. His eyelashes fluttered, and his mouth hung open like a baby bird's. Harry found himself smiling, though he didn't know if he was more amused or nervous.

Draco moved forwards then.

Harry stepped back, but Draco didn't appear to notice. His eyes were focused but glazed, and he was making a low noise in his throat that Harry thought was the closest Veela could come to a growl. Laurent had never made it.

Because of that, he forced himself to stand still as Draco came up to him and embraced him. Thank God, he did fold his wings before he tried that. But Harry almost thought he wouldn't have panicked even if Draco hadn't remembered. He was giving little desperate whimpers that didn't exactly promote the image of a giant predatory bird to Harry's memory.

Draco buried his face in Harry's neck and held it there. Harry tentatively wrapped his arms around Draco's back, wondering what would happen next, so dizzied and deafened by his own heartbeat that he could no longer hear Draco's whimpers.

Then Draco raised his hands and trailed his claws slowly down Harry's shoulders.

"God!"

Harry caught his breath in a sob. The claws seemed directly connected to his nerves. He was

hard in a second, and he could feel the hairs on his neck and shoulders standing up. His nipples stiffened. He swayed towards Draco, caught between arousal and shock.

Laurent had never done this. Harry hadn't known it was possible.

Draco raised his head. His eyes were clear now, the color of water lit from behind by a glassy flame. He chirped—there was no mistaking that particular noise—in a way that sounded pleased. He rubbed his cheek along Harry's.

He made no attempt to bring his wings forwards or reach down and undo Harry's belt. He just held him there, trembling with desire and muted fear, and stared at him as if Harry's arousal was enough.

But human expression was returning to his face all the time, and Harry could see traces of the human he knew. The corner of Draco's mouth curled up in a smug smile. His body shook with suppressed laughter. His hands tightened on Harry's back as if he would hold him in place and show him off for all to see.

There was the side of Draco that Harry had feared was lost when he started surrendering to his Veela instincts around Harry. The side that could laugh at someone standing there, trembling and wide-eyed, from just his touch. The side that could rejoice in his power over Harry.

Harry never wanted to take that from him. He wanted Draco to stand on his own two feet and resist Harry. He wanted challenges, someone who would roll his eyes when Harry behaved ridiculously, someone who would admit his mistakes, but sulkily, and gleefully point out Harry's.

Because that was who Draco *was*, and asking him to be less than that was wrong.

But Harry could accept now, at least, that for Draco, those human qualities and his Veela ones were connected. Perhaps it hadn't been that way when Harry knew him at Hogwarts, but it was now. And if Harry wanted to be Draco's lover, then he would just have to get used to it.

Those thoughts floated like light along the surface of his arousal and vanished beneath it when Draco touched him again, claws gently pressing along Harry's arms. Harry shuddered and found his teeth chattering.

"I c-can't," he managed to say.

Draco's claws sank back into fingernails immediately. His wings shivered and vanished. He leaned against Harry and smiled at him, still smug but fully human, and the fog across Harry's senses began to lift.

"I didn't know that you could do that," Harry said, because he had to say something. He wasn't sure if he was referring to Draco's ability to touch him and bring his body to life, or melt his Veela traits away.

It didn't seem to matter, when Draco gave him a lazy, appreciative smile that soothed him and increased his tension at the same time. Someone who could do that, who could lace Harry's neatly carved-up life with contradictions like this, was not going to be put off by a few stupid, confused words.

Draco had never felt as powerful an impulse as he did now, to simply lean forwards and *take*. If he made it as good as he knew he could, then Harry wouldn't even blame him.

And Harry's desire smelled so *good*. Draco could smell the precome from here, his senses heightened by the expression of his Veela traits, and the sweat that had broken out under Harry's arms and around his erection.

But mingled with the arousal was fear, which had a distinct, sour scent of its own. Draco didn't want to bathe in that. He didn't want to subject himself to that. He wanted Harry to come willingly to his arms and bed.

And because of what Harry had given him so far, he was more than willing to wait.

"I can do lots of things that you probably don't know about," he said, moving away from Harry. His muscles were languid with warmth, and he wanted to say a good many ridiculous things and laugh aloud. He settled for glancing back at Harry and lifting an eyebrow instead. "But then, we've established that you don't know as much about Veela as you think you do."

"Laurent never did that," Harry muttered. The scent of his emotions was vanishing, though Draco couldn't be sure if that was because he had stopped feeling them or because his own senses were returning to normal.

Draco permitted himself to show what he felt when he heard that name. His jealousy boiled and raged like lava under the surface of his skin. Harry looked up, and recoiled when he saw Draco.

"I want you to tell me more about what he didn't do," Draco said, making an effort to speak rationally. "And what he did. I'll surpass him in every way. I'll give you what you need, what you want."

Harry studied him cautiously. Then he turned his head aside and spoke in a soft voice.

"He acted as though I belonged to him, even before he made me Veela-struck. He would touch me all the time, without permission, and practically smother me with his wings. He claimed to love me, but he said it more often than he showed me. And then he had to take control in bed. Every single time." An ugly sneer marred Harry's face, but Draco rejoiced to see it, because it was an emotion Harry was showing about Laurent that wasn't mere anger or fear. The more he despised his former Veela lover, the better pleased Draco would be.

"You'll have more than that from me," Draco said.

Harry folded his arms and snorted. "Really? Because it seemed as if you were intent on touching me without permission, just now."

Draco glared back at him, but had to suppress a wriggle of pleasure. He *did* like it better when Harry fought back and argued, instead of giving in meekly because he thought Draco needed something—or worse, forcing himself to kiss and touch, then suddenly succumbing to fear in the middle of the experiment. "I was caught up in the moment. I'm not going to make a habit of it." He paused, then added caustically, "The same way that I hope you won't make a habit of going to visit Lucy and Owen without telling me, or distrusting and disbelieving me."

Harry tugged at his hair with one hand, but his gaze was direct. "I only visited them without you because we were spending two days apart in the first place."

"And the other? *Are* you going to distrust me no matter what I do?" Draco knew he was pushing it. He didn't care.

"Some of that is going to be inevitable," Harry said quietly. "I know the courage I have right now will fade. I'll need help and reassurance. There will be good days and bad days. So the answer is that I'll try not to, but I know it's going to happen."

Draco let his shoulders drop, and nodded. "That's acceptable," he said. "Honest. All I want is for you to be honest with me, Harry." He knew his voice sounded wistful, almost pathetic, but he couldn't bring himself to care about that, either.

"No, it isn't," Harry muttered. "You want me to sleep with you, too. And that won't happen anytime soon."

Draco leaned forwards. "If all I wanted was a quick fuck, I could have one without all this effort."

Harry's response was unexpected. He snarled and lunged towards Draco for a moment before he gained control and turned away with a tight hug of his arms around himself. "I'll leave you if I find out that you've tried to seduce someone else with the allure," he said over his shoulder, in a tight voice. "Yes, it's irrational and cruel. And no, I don't care. That's non-negotiable, Draco."

Draco licked his lips and stepped forwards. "Quite the contrary," he murmured. "I'm pleased."

"What?" Harry stared at him.

"My chosen is jealous over me." Draco moved nearer, and caught Harry's eye, extending his hands in silent question. Harry nodded warily, and Draco settled his hands on Harry's shoulders with a sigh. "I rather like the sensation."

"Well, it's—" Harry said, and then looked surprised. "I reckon part of it *is* jealousy over you," he said. "I don't like the thought of you touching anyone else, or talking to them like you're talking to me."

Draco purred again and moved closer. "I'm all yours, Harry," he whispered. "I promise." He was badly tempted to say the converse of that, that Harry was his, but he knew Harry wouldn't deal well with that, and he could keep silent.

For now.

Harry twisted around in his arms and stared up at him. "You don't mind that the rest of it is my not wanting you to use the allure at all?" he whispered.

Draco shook his head, staring at Harry's lips. He wanted to kiss him. He didn't quite *have* to, but the yearning was strong.

"Good," Harry said, and then smiled at him. "I'm also jealous because I don't want you showing anyone else your wings. Which is ridiculous, but—"

Draco leaned forwards and claimed that kiss.

Harry briefly stiffened in his arms and tensed as if he would scramble away. Then he changed the clawed hand that he had lifted to Draco's face to a caress, and relaxed with a sigh. He didn't part his lips, but Draco could live with that, given the smoothness of Harry's lips, the firmness of them—

And the fact that it was *Harry.*

Harry was smiling when Draco pulled back, and Draco stared at him in rapturous silence. He knew the moment would pass, and Harry would react badly again in the future. As he had said, there would be bad days and good days.

But right now, right here, Draco could care only about that smile.

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Chapter: 21

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-One—Influenced

"Are you sure about this?" Kingsley leaned forwards in his seat, studying Harry as if he thought there was a chance that Harry had been replaced by a shapeshifter.

Or at least someone using Polyjuice, Harry thought as he smiled back at Kingsley, and he was able to keep his smile and posture partially relaxed because that had actually happened last year. The imposter had been revealed when he ignored Ron as not worth speaking to. "I am, sir. I've talked to several people now, and they all think it's for the best." "Several people" were Draco, Ron, Hermione, and King. A few of the other Aurors, who had overheard Harry and Ron's discussion, had lent their voices as support, which surprised Harry. He hadn't realized how many other people in the Department had deduced that he'd worked too much.

Of course, he had a bad habit of not noticing people in general unless they were in trouble or already mattered to him. That was one of the things he would have to try to cure, Harry thought.

Kingsley, shaking his head and glancing sideways at Harry as if he expected Harry to speak up and stop this at any moment, took up a quill and scrawled a few orders on a piece of parchment. Harry watched him, making sure to do nothing more than smile encouragingly at every glance.

Copies of Aurors' orders were sealed with a heavy, ugly signet ring with a dragon and a chain on it. Kingsley picked it up but didn't lower it, instead staring at Harry. "You're *sure*?" he asked in a whisper.

"Sir," Harry said, stung into irritation at last, "what's so unusual about an Auror wanting time off?"

Kingsley sighed. "That's not the point, Harry. The point is that *you* never asked for it. We always had to force you to go on holiday. Until you started dating Malfoy. I don't like sudden changes in my most important Aurors."

Harry felt a small glow of pride to hear Kingsley call him that, but he shook his head. "I was wrong never to ask for it. There were times I felt like I was about to drop with weariness or pain, but I forced myself to come to work anyway. I thought there was nothing wrong with that as long as I didn't faint in the middle of a case, but *several* people have told me I shouldn't be so hard on myself." If he emphasized the number, maybe Kingsley would stop thinking that it was only Draco's advice or that Draco had forced Harry to change against his will.

"I didn't know that." Kingsley bowed his head. "I would have insisted you stay away longer if I did."

Harry smiled. "I know, sir. I didn't tell you, so how could you have known? And like you said, you had to force me to go on holiday. I wanted to be here because I was needed, and I like that. But there are other things that I need to concentrate on right now."

Kingsley nodded. "Just as long as you know that you're free to come back before the end of the fortnight if this doesn't work out."

"Understood, sir," Harry replied, and watched as Kingsley stamped down the signet ring and sealed the orders. He already had a copy of them, folded neatly in his robe pocket.

As he walked back to their office, he tried to stop feeling as if he might reel off a cliff or throw up. This was the best thing for him. He would need a lot of time to think, to talk, to decide what he wanted to do, and he would treat work as either a distraction from that—which the victims of the cases he investigated didn't deserve—or as salvation, which would just set him back again.

But…he had never *been* anything but a fighter. First he'd fought Voldemort, and then he'd trained to be an Auror, and then he'd been an Auror. He battled the monsters under the beds and in the closets and stealing through the windows. It felt lazy to lean back in his chair and work on healing himself.

Not lazy, Harry reminded himself firmly as he slipped into the office, where Ron was waiting for him. *It's going to be a harder battle than most of the ones that I've fought so far. Maybe that's the reason I tried to ignore it for so long.*

He rubbed the sweat off his palms and smiled at Ron's raised eyebrow. "I got it," he said, taking out the copy of the orders and holding them up. "A fortnight's holiday, with pay."

Ron smiled in turn. "Good." Then he stood up, crossed the room, and put his hands on Harry's shoulders. Harry fidgeted. He didn't like being studied from so close. It made him feel scrutinized in the same way that being stared at by the press from behind their cameras did.

"You know you deserve this, right?" Ron whispered. "I can't think of anyone who deserves it more."

Harry forced himself to stand still. "I know. But it's so *different* from anything I've done before. And what happens if you get some hard case during the next few weeks that you need my help to solve?"

Ron snorted. "Not all of us are as dedicated to our jobs as you are, Harry." Harry opened his mouth to protest—Ron was a fine Auror—but his friend pressed down with one hand to tell him to shut up. "I'll work while you're gone, but I won't be handling any cases that I would need a partner to work safely on. That was *your* specialty, even before Rose was born."

Harry sighed and lowered his eyes. "Sorry," he said. It was true he had treated Rose's birth, and the times before that when Ron was sick or assigned somewhere else, as free periods when he could take on more dangerous cases and act recklessly. For some reason, he'd never quite got around to thinking about how that would affect his friends.

"It's all right," Ron said. He squeezed Harry's shoulders once more and then removed his hands. "But you've got to remember that the rest of us are in this with you, and that we have our own opinions and our own standards of behavior. I've been reluctant to tell you when I think you're

being an idiot for the last little while, because I know what you've suffered. But—"

"*You* were reluctant to tell me *that*?" Harry fluttered his eyelashes in exaggerated fashion at Ron. "I must have really been bad."

Luckily, Ron laughed. "I'm glad that you're coming back, mate," he said, slapping Harry on the shoulder. "I've missed you. Dinner with me and Hermione tonight?"

"Tomorrow night," Harry said firmly. "I have to go and talk to Draco tonight."

"Yeah, I can see why you would." Ron cocked his head curiously. "Where are you meeting?"

"His house," Harry said. "I'm cooking."

A shadow of a smile crossed Ron's lips, and he nodded. "Tomorrow night, though?"

"Of course," Harry said, and touched Ron briefly on the back as he went to his own desk, where he had a few reports to finish filing before he could leave on his holiday.

He spent the rest of the afternoon working there, and could sense Ron glancing over at him with a smile more than once.

I didn't realize I was causing my friends that much stress, Harry thought as he waved to Ron on his way out the door. *Lucy was right about one thing, if not everything. I was pushing the people close to me away because I was trying to control what happened to me so strictly.*

That has to stop.

The courage he had gained from Lucy's outburst last night had faded by now. That meant he would have to ask Draco for help, or, even worse, more tolerance while he struggled to recover his balance on his own.

Harry shut his eyes and shuddered. Then he opened them so he could find his way to the lifts, and from there to the Atrium, and from there to the Floos, and from there to Diagon Alley so that he could buy the ingredients he would need to make dinner tonight.

Ignoring the people around me has to stop. Trying to control them has to stop. And one of the best ways to stop that is to trust them when they say that they want to help.

I'm going to do my best.

Draco raised his eyebrow when Harry stepped through his door carrying many delicate baskets full of what looked like plants. Under the leaves were reassuring glimpses of meat and the white bags full of ice that some of the shops in Diagon Alley used to preserve their more delicate

vegetables, but the plants were the most prominent. Draco could see why Harry had wanted to Apparate instead of Flooing.

"What are all of those?" Draco asked, poking at one of the plants and then leaping back as a cloud of scent seemed to assault him. It was musky and got into his nose like dust, making him sneeze.

"Spices," Harry said, rolling his eyes as though Draco had asked the stupidest question in the world. Draco, miffed, trailed after him to the kitchen, where Harry set the baskets down on the counters and began to remove their contents, arranging them in neat piles. Draco recognized a few—ginger, nutmeg, rosemary—from using them in potions, but there were many more that he simply stared at in bewilderment.

"What are you going to make?" he asked. "Spice soup?"

Harry took out what was clearly a whole chicken, wrapped in a Preservation Charm, and gave him a patient look. "I didn't know what spices you might be allergic to," he said. "Magical creatures have sensitivities that don't exist in humans. So I brought as many along as I could."

"You don't have to cook *everything*," Draco said, pacing around the counter so that he could stare at the clumps of green leaves from the other side. "I could have told you what I like, or I could have made part of the meal."

"Yes, I do have to cook everything."

Draco paused, glanced up at Harry, and recognized that this was not an area where he could press further. Harry's eyes glittered like ice, and he was gripping the handle of a basket hard enough to crack it. Draco reached out, playing as though he hadn't noticed anything, and wound his fingers around Harry's hand, gently loosening his grip.

"Of course," he said. "I understand. You couldn't have someone as clumsy as I probably am around the kitchen messing it up."

It worked. Harry glared for one more moment, then relaxed into a light smile. "You have house-elves to do everything for you," he said, as he started moving the spices into different clumps, according to some recipe or set of instructions that were invisible to Draco. "Have you ever cooked in your life?"

"I brew potions," Draco said, surprised to realize how much of his sulkiness at the accusation was real. He wanted to be able to take care of his chosen in any way his chosen needed, and if Harry didn't trust house-elf meals, then Draco would have cooked for him. Standing back and letting Harry prepare the food made his fingernails itch. "That can't be much different."

Harry rolled his eyes. "They're sufficiently different that I'm good at cooking, while I was never any good at Potions."

Draco started to say that Harry had become good at one out of necessity, while he'd had no such incentive to master the other, and then bit savagely at his lip, just in time to stop the stupid words from escaping. "Maybe it was Professor Snape's teaching," he said instead. "I admired the man, but Merlin knows his temper was horrid."

Harry nodded. "Yes. I learned to respect him after he was dead. I was sorry I never had the chance while he was alive." His hands were moving with quick cleverness, dancing among the spices, setting some of them aside. Draco tried to tell himself that having a chosen who knew so much was a point of pride strong enough that he didn't need to regret his inability to provide food for Harry. "Can you tell me if you're sensitive to paprika?"

Draco shook his head. "I've eaten it often enough to know." At least he knew what Harry was talking about. That was in his favor, right?

"Good." Harry laid some more things aside. "Coriander?"

"I don't know," Draco said. "In any case, I have an objection to leaves in my food." The thing Harry was handling at the moment looked very leafy.

Harry gave him a wry look. "This is the *raw* ingredients, Draco. It's not going to look like that when it goes into your food, I promise you."

Draco blinked. He hadn't realized how far down Harry's paranoia ran. "You mean…you grind and prepare the spices yourself?" He looked again at the collection of leaves, which in some cases connected to peppers, in some to roots, and in some cases to things he didn't recognize at all. "Oh."

"Is that a problem?" Harry gave him a falsely innocent look, but his shoulders were tense and his head lowered like that of a bull about to charge.

Draco reached out, keeping one eye on Harry's face so he would know if he was refused permission to touch. After what looked like a minute of silent struggle, Harry slashed his chin down in a nod, and Draco sighed and cupped Harry's shoulder, moving his fingers in a circular pattern. "Of course not," he whispered. "You are who you are, and the only parts of you I wish to change are the unhealthy defenses that you've raised against the world."

"Really?" Harry sounded as though he disbelieved but wanted to be persuaded otherwise. He turned his head to watch as Draco moved behind him, taking the time to massage both of Harry's shoulders now.

"Yes," Draco said. "The things that hurt you, or make life inconvenient for you, should alter because they *do* that. Even if certain other traits make me wish you could be different, they aren't important enough to make me change my mind, or I wouldn't have chosen you at all. And in the right light, some difficulties and rough edges can be charming."

"Hmmm." Harry's eyes were closing, his shoulders relaxing under Draco's touch. His head drooped, and the motion exposed the back of his neck. Draco's eyes locked on it. It wasn't a patch of skin he had seen bared often, unlike Harry's face and hands, and he would have liked to take it in his teeth and hold Harry there, gently still, calmly caught. He refrained. "It's still strange to hear you talk like that."

"I can't believe that I'm the only one who would." Draco thought Harry had dropped the knot of tension he'd picked up when they were talking about food, so he moved his hands down Harry's sides and rested them on his hips. "You're so beautiful." His breath sighed out of him, and he gave in to one temptation and brushed his cheek against Harry's nape.

Harry wriggled against him, and Draco pressed down. If he could hold Harry just a little longer, then he would feel better. He couldn't make dinner for his chosen, he couldn't bite him, but if he could hold—

"Draco. *Off*."

The tone told Draco he would find himself on the wrong edge of a wand in a moment. He dropped his arms and backed away. Harry glanced over his shoulder, bristling, and then abruptly choked and buried his head in his hands. Draco frowned. He couldn't tell whether Harry was on the edge of laughter or tears, and he should be *able* to tell.

"Harry?"

"I'll be all right." Harry shook his head and sighed, lifting it again. His fringe hung in his face. Draco reached out to brush it away, but Harry did that himself, only raising one eyebrow as if to ask Draco what he was doing. "It's—hard, that's all. Going between emotions so quickly like that."

"So quickly?" Draco kept his voice as low and gentle as he could, hoping that would encourage Harry to talk. He didn't understand everything about what Harry was feeling, and he should. He wanted to. That meant he should have the knowledge, if it was knowledge of his chosen and he wanted it.

"One moment I'm calm and happy that you're there, and the next moment I want to shove you to the other side of the room and stalk out the door." Harry flicked his forehead with his fingers. "I didn't do that most of the time in the last three years. I wasn't fully healed, now, but I wasn't some volatile mess of reactions, either."

Draco licked his lips. "I think you're healing, but I also think that you're coming under my influence."

In moments, the gentleness was gone from Harry's face. He leaned forwards, hands clamping down on the counter as though he would tear the wood and marble apart. "Explain."

"It's not the allure," Draco said. "I promise." He found it hard to breathe when Harry was that angry at him.

Perhaps some of that showed on his face, or else Harry trusted him enough to believe he was telling the truth, because he nodded and said, "All right. It isn't. But that doesn't explain what it is. Explain."

Draco bared his teeth, anger welling up in him. "Don't talk to me like that. It's not as though I did it on purpose."

"But you didn't tell me about it, either." Harry stepped around the counter. Draco, as irritated as he was, could take that as a positive sign: at least Harry wasn't retreating from him. "Explain."

"I shall get very annoyed if you keep repeating that," Draco told him. "The reason I didn't mention it is because not every Veela-and-chosen pair feels the influence. Most of them don't need it. Lucy and Owen didn't. I never felt it with Pansy." He bit down on his tongue to keep from saying that Harry probably hadn't felt it with Laurent, either, because he was not an idiot, current appearances to the contrary. "It's meant as a tool to bind together two who are reluctant, for some reason."

"Just like the allure," Harry said. His tone was so sharp that Draco nearly replied, but his face was haunted.

"No," Draco said. "The influence affects the Veela, too. It guides them into pushing the boundaries, sensing what would make their chosen comfortable and trying to go a bit beyond that. It fixates them until the relationship is settled and the influence is no longer needed."

"Until we have sex?" Harry was gripping his own arm now.

Draco shook his head. "No. Just until they're certain that their chosen isn't going to walk away."

"So you can't really say when that will happen," Harry said. "And it'll affect you until then."

His voice had softened, and it wasn't until Draco saw his expression that he realized why. He stood up straight, his claws emerging. His wings strained and burned, but he kept them down. "Don't you dare pity me," he snarled at Harry. "I don't *mind* being subject to this. It's part of me. Not everyone resents being controlled, you know."

Harry raised his eyebrows, but said only, "What does the influence do to the—the chosen?" He still stumbled on the word when it came to him.

"It heightens their emotions around the Veela," Draco said. "That means that the Veela—me—knows at once if something I do doesn't work." He *was* going to personalize this and make it impossible for Harry to ignore. "You can't pretend to ignore it. In other words, you

can't do things anymore just because you believe that I might need them. You'll react with anger or fear or joy before you think about it."

Harry scowled. "That seems like a roundabout way of making a relationship happen."

Draco smiled, because he had to. "Can you think of another way that would work for us?"

Harry hunched his shoulders and looked away in a way that told Draco he was still refusing to accept those words as they applied to him, personally. If he had been Veela, his feathers would have been ruffled. "I don't like being controlled," he said. "Not by this influence, not by anything."

"And yet, you are and will be," Draco said, deciding to drop the conciliating words and go straight for the direct ones, since Harry had stopped responding. "The best you can do is face up to what controls you and wrestle with it or live with it, rather than denying it exists."

Harry winced. Draco spoke the truth, and if he had forgotten the courage that Lucy's words left him with, he hadn't forgotten the revelation: that there was no way to control everything that might touch him.

But he could control how miserably he acted about it.

"All right," he said. "But will you tell me when you think that you're doing something because of this *influence*—" he spat the word, the only way he could express his hatred of it "—that you wouldn't do otherwise?"

Draco looked at him instead of answering. Harry tried not to feel insulted. He reminded himself that he'd come to make dinner, and he had to be in the right frame of mind to cook. He looked at the chicken and began selecting among recipes in his head, trying to forget what Draco had told him.

"I'll try," Draco said at last. "I don't always know. I took some time to recognize the influence operating, just now."

Harry nodded shortly. "All right. That's the best I can ask for."

He turned back in time to catch sight of Draco's brilliant smile. He held out one hand as if he were reaching for Harry in spite of himself, and then started to draw it back. Harry caught it and squeezed it briefly.

"Let's have dinner," he said in determination, turning to face the food again.

He had expected Draco to sit back, perhaps asking occasional questions while Harry worked. Instead, he fussed and fidgeted about as Harry removed charms, chopped and ground—mostly

by means of spells—and started fires burning. He asked so many questions that Harry sometimes lost track of his preparations to answer, and then had to start the count over again.

"Look," he said at last, "could you sit down and let me do this? I like you, but I need concentration when I'm cooking."

Draco sighed. "I'd only wriggle around and suppress my questions and annoy you just as much, I'm afraid."

Harry blinked at him. "Why?"

"Because my instincts say I should be the one to take care of my chosen," Draco said. "To feed him, to provide for him, to buy him clothes and the like." He shrugged helplessly. "I'm trying to learn what I can so I can cook for you someday."

Harry had a sudden sense memory of Laurent pouring cream into his mouth and feeding him chicken sandwiches that Harry didn't get to choose. That had been before he made Harry Veela-struck, but he still was nearly sick. He glanced aside and nodded.

"I understand," he said in a delicate voice. "But can we agree that you can't do anything about it right now? Can you sit down and relax?"

Draco paused, then settled. Harry looked over to see him watching with his elbows propped on the counter and his hands beneath his chin.

"As long as you don't mind me watching," he murmured. "You're still the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Person," Harry muttered as he began to slice up the chicken.

"Pardon?"

Harry glanced narrow-eyed at Draco. "I'm not a *thing*."

Draco smiled, and it was genuine and warm. "Of course not. Can you bear the staring?"

"It'll do," Harry said, and restricted himself to tiny glances in Draco's direction as he worked. He could feel the stare on the side of his face, and sometimes on his back and arse when he bent down or turned around to work, but he had done harder things under harder conditions. He made a mental note to check in the mirror when he got home, though, and try to work out what had fixed Draco's attention.

The chicken, in a marinade that Harry had designed himself, was a success, and their conversation stayed away from Laurent or the Blazing Season or any difficult topics during dinner. And as they ate, Harry let himself do something he hadn't done before: he softly

unfocused his eyes and studied Draco, looking for what attracted him.

Draco's way of moving, for one thing, he decided. His hands floated through the air, and he could slice through a motion and yet end it precisely where he needed to be. It was hard to imagine him knocking over cups or hitting dishes with his elbows. Harry was sure that he could be hard in a fight, but he wasn't that way all the time, battle-tempered, the way Harry knew he himself was.

And Draco's voice, soft and full of laughter, was attractive, too. It matched the way his hair fluffed around his face now and how his eyes sparkled when he had them on Harry. He was less like a carved bone ornament, the way he had seemed a year ago, and more like a swan or greyhound, a living creature.

Harry felt a stirring in his groin and quickly returned his attention to the food, somewhat terrified by how quickly his arousal had risen.

When Harry left, Draco cupped his chin in his hands and stood there staring into Harry's eyes for a long moment.

"Thank you for dinner," Draco murmured. "I have hope that someday you'll let me do the same thing for you."

Harry couldn't make a promise about that, and experience had taught him not to try. But there was something else he could do.

He leaned forwards and kissed Draco, thoroughly, gently, even edging his tongue a little past Draco's lips when they opened. He kept his eyes closed, because if Draco suddenly manifested Veela features he couldn't stand to see it.

But it was a kiss, and it left Draco looking pleasantly dazed when Harry murmured, "Good night," and turned away.

Draco was sure he looked ridiculous to anyone who might have watched him, standing there for ten minutes and touching his lips after Harry had left.

He didn't care.

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Chapter: 22

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Two—Gifted

"How long has it been since we did something like this?" Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know," he answered honestly, rocking Rose. Hermione had gone into the kitchen to check on the progress of the soup and probably add something secret and extra-healthy to it, if Harry knew her. He was trying not to think about what would happen when she brought the soup to the table. He looked down and made faces at Rose to distract himself. She waved her hands at him and goggled with her mouth. Harry wasn't sure if she was yawning or trying to make faces back, although she was probably too young for that.

"Well, we should do it more often, that's all." Ron toasted Harry with his glass of Firewhisky and gulped down some more, leaning back against the chair. "Did I tell you what Lewis did?"

Harry looked up curiously as he rocked Rose in a more complicated pattern, making her goggle again. "What?" He remembered the young Auror, of course, though he was more remarkable to Harry for his hatred of Draco than anything else.

"He was stupid enough to get caught saying that he could do a better job than Kingsley of being Minister." Ron smirked into his glass.

Harry let his mouth fall open, both because it was surprising—Lewis had never seemed interested in power like that—and because Ron would expect it of him. Harry was trying to ease his way back into his friends' lives with this evening, take an interest in them that he hadn't in a long time. "What? Why? What did Kingsley do?"

"Well, he could hardly ignore that, but it isn't a crime to talk about becoming Minister, either." Ron swallowed more Firewhisky. "So he called Lewis into his office and said that he wanted his advice about running the Ministry. When Lewis came out, he was white and shaking."

"Good," Harry said, with feeling that made Ron glance at him curiously. But Ron seemed to dismiss it a moment later and accept that Harry was just as incensed as he was about the way the idiot had talked.

"Yeah," Ron said, with an admiring shake of his head. "I wouldn't want to go up against Kingsley." He hesitated, then added, "I hope I never have to."

Harry stroked the down on Rose's head that was too soft to be called hair yet and didn't answer. Ron was more thoughtful and mature than he had been during Hogwarts, though you didn't always know it. Sometimes he sounded as if he only thought about Hermione, Rose, the next case, and drinking—which, to be fair, was a wider variety of subjects than Harry usually thought about—and then he would come out with something like this.

"Dinner's ready." Hermione bustled out of the kitchen, brushing her hands together. She gave

Harry a private, quiet smile, the kind she'd been using since he showed up tonight, and reached out to take Rose. Harry handed her over willingly. He liked holding her, but he wasn't used to the sheer *smell* of a baby yet.

Besides, he would need his hands free for what he had to do next.

They went into the kitchen, which was large enough that Harry thought Mrs. Weasley must feel a pang of envy when she visited. The table could change sizes with the tap of a wand, and was small and intimate right now. Hermione placed Rose in a cradle to the side of the table and cast a spell that made a ball of colored light manifest right above her head. Rose giggled and reached out with both hands, making awkward snatching motions. Harry watched her with a smile, partially because she was funny and partially because he wanted to wait for Ron and Hermione to sit down.

With a whisk of Hermione's wand, the food appeared on the table. Slightly steaming, meaty brown soup, and a salad thick with lettuce that caused Ron to catch Harry's eye and scowl, and something else that looked like another salad made with bread and eggs but which Hermione insisted held meat.

Harry aimed his wand at his plate.

"Harry? What are you doing?" Hermione's voice was wary, and her eyes darted back and forth between him and the food as if she thought it would explode into flying criminals any moment.

"Sorry," Harry said. "But you know my issues with food." He had decided it would be for the best if he could just acknowledge what was wrong with him and do what he needed to alleviate it, rather than pretending that nothing was wrong. Pretending hadn't worked to heal him, after all. "I wanted to eat with you instead of preparing my own food, but I have to test it for—things. Sorry," he added again, when he saw Hermione's stricken face. "I have to."

Hermione, hands over her mouth, nodded. Harry thought she was blaming herself for forgetting about his issues as much as anything else.

Ron leaned forwards. "Do you have to?" he demanded in a hiss.

Harry nodded and began to cast the spells. Luckily, he used them all the time at the shops to test the ingredients and had become excellent at casting them non-verbally. He didn't want his friends to think he didn't trust them.

He *did* trust them. But he didn't trust food. Laurent had chosen everything for him, for months before the Blazing Season where he had raped Harry. Only later, when Harry looked at samples of his own blood and performed other spells, did he realize the charms and potions they had been laced with—charms to keep him faithful, potions to make sure that he didn't have enough independent will to leave Laurent.

No one was ever going to do that to him again.

As he proceeded through the spells that detected the most harmful and common hexes and the ones that would make any ingredient in contact with a potion during the last five hours glow, Ron and Hermione exchanged glances. Harry kept his eyes carefully away from their faces. He could try to force himself to act like everything was fine and then eat nothing or vomit it up later. Or he could do this, apologize, and sit down and eat a meal with his best friends. He was sorry he was making them uncomfortable, but his choices were limited.

Someday, they wouldn't be. That was the day he was working towards, with their help and Draco's. He just wasn't there yet, that was all.

He finished the last of the spells in five minutes and took his chair with another quick, apologetic smile. Then he picked up a spoonful of soup and sipped it. The taste was spectacular, and he knew that he couldn't have made this for himself.

"Thanks, Hermione," he murmured. "What did you use to make this? Beef? Chicken?"

Hermione exchanged one more glance with Ron and then began telling him, getting enthusiastic about ingredients as she talked. Harry smiled. Hermione had wanted to become good at cooking not because she was trying to imitate Mrs. Weasley, as Ron had suggested once when he was drunk, but because it was so similar to Potions, and it was a matter of pride for her to be good at one when she was good at the other.

That reminded Harry of his conversation with Draco, and he wondered what else he would be able to do with Draco when he was more comfortable. If Hermione could make a dish he couldn't make and so wouldn't have got to taste otherwise, then maybe Draco's house-elves could do the same thing.

And sometimes his breathing sped up throughout the evening when he tasted something unfamiliar, especially in the not-quite-a-salad, and sometimes his throat locked and he had to spit a bite privately into his napkin. But other than that, and the sweat that seemed to collect continually at the back of his neck and under his arms, he got through the meal perfectly well.

He would have to walk the road one step at a time. That was the hardest part to remember.

Draco blinked and looked up from the book he was reading when the Floo flared to life. Then he saw Pansy's head starting to form and quickly shoved the book under the chair cushion. Perhaps he would have trusted Harry with the knowledge that he read romance novels on occasion, but Pansy would subject him to merciless teasing for it.

"Pansy," he said, smiling at her, and glad now that he hadn't sent the letter Harry had originally demanded he send. He and Harry had talked about it after Draco had told Harry the truth, and agreed that it would only make her more suspicious. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Pansy said, rolling her eyes. "Honestly, why do you think I only firecall you when something's wrong?" Draco pursed his lips, and Pansy sighed. "It's *good* news, I promise."

"Don't tell me," Draco said, locking his hands together and touching them to his forehead. "You've finally met a rich old man who's promised to leave you everything in his will."

"Idiot." Pansy appeared to flounce, despite the fact that it was difficult to do that while kneeling.

"Ah, of course not, forgive me," Draco said, and waited just long enough to see her smile before he struck. "A rich old *woman*."

Pansy rolled her eyes again. She had an unfortunate habit of doing what when Draco was around. "Do you want to hear the good news or not?"

"I don't know." Draco folded his arms and frowned thoughtfully, tilting his head to the side so that he would appear more judicious. "Do I?"

This time, Pansy wisely decided to ignore him and just go ahead. "My friends have found out what happened to that Laurent I told you to find information on."

"Oh, did they?" Draco said, and kept his face blank while his heart started beating hard enough to make him feel dizzy. "How strange. I thought you were saying that they had the most trouble tracking him down."

Pansy leaned forwards, lowering her voice. "He's in Azkaban, can you believe that? We have confirmation, though it was from a guard who used to work there before he was sacked, not anyone still working there, so our means of getting a message to him are limited. But the guard was absolutely sure he saw someone like that brought in almost three years ago."

"Are you sure you can trust the word of someone who was sacked?" Draco dared do no more than flavor his voice with the faintest touch of disbelief. He didn't think that Pansy would be likely to overlook it if he displayed too much interest. "Maybe he found your bribe more attractive than the truth."

"No, I tested him with a few charms of my own," Pansy said, and gave him a sly smile. Draco refused to rise to the bait. She had always claimed that she had discovered a spell that mimicked Veritaserum, and Draco had never been sure whether he should believe her or not. "Anyway, it would explain why Laurent seems to have vanished from the world of the living, and yet there's no record of a death or a funeral, either. And to make it even more mysterious, there's no record of what he was tried for. That means it had to be a secret trial, in front of the Wizengamot."

"What could he have done that would get him there?" Draco sounded bright and excited, because he had to be. *Harry, forgive me. But all I can do now is control this and try to make sure they don't find out the truth. It's too late to disassociate myself from it.*

"Well, generally people are only tried in front of the Wizengamot for murder," Pansy said, frowning. "But even that wouldn't need a secret trial. There are factions in the Ministry that would love to popularize a murder by someone of Veela blood, because then they could argue that you're dangerous animals who need to be controlled. It makes no sense to conceal a murder when Laurent himself wasn't powerful or deserving of any special consideration."

"Maybe the Veela arranged something," Draco suggested. He would throw off suspicion as much as he could. "There are Veela-favoring factions, too. Bribe one of the Wizengamot members enough, and he could push a secret trial through, so that the murder couldn't be used for the purpose you just mentioned."

"But why would the other members agree, when some of them belong to the factions that want magical creatures more under control?" Pansy shook her head. "No, there's something deeper here, something that I have to understand, but don't yet."

Pansy had involved herself in the investigation? Draco felt a chill travel down his spine. He could understand why she would do that, if she was intrigued enough or if she liked these friends well enough, but it was bad news. She was like a terrier: she wouldn't let go of a secret until she broke its neck.

"Then I must confess that I don't have any idea why he would be tried in secret," Draco started to say. Then he stopped and caught his breath, staring at the wall.

"What?" Pansy demanded, leaning forwards. "What?"

"I just had a thought," Draco said, which was true enough. She didn't have to know that it was a thought about how to fool her and make her start hunting down a false trail instead of a thought about how to help her find the truth. "What if this Laurent had committed a crime that would disgrace the Veela community *and* the Ministry if it was discovered? That would be a powerful incentive for both factions to keep the crime secret, and I'm sure those who didn't care one way or the other could be persuaded."

"But what kind of crime would do that?" Pansy rocked back, tapping her lips with her finger.

"I can think of one," Draco said. *Dangerously close to the truth. Dangerously close. But if I can only make her think this! The Wizengamot members have layered defenses of secrecy that could take her years to get through, and her friends can't have enough money to bribe everyone.* "If he tried to use the allure to influence key Ministry and Wizengamot members. If he already had, in fact. It could set Veela and wizard relations back years if it was discovered, and the Ministry wouldn't want to admit that some of its members made bad decisions under the influence of magic. They already have enough problems in that direction as it is," Draco added, thinking of the way that some Muggleborns *still* didn't trust Ministry officials who had acted under Imperius during the war.

"That must be it," Pansy whispered. "Oh, you're right, it must be." Her eyes were wide with excitement, and Draco relaxed a bit. Pansy was emotionally involved in this now, proud to be connected to wizarding politics, and there was a high chance that she would ignore contradictory evidence to keep the story going. "You've been a big help, Draco." She smiled at him and started pulling back. "But I have to go talk to my friends now and tell them about this, so that we can start preparing for what we may find."

Draco managed to hang on to his temper until she vanished. Then he leaped to his feet and paced around the room furiously. Even listening to Harry's calm heartbeat through the bracelet didn't help.

He had to do something. He *had* to. His chosen was in danger, and Draco couldn't completely stop it without betraying Harry's trust and exposing his secret to other people—which would give them the power to hurt him in the future.

If theirs had been a normal relationship, then Draco would simply have visited Harry's house and embraced him in his wings or pinned him to the wall and kissed him until this sense of thorny protectiveness disappeared. But it wasn't.

An inspiration hit Draco, and he decided what he would do, and what Harry might accept. Even better, it would take some extensive thought, which would allow him to distract himself from the threat of Pansy's interference.

Moments later, he headed out the door, a pouch of Galleons jingling on his belt and his mind whirling red and silver and green with anger and desire and anticipation.

Harry blinked. He'd been sitting in front of the fire, almost lulled into a trance by the flames, full and content and satisfied. That had been the first meal he'd been able to eat from someone else's hands in almost three years. He had planned to dream the rest of the evening away.

But someone knocking this late probably meant trouble. Harry snatched up his wand and went to examine the wards.

They told him Draco was there. Harry opened the door for him at once, so concerned that he only experienced one tiny trickle of worry at letting a Veela inside his home. He had anti-Veela wards that he could activate, if he needed to.

Harry's confusion increased when Draco stepped through the door. He was draped with boxes and bags and what looked like one shrunken trunk, and Harry wondered if he wanted to come and live here. Harry wasn't ready for that yet.

"What are you doing?" he asked, as Draco began to put the bags on the floor. "Draco? Is something wrong?"

Draco looked up at him. His eyes were brilliant, silvery, almost glass-colored, and Harry saw then that white feathers sheathed his arms and his nails were claws. His voice was low, so soft and sweet that Harry imagined he'd had no trouble in charming the shopkeepers he'd just visited. "Harry. Pansy upset me tonight. They've discovered information on Laurent, that he was arrested and tried in secret before the Wizengamot, though not for what for. I tried to misdirect them as best I could, but I needed to do something else for you, since I couldn't protect you completely."

Harry licked his lips, trying to control his breathing, and then his nausea, and then his urge to lock himself in the secure room he had created to be warded against his magic and never come out. He reminded himself, sharply, that Draco had said he had taken care of it, and he could trust Draco.

His voice was low and rough when it did come out, but he hoped Draco would overlook that—probably, considering the state he was in. "What—what did you need to do?"

"I bought you gifts." Draco ducked his neck in an inhumanly graceful motion when he opened one of the bags. Harry thought it made him look like a swan. "Please accept them. You have to." His words held the edge of a shrill chirrup that told Harry he would get worse if not soothed.

Harry's emotions swung wildly for a moment; he was sure he showed his fear. But he had read, in the better books on Veela that he'd been trying to get himself to read lately, that the influence couldn't happen until after both Veela and chosen had consented to be with one another. It was only hurrying what would happen, helping it, rather than forcing it. And Harry needed all the help he could get.

"All right," he said, and tried to ignore his own embarrassment as Draco fixed wide, grateful eyes on him and shoved a tangle of cloth at him. Harry juggled it for a minute before he could get a good look at it.

It was a cloak, a large, dove-grey one made of such fine material that Harry stroked it instinctively just to feel more of it. And it was *light*, too. He could wear this and hardly know he was wearing it, Harry thought.

"Draco," Harry whispered. He wanted to say thank you, and he also wanted to say that it was the kind of thing he never would have bought for himself, and he was also wondering how much money Draco had spent on it and whether he would want to return it once he came to his senses and was no longer so worried.

"Accept it," Draco said, words slurring at the edges. Harry glanced at him sharply and saw his claws flexing as if he would rip his own sleeves. "Please?"

This was important, Harry knew. And neither his embarrassment nor his modesty should prevent him from taking it. Besides, Draco was perfectly capable of deciding whether he wanted to return the cloak himself, in a rational frame of mind, without Harry making the decision for him.

He hated people making decisions for him, Harry thought, and turned so that his back was to Draco. "Put it on me?" he asked in a meek voice.

Draco was behind him in seconds, unfolding the cloak and unfastening the pin that held it shut, which was in the shape of a silver owl. He crooned and purred and chirruped into Harry's ear, then took him firmly by the shoulders and swept the cloak around him.

Harry closed his eyes. Yes, the lightness was just what he had thought it would be, and the cloak brushed against him like a veil or smoke. He couldn't help wriggling his shoulders, half to feel the cloak furl into place and half to feel Draco's grip tighten.

"It looks perfect on you," Draco said, in a lower, more human voice, and a more heated one.

Harry nearly conjured a mirror in front of him so he could see for himself, and then stopped. He wasn't ready for that yet. "Does it?" he asked, tilting his head back so his hair brushed against Draco's face.

This time, the sound Draco made was most definitely a trill. He pressed closer, until Harry could feel Draco's chest against his back, his legs against Harry's legs.

His erection against Harry's arse.

A sharp, mindless moment passed, during which Harry's mind spun with panic and Draco's trill lowered into a human sound once more. Harry swallowed and slowly stepped away. *He said that he would know when he'd pushed me too far, that the influence would let him know. It's all right.*

"What else did you buy?" he asked brightly, already deciding that he couldn't possibly like the rest of it as well as the cloak.

Nor did he, but watching Draco's face glow with pride and pleasure as he displayed his gifts was reward enough. There was a bracelet of white jade that Draco insisted on clasping around Harry's upper arm, his touch lingering. There was a silver knife in a rich sheath of tooled leather, which had enchantments on it that meant it could cut through steel. (Harry privately admitted to himself that it would be a useful thing to have if an enemy used chains or reinforced steel doors). There was a thick tapestry decorated with creatures so delicate and strange that Harry only thought they were hounds, horses, deer, and phoenixes. Or maybe the deer were unicorns, given that they were white and had single, branch-like horns on their heads.

Draco hung the tapestry beside the fireplace and the knife on Harry's belt before he continued. Harry nodded when he saw the next gift, a fake wand that could be thrown at an enemy and which would become a wooden snake to coil around their legs and bind them. Everything Draco had got him so far was either an ornament or a means of defense, although the cloak was arguably also useful. Veela liked to display to their chosen and protect them. It made perfect sense, and reassured Harry, a little, that Draco hadn't gone mad and simply spent Galleons like water.

There were also two books on Veela that Draco said were written by Veela he knew and trusted, and which Harry could trust in turn. Harry stroked their thick leather covers and smiled at Draco. The smile made Draco unfold his wings and beat them, once, although he tucked them away before Harry could react.

The trunk was the last thing Draco unpacked, and Harry was getting curious about what could be in it, since everything else had fit neatly inside smaller containers with shrinking charms.

It was a bed.

Harry stared as he watched it become larger, abruptly making his drawing room a much more crowded place. The frame was a rich wood so dark that it was probably ebony, although Harry knew nothing about luxuries like that. It stood on a raised pedestal with three steps up to it, and the sheets were an ivory color that made Harry feel dirty just touching them. Pillows lay on the sheets like a snowfall. The canopy was a phoenix with widespread wings, ornamented with cloth of gold and rubies for eyes.

From the yearning gaze that Draco fixed on him, Harry knew his acceptance of this last gift was absolutely crucial.

He closed his eyes. This was a bed that was meant to be slept in by two people; the sheer size indicated that, if nothing else. And the *luxury*. Harry had never needed anything except a bed that was warm, soft, and long enough to hold him. It was more than he had ever had in the cupboard, after all.

But he thought—

He thought he could do this, and more than this, something that would soothe Draco and give him back some perspective. It made Harry hurt to see Draco so fixated on him—although he had said the influence would make him so—with his eyes set to dim if Harry acted displeased for one second.

Harry slowly climbed the steps into the bed and lay down against the pillows, muscles tensed and trembling. But he lay there for some minutes and nothing happened, and the fear began to pass. He was good at facing fear, challenging it, he thought. The main problem since he had been raped was that he hadn't faced those fears.

He looked up at Draco and smiled. "Would you like to sleep in it with me tonight?" he asked.

Draco stared at him, eyes wide, and Harry wondered if that had been the right question after all.

Then Draco was beside him in the bed, seemingly Apparating between one point and another without sound. Harry thought Veela could do that when they needed to. Draco nuzzled into his neck and took a deep sniff, then whispered in an almost human voice, "Are you sure? Are you

absolutely sure?"

"Yes," Harry said. His voice trembled, but so what? "No sex, obviously."

"Of course not." Draco sounded ready to fight anyone who would suggest that.

Harry reached up and delicately wound his arms around Draco's neck. Draco leaned down on top of him immediately, moving to cover Harry with his body. Harry wriggled partway free and closed his eyes, wondering if he *could* sleep with someone. It had been so long. Wasn't it the kind of thing you forgot without practice?

As it turned out, no, it wasn't. Draco's warmth blended with his, and the weight—once they had settled that Harry wasn't going to lie completely separate from Draco and Draco wasn't going to cover all of Harry—actually comforting. If someone came up to him in the night or in his nightmares, Harry thought, he wasn't alone.

He didn't have to go to work tomorrow. He didn't have to worry about anyone thinking it was absurd for him to sleep in his drawing room, fully clothed, in the middle of such a huge bed. Draco was cooing into his ear, a sound far enough away from the trill to be soothing.

He relaxed.

Draco went to sleep with joy so intense that it hurt like a pair of hands resting on his throat.

Or around his heart.

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Chapter: 23

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Three—Promised

Draco had trouble moving when he woke. His muscles were liquid with satisfaction. His head rested close to another head that actually seemed perfumed, it smelled so good. He didn't want to do anything but nuzzle into Harry's neck and go back to sleep.

Harry, he thought then, and had to work hard to control his start. *Harry really let me in the bed with him last night, didn't he?*

The bed I bought for him.

Draco shook his head in wonder. The memory of buying those gifts for Harry was hazy, cut through with drifting clouds of white and silver and black as he worked to come up with things that would help keep Harry safe from Pansy. It had seemed so important that he choose only the right gifts, and then that he bring them to Harry right away, that his memory of the night consisted of emotions instead of events. The frantic fear. The impatience when the shopkeepers who showed him items wanted to pawn off inferior imitations on him instead of the true jewels and silver and rich cloth that Draco wanted.

The rush of cool relief, nearly as great as sexual relief, when Harry had accepted those gifts into his house and Draco into his arms.

Draco rolled over, trying to be as delicate as possible. He didn't want to wake Harry up. In fact, he would have given a lot to be able to watch him sleep, noticing the way his breath escaped his lips when he was relaxed and how his eyelashes fluttered when a dream chased itself across his mind.

But Harry was already awake, grave, calm eyes fixed on Draco. He smiled a little, seemingly in embarrassment, when he saw Draco watching him, and ran a hand through his hair. "Hi," he said.

"Hello," Draco returned, bending down so that he could sniff Harry's neck again. Harry grimaced but tolerated it. Draco suspected that he would be a little more reluctant to indulge Draco's Veela side this morning, partially because he had done a good job of sating it last night, but Draco would take what he could get. "Do you want breakfast?"

"Of course," Harry said, as if not eating breakfast was blasphemy, and sat up, stretching. "Do you prefer porridge, or something else? I usually just have porridge."

Draco stretched out one arm and placed it over Harry's stomach, annoyed with himself. He had forgotten about that little tendency of Harry's to cook which meant that Harry would have to prepare the food himself. He had wanted to pamper his chosen this morning. "Do you trust one of my elves to bring us toast and porridge?"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "If you don't mind me testing every ingredient for poison and charms."

Draco shut his eyes. The mere mention of that cut him deeply and disrupted the contented mood that had remained with him from last night. "No," he whispered. "I'm sorry, but I can't bear that, even though I know the reasons why you need to do it, and they're perfectly good and valid reasons."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, and then kissed Draco, his lips brushing over Draco's gently, chastely. "But I can't—"

Draco's arms came up blindly, and he grasped Harry and rolled him over, needing to have his chosen beneath him, wanting to shelter him with his body, wanting to keep him away from all the sorrows of the world. He had a confused, blurred sense that things would be so much better if only Harry would consent to let Draco take care of him in that sense.

There was a long moment of warmth and pressure, Harry's hips against his, Harry's chest against his. Draco moved away from Harry's mouth and to his cheeks and neck, using his tongue now, wondering if he dared to use his teeth.

"Draco. Let me go." Harry spoke in a flat, metallic voice, and there was a wand pressing against Draco's chest.

It was a struggle, but Draco managed to release the tight clutch of his arms and sit back on his heels, fighting to breathe. Harry sat up in front of him. Draco tensed, wondering if Harry would flee the bed now, but he only looked straight at Draco instead, his shoulders hunched and a little frown on his face.

"There's something I need you to explain to me," Harry said. "Laurent did it all the time, and you're showing signs of it, too, and I never understood it. If I did, I think I would be able to allow you to do it, if you really need it." He puckered his lips as if he had bitten into a lemon, and Draco flinched, though he thought that was more about being compared to Laurent than anything else.

But Harry was sitting there, Draco reminded himself, and that was a lot better than running away. He nodded and tried to look as composed and calm and enlightened as Harry needed him to be.

"Why do you need to hold me down like that?" Harry frowned at him, folding his arms as if he wanted to keep in the magic that Draco could feel buzzing warningly around the room. "I could understand wanting to do it during the Blazing Season. I know your instincts go mad then and you have to do what you can to satisfy them. But why other times? Laurent liked—" Harry swallowed around an obvious click in his throat. "He liked to hold my arms down above my head and lie on top of me at night and restrict my freedom of movement. And that was a long time before I—before, and before the Blazing Season. Why? What's the point of it?"

Draco opened his mouth, and found he was without words. Harry wouldn't be impressed with the simple words that usually sufficed when an older Veela was explaining things to a younger Veela, because those words depended on the corresponding instincts in the other Veela, the ones that said how *right* and *necessary* such things were. The advice sessions were mainly to convince Veela to listen to those instincts instead of ignoring them.

He spent a few moments thinking about it. He thought Harry would get impatient, but he remained in place, his folded arms actually relaxing.

"Well," Draco said at last, drawing the word out. He knew what he was going to say, but it sounded stupid even in his head. He didn't think it would sound much better aloud.

"It's all right." Harry spoke softly, reassuringly, and reached out to put his hand on Draco's arm.

That jolted Draco into action, because it was ridiculous that his chosen should have to reassure *him*, who was the stronger of the two of them. "It feels good," he said, and he still whispered, because he couldn't help himself. It *did* sound stupid, the way he had thought it would. "It makes us feel that we're sheltering you against the outside world, even though of course no one can do that completely."

He held his breath and waited.

Harry felt his face soften.

He had been tensed to resist some explanation that would make the Veela superior to the chosen; Laurent had certainly seemed to think so. He had thought he would hear some vapid philosophical justification that would try to wave everything away. In the worst case he could imagine, Draco would try to pin him to the bed again instead of explaining.

But this…

"Of course I understand that," he said, and rubbed his hand up and down Draco's arm, hoping he could take away the apprehensive, waiting-to-be-hurt expression on Draco's face. It hurt him to see Draco looking like that. *I do,* he thought, with relief. *I do care about what happens to him.* "It's the same impulse that drove me to become part of the Aurors. I couldn't stand back and do nothing when people were being hurt, and even though I know I can't protect everyone, I still try, and feel best when one case is solved and I've caught someone or got justice for someone or returned a kidnapped child to his mother's arms."

Draco crooned, his eyes widening and shining. Harry didn't think he minded the sound as much as usual, and it was a lot easier to sit still when Draco reached out and embraced him. Harry rubbed his back in turn.

"If it's like that," Harry whispered, glad that they weren't looking each other in the eye at the moment, since the words would have sounded stupid, "I'll do my best to let you protect me. Not everything yet, because I still don't want you to pin me down and keep me from moving, but—I'll try."

"I'm so glad," Draco said, and the simple words made Harry's eyes sting. He shut them. *Getting sentimental, Potter,* he scolded himself in his mind.

But maybe that was the best thing he could do. One of the simpler things Laurent had stolen from him was a trust in his own emotions. He had to question what he felt, now, every single time, because what he had experienced when he was Veela-struck—the slavish devotion and panting desire—wasn't real. If he could get over that and accept that some of his feelings were

real, then maybe he wouldn't be so reluctant to admit that he cared for Draco, or immediately dismiss it as the effect of pity.

"Come on," he said, tugging at Draco's shoulders. "Let's get up, and have breakfast, and you can tell me more about Laurent's chances of getting free."

Draco seemed reluctant, as if he wanted to stay in bed and just gaze at Harry some more, but came along with another tug. Harry seated him at the table while he made porridge and toast, and sat down across from him with a genuine sense of accomplishment. Draco hated to let his chosen take care of him, but other than a few twitches and the longing stare that Harry remembered from the other day when he had made dinner, he hadn't shown any of that hatred. And now he was gulping down his porridge with gratifying hunger. Harry watched him for a few seconds before he started eating himself.

Their conversation waited until they'd filled their bellies, which Harry didn't mind. Concentrating on food while he ate was something he usually did when he was bolting down meals in the middle of a case, anyway. He sat back, wiping his mouth on his napkin, and nodded to Draco. "How much do you think they're going to find out?"

Draco reached across the table and took Harry's hand. Harry intertwined their fingers and nodded. Draco gave him a faint smile, then said, "They've learned that Laurent went into Azkaban. They knew he had a secret trial in front of the Wizengamot. I suggested to Pansy that it might have been because Laurent was using the allure to charm key people in the Ministry, and I think that's the direction she'll search in for a while. But I don't know how long I can keep her off."

Harry shuddered and closed his eyes. Laurent loomed in the darkness of his mind like a nightmare, but he had someone to help him fight those now. "We'll have to lay down a false trail," he mused. "I think Kingsley would be willing to help me do it."

Draco caught his breath. "Why didn't I think of that?" he said. "It's so *simple*, but I got upset that she knew so much already."

"That's understandable," Harry said. "You were dealing with the instincts that said you had to protect your chosen." He frowned, considering what he should do next. "I know some of the Ministry employees who can pretend that they were charmed by a Veela three years ago in exchange for a sum of money. They won't need to know what it's about. They'll just assume it's one of the many intrigues or power plays that no one really comprehends except for the people directly affected by them."

"Bribery," Draco said, and his voice had become a purr. "What a wonderful idea."

Harry opened his eyes to make sure that he wasn't being sarcastic, and decided he wasn't when he saw Draco's eyes literally glowing. He looked, now, like the Slytherin Harry had known at Hogwarts. "Well, then. I'll need to visit Gringotts, but there's nothing suspicious in that. And then

I'll go to the Ministry—"

Draco leaned back, his nostrils flaring and his wings bursting out of his shoulders. Harry flinched, but managed to relax rather than bolt screaming for the bedroom, which he really wanted to do. "No," Draco said. "I'll bribe them."

Harry snorted and gestured at the bed behind them. "You've already spent enough of your money on me for one week."

"I want to," Draco said, and his claws popped out on his visible hand, peeling a few strips of wood from the surface of Harry's table. Harry stared at it to express his dissatisfaction with that, but Draco didn't seem to notice or care. "I didn't come up with the plan to protect you. I didn't do anything but run to Diagon Alley last night and spend a lot of money on things that you might or might not have wanted. Let me at least do this."

"But I did want those things," Harry said, reaching up to stroke the cloak still draped around his shoulders. "Even if I didn't realize I wanted them. That's all you need to do."

Draco snarled at him, his eyes taking on that glassy sheen again and a white haze settling into place around his hair. Harry thought, clinging to reason in the face of panic, that Veela emotions seemed to make them look even *more* decorative than they already were. He wondered if that was so they could attract their chosen or for some other reason. "You're being stupid," Draco said. "I'm the one with more money, and they'll wonder what connection you have to the Veela if you start asking. I'm already part of the community. I can do it without rousing suspicion."

"No, you can't," Harry snapped, irritated that Draco was acting as though he didn't understand the way Ministry politics worked. "It's the Ministry. Someone's *always* suspicious. The really important thing is that no one will connect me with Laurent—"

"Someone might, if you bribe them and then Pansy and her friends ask around about him." Draco's eyes were flat. He leaned forwards in a way that suggested he was going to rise into the air and pounce on Harry. Harry stiffened his back against his chair and concentrated to get past his dizziness. "Let me do it."

"No," Harry said.

"Why not?" Draco's voice held the edge of a screech. But he had asked for an explanation instead of attacking, Harry reminded himself. There was that.

"You've already done so much for me," Harry said—stubbornly, he knew, but if he had ever cared about that, then a lot of his relationships would have been very different. "I don't want you to exhaust your money or your patience acting in my name. I should be able to do things that protect myself."

Draco, unexpectedly, laughed. He had unfolded his wings, but they flapped lazily behind him,

and he regarded Harry with a gentle smile. "You don't understand," he said. "My vaults are much deeper than yours. The Malfoys are *rich*, Harry, and our lack of involvement in politics over the last few years means that we haven't spent a lot. Please. Let me do this for you." His voice was meltingly sweet, and he reached out and trailed his claws down Harry's arm in a way that caused sharp sparks to burst in Harry's groin. "Call it the influence, if you like, making me fixate on your safety. But I want to."

Harry gaped at him, then shut his mouth. It wasn't all that hard to understand, after what Draco had explained to him about how good it felt for a Veela to protect his chosen.

But it was still hard to *allow*.

Harry struggled with his outrage in silence, and then told himself that if Draco enjoyed it well enough, there was no reason that he should object. There would be other times when he would assert his independence, he assured himself. In fact, he had won the argument about breakfast, so he could count that as a "victory" if he needed to keep score between himself and Draco. "All right."

Draco tilted his head back and trilled, a silvery sound that left Harry blinking back tears. That was purely a sound of joy, he thought, not meant for seduction. He'd like to hear it again.

"You won't regret this, Harry, I promise," Draco said, bringing his head down and smiling at Harry. His smile was as much pure sweetness as his voice or his touch. He moved his claws again, and Harry gasped and shivered. He felt sweat start into place along his collarbone. Draco's voice dropped. "You'll never regret anything you let me do for you."

Harry's vision swirled with color as if he were going through a Portkey. He was half-hard, and he wanted to lean across the table, kiss Draco, back him up against the wall, insinuate a knee between his legs—

Harry tore himself free of the grip of desire with an effort, and put his hands over his eyes, pressing down.

"Harry?" Draco's voice was concerned.

"That's—that's the first time I realized that I really *want* you," Harry said. He knew his voice was raw and surprised, but he couldn't help it. He only hoped that it didn't hurt Draco's feelings too much. "I haven't been thinking much about what I felt for you, because healing and trying to let you have what you needed were in first place. But now I want you, and you haven't even done anything but touch me."

Draco trilled again, and his voice no longer sounded human when he said, "I would do anything for you, Harry. Anything."

Harry looked up. Draco glowed and shone as if made of porcelain and then backlit by the sun.

He was extending his wings, holding them high enough that Harry could catch glimpses of silver from the feathers on the edges. His trill cut through the whole maze of light, and Harry felt it like a rope of white silk, surrounding him.

For the first time in years, the notion of a rope didn't make him panic. Harry wondered what it would be like to lean back within it and luxuriate in the loose coils.

He couldn't *do* that. In a moment he was blinking hard and fighting his way back to control of himself.

But that lapse had happened, and he hadn't died or panicked.

He looked at Draco in wonder, and smiled when he noted that Draco was regarding him with wide eyes. "I know you would," he said.

Draco caught Harry's hand and kissed the knuckles softly. Harry flushed as he met his eyes—it was still hard to think of someone looking at him like that and not react defensively—but then again, there was no rule against flushing.

When Draco had left, Harry sat beside the breakfast table for a long time, his eyes closed, and tried to think about what it would mean that romance was coming back into his life, now, when he had thought it was so long gone.

Draco leaned against the table and regarded the clerk across the room—one of the numerous Undersecretaries in the Department of Magical Games and Sports—speculatively. Her name was Angelina Ramsay, he knew, and she had been a member of Slytherin House while she was in Hogwarts. But she had escaped any touch of the Dark Lord, and had proceeded to ignore anyone who knew her then as much as possible after the war.

The way she was ignoring him right now.

Draco smiled and reached out with the briefest touch of allure, too small to be registered by the wards around the Ministry that supposedly picked up things like that. And too small, Draco reassured himself, to count against Harry's rules that he not use the allure on someone else. He wasn't trying to enchant Ramsay, just get her to pay attention to him, the way he could have used a polite cough if the world was saner.

Sure enough, she looked up with a faint frown, as if she thought someone had called her name. Draco started forwards, and it would have been against the rules of courtesy for her to ignore him once she'd caught his eye. She smiled tightly and folded her hands on the table in front of her.

"Mr. Malfoy," she said. "What do you want?"

"To present an opportunity of some advantage to you," Draco replied smoothly. He had chosen

his time well. The other secretaries were gone from the Department on a gathering of some sort, to be followed by a lunch. Ramsay had volunteered to stay here and hold down the desk—supposedly a sacrifice, but Draco knew the power of being in charge of the entire Department thrilled her.

"I can't let you see any records." Ramsay recited the words with the ease of long practice. Her green eyes, not as bright as his Harry's because no one's were, looked over his shoulder at the wall.

"I know that," Draco said. "Instead, we're trying to create a trail that extends back three years." He shifted and let, as if by accident, the bag of Galleons in his pocket clink.

Ramsay wasn't stupid, whatever Draco thought of her trying to deny her affiliation with Slytherin in later years. She sat up and paid more attention, with a professional smile that would convince most people peering into the room that she wanted to be in on the conversation. "Really? Let's hear it, then."

"There was a Veela who spent some time about the Ministry three years ago," Draco said, sitting down in the chair that she gestured him to. It was comfortably padded. Draco wondered if working in the Department of Magical Games and Sports meant more remuneration than he had assumed it did. "You might remember him. Laurent du Michel."

Ramsay made a face. "Oh, yes. That bastard."

"You knew him?" Draco hadn't dared find out who had had a bad relationship with Laurent. It might give away his hand too easily. (Despite what Harry thought, he really did know how to play this game). He was able to put on an honest expression of surprise.

"Yes." Ramsay shook his head. "Jealous and possessive, and forever convinced that the people he dated were going to leave him. He dated my cousin for a short time, and restricted her movements and wanted to know why she was spending time with men who weren't him. *Any* men, even her colleagues. It was intolerable for her."

"Well," Draco murmured, "there was a problem some years ago, and we thought it had been taken care of. But now there are people—his family—asking around about him, and they might try to get him out of Azkaban."

"Azkaban?" Ramsay chuckled harshly. "Just what he deserved. What did he do?"

Draco had to step carefully here. Technically, he probably shouldn't have revealed that Laurent was in Azkaban, but he knew Pansy wouldn't be shy about using the fact to arouse sympathy for Laurent if she could.

"Charmed someone key." Draco let his eyes flicker to the door that hid the office of the Head of the Department, and then back. "Someone whose name can't be revealed, because then *all* his

decisions for a certain period of time would have to be reviewed, and he might be sacked. I'm certain you understand."

Ramsay caught her breath, and Draco knew he had chosen rightly. Ramsay might have been ambitious to replace the Department Head, but since she'd just started working for him three years ago, her decisions could be subject to the same, fake review if it was made. She would be anxious to help protect the Head, and with it her position.

"What do you need?" she asked tightly.

Draco slid the bag of Galleons around the desk to her, and let her look into it. When she glanced up, blinking in a gratifying way, Draco said, "For you to imply that Laurent might have got into others' brains, too. You don't need to imply that you were a victim unless you want to. But we need rumors floating about so that anyone who asks won't focus on the correct victim."

Ramsay smiled slightly. The temptation of money plus secret information plus a legitimate reason to gossip was too much for her, as Draco had suspected it would be.

But because she had been Slytherin, she had to push the boundaries. "And if I don't?" she asked.

"Easy enough," Draco said in a soft drawl, "to imply that other people *were* implicated in the decisions a certain key person made years ago."

Ramsay nodded. "All right. Just asking." She grinned and tucked the money away. "I assume you're approaching others about this?"

"Never you mind that." Draco stood. He had done all he could here. "But if you hear any rumors, it might do you good to confirm them."

Ramsay nodded, still grinning, and returned to work. Draco stepped out of the office and cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself just in case he ran into anyone whose attention he might need to avoid.

One step begun.

Lazy pleasure poured like honey down his spine. He was protecting his chosen. He was doing as he should.

And Laurent might be punished. At the very least, he would be denied freedom.

Draco strode out of the Ministry with his wings spread, and given the Disillusionment Charm, it wasn't even a problem.

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Chapter: 24

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Four—Distressed

Harry shut the book Draco had got him thoughtfully. It explained more than he had thought it could about the influence and the situation he and Draco were in.

It also made him feel like less of a freak. Not everyone always accepted a Veela choosing them easily and joyfully. Some of them had problems like his. Some of them were in love with others and didn't want to forsake those feelings, even if they were unrequited. Some had hated the Veela because of personal grudges in the past, or because of the endless feuds between pure-blood families that seemed to occupy most of wizarding history when Harry read it in detail.

But most of them had accepted the Veela in the end. The book was ominously silent about what happened when they didn't, but Harry refused to worry. First of all, he knew Draco wouldn't die if it turned out that Harry couldn't go through with this.

Second, he had every intention of going through with this.

He sat quietly in his drawing room in front of the fire for long minutes, half-thinking, half-wondering when Draco would return from the Ministry. He had told Harry he was going to bribe only a few people today, so the rumor would have time to grow and wouldn't look artificially pushed.

It surprised Harry how much he already missed Draco.

I reckon that's what helps make up for the Veela being under the power of his chosen, he thought, as he rose to his feet with a stretch. *We miss them just as much. We want them back.*

Harry didn't know if that came entirely from the influence, or because Draco had chosen him and that was flattering—and, now, more exciting than it had seemed before—or because of those growing romantic feelings he had for Draco, or maybe just because he *wanted* to have those feelings for Draco. But he no longer wanted to analyze every feeling he had to death, either. Certain things were going to happen. They were or weren't going to hurt. He could accept that.

He turned around and looked thoughtfully at the drawing room. The huge bed still sat there, and as magnificent as it looked, Harry didn't want it taking up room out here. He waved his wand, shrank it, and then floated it behind him as he went into his bedroom.

The bed there was nothing bad, but nothing special either. After a moment's hesitation to make

sure that the walls of the room were actually spacious enough to contain the huge bed, he shrank his own and put it against the wall, out of the way, while he floated the huge bed into its place and unshrank it.

Harry winced at the way it looked as it stretched out. "Oh, sure, *it's* pretty, but it makes the rest of my house look shabby," he muttered.

Arms folded around him from behind, and Draco's voice murmured into his ear, "That doesn't matter. No place that housed you and protected you in the past could ever look shabby."

Harry started to reach behind him, to curve his arm around Draco's neck, and then managed to retract it, because touching him like that was the beginning of an Auror move meant to snap Dark wizards' necks. "Draco," he breathed instead, leaning against him. "Don't do that again, please."

"I'm sorry," Draco said, words already edging into a croon. "I didn't mean to startle you. Your instincts are so good I thought you'd already heard me." He kissed the edge of Harry's neck and led him towards the bed. Harry noted wryly that, despite his words, he seemed to choose the fancy bed as a place to sit in preference to the two chairs against the wall.

Although maybe it's for what a bed represents to him, rather than because it's the fanciest place in the room.

"Harry? Do you forgive me?"

"Yes, of course," Harry said quickly. The books could explain it, but he was still uncomfortable with the power he had over Draco, at least when Draco looked at him with lost eyes like that. Draco relaxed at once this time and started stroking Harry's stomach, his hand edging beneath his shirt. Harry leaned on Draco's wrist and stopped that. They had serious things to discuss. "How did the bribes go?"

"Very well." Draco took the hint and eased his hand out from under the shirt to massage Harry's shoulders instead. Harry felt a bit embarrassed to remember he'd never taken the grey cloak off, but if anything, Draco's touch was heavy with approval as he stroked Harry. "Two former Slytherins and one former Ravenclaw, all in different Departments, and I'm fairly sure that no one saw me enter or leave the areas. And I learned some interesting things about Laurent. Apparently he was considered a bastard on the basis of the people he dated before you, possessive and controlling."

"Imagine that," Harry said, and tried not to feel that he was enclosed in a second skin that was too small because he was talking about Laurent. "I had that impression, yes, but because I loved him at the time, I told myself that no one was perfect and tried to ignore it. Besides, since I was immune to his allure, I wasn't really worried."

Draco's arms tightened, but he said nothing for long enough to give Harry the impression that he

was thinking furiously. Harry sat still and let him think, noting in silent amusement that if he shifted too far one way or the other, Draco shifted to keep up with him. He didn't seem to notice it, any more than he noticed the weight of his arm around Harry's shoulder.

"Would you mind talking about what he was like some more?" Draco asked at last, his voice rough. "I can understand if you don't want to, but I think I *need* to know. I want to avoid his mistakes."

"There are some of his mistakes that you can't avoid, from what I understand from the books." Harry kept his voice calm, the voice that he used when he interrogated reluctant witnesses. He was not about to flinch and cower in front of Draco. He was going to face his fears. "Some of them are just part of being a Veela."

"Rape isn't, no matter what they told you." Draco's voice had deepened, and Harry could feel Draco's chest throbbing against him with the sound of it.

"I know that, now." Harry faced Draco and looked into his eyes. They were glassy and silvery, he found, as usual when Draco was in the grip of the Veela part of himself, and his hands trembled where they rested on Harry. "But do you really need to know this because it's—well, a *need*? Or do you just want to? Because I don't talk about this kind of thing for fun."

Draco suppressed his immediate reaction, which was that he would never ask Harry to talk about something like this for "fun" and Harry had once again underestimated what it meant to be a Veela.

But he silenced himself in the face of Harry's wide eyes and clenched hands and white face. Yes, this was still hard for Harry to talk about. It always would be, even if it didn't touch directly on the rape. If Harry was making an effort to understand why Draco wanted to talk about it, he should make some effort in the other direction, as well.

Draco breathed until he felt the tightness in his chest—the tightness of anger, that he could be accused of trying to hurt his chosen that way—loosen. Then he smiled, with a deliberately wry twist of his lips, and said, "Both want and need, I think. I want to know what Laurent is like so that I can understand how he damaged you even more than I already do. And I need to know so that I can avoid repeating his mistakes. I definitely wouldn't ask you to talk about it for *fun*." This time, the offended growl came out despite himself.

Harry didn't seem to notice. He examined his hands as if they held the answer instead. Then he looked up into Draco's face again, and his hands had relaxed from their tight fists, though his eyes were wider than ever. Draco was starting to regret his request, and he would have lain Harry down beneath him and bitten his neck until he forgot about it, if he hadn't thought Harry would be even angrier about that.

"All right," Harry whispered. "But understand, I don't think I'm being entirely fair about him. My

view of him is retroactively tainted, so things that didn't bother me when he did them bother me now."

Draco couldn't respond for a long moment. Then he managed to untangle his tongue from his teeth and move his dropped jaw. "Only *you* would think that you were being unfair to your rapist," he said. "And I love you for it."

Harry twitched and looked as if he would have loved to bury his head in blankets so Draco couldn't get a good look at his face. Instead, he touched Draco's cheek with clumsy fingers and kept his hand there for a moment before he pulled it away and took a deep breath.

"I knew Laurent was controlling before I started dating him," Harry said. "But I really thought I was safe. He'd never tried to rape anyone; there wasn't even a rumor of that. I knew I was immune to the allure, the only way I thought a Veela could control someone. And I fought back and stood up to him, which most of the people he dated didn't do." His voice went thick with crawling bitterness. "I thought I was different. Of course. Everyone thinks that."

Draco couldn't think of anything to do except put his arms around Harry. Harry leaned towards him and sighed. Draco took a moment to absorb nothing more than the scent of his skin and the sound of his breathing before Harry spoke again.

"I noticed he was getting worse as the Blazing Season came, but I didn't know the half of it. Fidelity charms on me, hexes and potions in the food, and he apparently warned anyone he thought had an interest in me away. I wondered why several of the Aurors suddenly stopped talking to me. But—well, along with not knowing most of this until later, I just thought it was natural. He was a Veela. It was what they did. You did."

"I will never be like that," Draco said.

Harry looked up and shook his head. "I've been reading those books you got me. Jealousy is a natural emotion, they said. I don't think you'll be able to keep from feeling it over me."

"I will never be like that," Draco repeated, and took Harry's head in his hands to ensure he was paying attention. "I know that you think certain excesses are reasonable in a Veela, but I'm here to change your mind and show you they're not. Yes, I could be jealous, but I'll never try to control you with potions in your food or charms."

"Even jealousy by itself could be enough to set me off, I'm afraid." Harry shrugged. "I really don't know, because so far it hasn't happened, and I won't know until it does. And you know that I can't eat food your house-elves cooked yet."

Draco was starting to wonder if he should have asked Harry to talk about Laurent. He seemed to be sliding further into despair as he did.

"We'll work things out," he said. "You'll see. It won't matter what obstacles are in our way. We

have to keep on."

"I know that," Harry said, his fingers clutching down for a moment on Draco's sleeve. "I just want to forewarn you that I'll be difficult to deal with."

Draco was laughing before he thought about whether or not it was a good idea, deep, bubbling laughter that took all the tension in his chest and dissolved it. Harry started to smile, seeming uncertain of whether he should join in or not until Draco leaned down towards him and whispered, "You, difficult? I certainly never would have guessed from all the difficulties we've met and downed so far."

Harry smiled, and then leaned up and caught Draco's mouth in a fierce kiss. Draco let his mouth drop open in a second and tightened his hold on Harry, leaning in towards him, willing to lay him on the bed if Harry would cooperate with that. But Harry put up resistance, pushing against his chest, even grabbing Draco's jaw and prying it open so that he could control the kiss.

Draco, quivering with tension, managed to yield to the point that he could stroke Harry's lips with his tongue and do nothing else while Harry plundered his mouth. When he finally pulled back, dazed and triumphant, Draco sighed and leaned his head on Harry's shoulder in turn. Harry stroked his hair as he took up the story.

"As we got closer to the Blazing Season, he got worse and worse. Didn't want me going anywhere alone, didn't want me visiting Ron and Hermione—he claimed he caught Ron eying my arse one night—and didn't want me getting into any dangerous situations. I asked him how I was supposed to avoid that, as an Auror, but he didn't answer me."

Draco swallowed back his own complaint. It was something they would have to address, but Harry was right that he wouldn't simply give up being an Auror, and Laurent had been foolish to expect him to do so.

"And then the Blazing Season started." Harry's words were low, quick, and rough now, and Draco listened carefully to separate them and not miss one piece of the tale. "He tried the allure on me. I laughed at him. He pushed me further, and I was Veela-struck. And I just lay there and *let* him—"

This isn't going to happen. Draco grew his claws, seized Harry's shoulders, and pressed down until he almost cut skin. Harry choked back whatever he had been going to say and blinked at him. His face was too calm, the kind of mask Draco had seen his father stretch over his emotions after Narcissa was attacked.

"You didn't just lie there," Draco said. "I know what being Veela-struck means, probably better than almost anyone who's not a Veela except you does. And it's a miracle that you broke free and didn't stay his passive toy for the rest of your life. It's amazing that you've recovered as far as you have. Never think that you didn't do enough, or that you somehow caused this and deserved it. Can you do that for me?"

Harry pulled up a smile from somewhere, although the smile pointed sideways and was too dark. "So I should stop panicking over a Veela commanding me because a Veela commands me to?"

"*Damn* it," Draco said, and didn't know how much he felt the words, except that he had to take his hands away from Harry so that he could curl his claws in his lap.

Harry laughed in turn, bending his head so that he hid the strange smile and shaking his head. "Told you I'd be difficult," he muttered.

Draco took a deep breath, told himself he had handled far harder things than this—like the panic Harry had fled in after he saw Draco's wings for the first time—and recovered. "But you know that being Veela-struck isn't your fault," he said.

"I'll probably think that way, for a while." Harry shrugged as though he hadn't just said one of the most horrible things Draco had ever heard. "It was hard to fight my way out from under it, but I managed it. Why couldn't I have managed it earlier? Why was I susceptible to it in the first place, if I'm not vulnerable to the allure?"

"It's like the reason some people can fight off minor pain curses, but not the Cruciatus," Draco said, with a smile that he hoped hid the depth of his feeling. "Because one spell is deeper and stronger than the other. Being Veela-struck is a deeper matter than being affected by the allure. There's no way that we could say Laurent made those people I chose in the Ministry Veela-struck, because there would have been a lot more evidence. The allure is a nice lie."

"Who knows?" Harry lifted his head and spoke more brightly, as though trying to put his half-told story decisively behind them. "He might have touched some of them with the allure. He said at the trial that he had done what he could to keep people away from me and influence them not to interfere in our relationship."

"I'm not going to do that," Draco said. He felt he would get weary of repeating these reassurances to Harry, but there was nothing else he could do except hope to imprint the idea that he was on Harry's side, not Laurent's, by repetition, until Harry accepted it. "I would never influence your friends with the allure."

"I know," Harry said. "Because you want to keep me, and I would leave you if I found out you did that."

Draco decided, very carefully, that he wasn't going to tell Harry about using the allure to make Ramsay pay attention to him. "What do you want to do today?" he asked. "It's barely noon. We can eat lunch, and then we have the afternoon free."

"And the next eleven afternoons, since I took a fortnight off," Harry added. He didn't sound enthusiastic about it.

Draco cocked his head. Perhaps it was time to tackle this, in turn. "You know that you have to find some meaning in your life apart from me and the Auror work. What do you like to do?"

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed the back of his neck. While he was relieved they weren't talking about Laurent anymore, he had dreaded this question almost as much. Draco wasn't going to like the answer.

If he had learned anything in the past few days, though, it was that he should tell the truth.

"Being an Auror is a full-time job," he said quietly, opening his eyes and looking at Draco. "And the free time I spend researching other cases or with my friends, or with you lately. That's all."

Draco's nostrils flared, and his claws twitched once, as if he were going to reach out, grip Harry, and pin him to the bed. Or maybe that was just Harry's imagination and memory combining, because Draco seemed to gain control of himself with a deep breath and a smile. "How long has it been since you were at a Quidditch game?"

Harry blinked. "I think Quidditch is sort of childish now. Don't you?"

Draco struggled against it, but there was a flash of pity in his eyes. Harry saw it, and there was no use Draco trying to hide it. He sat up, indignant, but Draco shook his head and touched his jaw until Harry relaxed.

"Quidditch is *fun*, Harry," Draco said. "Now that you're not working as hard as you used to, you'll need to find something to do or go mad. No, I don't think you can spend every moment studying or watching Quidditch. But it's a start. Now. I asked you a question. How long has it been since you were at a game?"

"Since I was in training, I think," Harry said. "Maybe before then." Prodding the part of his mind that used to play Quidditch and care about it felt like prodding a loose tooth with his tongue. "I don't—Draco, it's not that I won't go if you want to, but I just can't muster up any enthusiasm for it."

"Not yet," Draco said. "It's the first idea I had, and maybe not the best. But we'll go, and you'll see if you still like it. All right?"

Harry nodded reluctantly, but did ask, "How do you think we're going to be able to waltz into a game and just pick up the tickets?"

Draco smiled. "There are other advantages to being a Malfoy than having fabulous good looks, Veela heritage, and the money to spend on bribes. On my suggestion, my parents cultivated contacts in other directions once the Ministry started closing doors on them. My mother is good friends with several Quidditch coaches who would be delighted to accommodate her son with tickets." He paused, as if consulting an invisible schedule in his head, and then nodded. "The

Falcons are playing the Cannons today, and there's a smaller game between two amateur teams as well. Which would you like to go to?"

Before Harry could respond, an owl tapped frantically against the window. Harry turned around, concerned. The one thing he could imagine was that Ron had got wounded on a case without him, or that Hermione and Rose were in some sort of trouble.

When he opened the window, though, the owl flew straight to Draco. Harry saw the way his mouth pinched before he opened the envelope, and crossed the room to lean supportively against his side. Maybe he couldn't do more than that, but he would do all he could.

Draco read the letter, and his face went white. His hand shook so badly that the paper fluttered towards the floor. Harry picked it up and would have folded it without reading it, but Draco looked at him with dead eyes and shook his head.

Harry raised his eyebrows. Draco nodded towards the letter, movement wild, jerky, as though he were fighting demons in his head. Harry thought himself prepared when he began to read; something must have happened to Draco's parents.

That wasn't it, although the letter was in the flowing hand that Harry recognized from various thank-you notes as Narcissa Malfoy's. And he wasn't prepared. There was no way that he could have been.

Dearest, Pansy Parkinson firecalled the Manor looking for you. She seemed highly excited and mentioned the name of Laurent, at which I drew her out. She said that she had found 'the Veela witness' and could simply interview this witness in order to find out what had happened to Laurent. I thought this concerned you and Mr. Potter and decided to inform you.

Harry knew what that meant in a minute. The Veela witness at the Wizengamot's trial, the one who had denied that it was possible for a Veela to abuse their powers the way Harry said Laurent had abused his, and glared at Harry with contempt while the Wizengamot decided to convict Laurent.

"I'm going to be sick," he said thickly, and managed to make it to the bathroom before he threw up most of his breakfast.

Draco was at his back, the silky slide of feathers against his hair telling Harry that he had spread his wings before Harry's world narrowed down to his cramping stomach and his burning mouth and the stink he was emptying out of both.

And the memories. Oh, God, the memories seared his mind worse than the bile seared his throat.

It was some time before he could calm down enough to hear Draco's murmured words. "It's all right. I will take care of everything. I will do everything. It will be all right."

And Harry, pained and empty and horribly afraid, leaned back and let Draco take him in his arms and wings.

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Chapter: 25

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Five—Held

Draco knew he was being selfish and stupid, because his thoughts should have been focused on how they were going to defeat Pansy and this Veela witness and make them pay.

Instead, he was thinking about how warm and heavy Harry was in his arms, and how he had his wings around him at last, and how, if Harry remained as tranquil as he was right now, Draco could hold him safe from the dangers around him forever.

His feathers interlaced in front of Harry's face. Held like this, Draco was the only one who could see Harry, the only one who could touch him. Hurled spells would break on his wings; attempts to hit Harry would rebound from the feathers. He lowered his head and breathed in Harry's scent, and wistfully imagined being able to breathe it always, while Harry remained safe from another Veela who might want to sniff it.

Like Laurent, for example.

That thought shook Draco out of his trance. He had to be prepared to face this, and more, to help Harry face it. That would be the harder task. Thanks to his Veela instincts, Draco could receive support from his own mind to stand up for his chosen, but Harry didn't have that reinforcement. Draco would have to be his shield and his armor.

"Harry?" he whispered, when he judged enough minutes had passed that Harry would probably wake up soon, notice the wings, and panic.

Harry stirred. His head lifted, and his eyes looked drugged. That made Draco's heart ache, even though he had thought a while ago that he would like Harry to trust him enough to relax like that. He wanted Harry to relax of his own free will, not because his fear had put him into a trance.

He whispered Harry's name again. This time, as if responding to an echo down a long tunnel, Harry slowly nodded and began the climb back to the surface. Draco flipped his wings behind his back again, and dealt with the surge of panic in his belly that told him his chosen was now unprotected. It was irrational, and at the moment, he needed to be as calm as possible, as sane.

He knew Harry needed that.

"What do we do?" Harry whispered.

"We start with Pansy," Draco said calmly. "Her new friendship is making her do this, but my friendship with her is much older. I'll go to her and ask her to stop her investigation without revealing any details of the crime."

"If she's already spoken with Oblansky, she'll know it." Harry's eyes were still wide, if not drugged, and he shivered and peered into corners. The jerky motions of his head and hands reminded Draco of the way he had looked himself when he was young and had a nightmare, one of those about nameless, formless terrors hiding under the bed, difficult to describe to his parents because the dream was always worse than the waking.

"Oblansky? Is that the Veela witness's name?" Draco kept his voice determinedly soft, as if he didn't understand Harry's panic, and his hand moved up and down Harry's back. As he had thought it would, the repetitive motion gave Harry something to focus on and calmed him. He took a few hurried gulps of air and then nodded.

"Yes," Harry said. "Curtis Oblansky."

Draco curled his lip at the evidence that some parents couldn't give even Veela children euphonious names, but decided that Harry wouldn't appreciate hearing an aesthetic criticism right now. "What exactly did he say during the trial?"

Harry could relive the trial all too easily, and he didn't want to. His hands ached with the thought. His throat burned, though he had dry-heaved enough that he knew he had nothing more to bring up. His eyes flickered open and shut, and there was a new scene from the trial each time they closed.

Laurent looking at Harry with a simple hungry expression, and shaking his head, to say that this trial business was all a distraction and they would get out of here and go back home and to bed soon enough.

The members of the Wizengamot seated in stiff, glittering robes, frowning into the middle distance, as if they didn't want to show favor to anyone. Since Harry knew who had taken bribes from whom, and had known most of that information from the first day of his Auror career, he wanted to laugh bitterly at the sham of it all.

Oblansky, glaring disdainfully in Harry's direction, his wings rising every time he was angry—which of course made Harry stutter when he tried to tell his side of the story and made him sound less credible. Harry would have thought Oblansky had planned that, but it had begun before he reached the part of the story where he explained what Laurent had done to him with his wings.

So much. So much had happened in that place, during that time, and Harry didn't want to tell the story to Draco so soon after telling him more details about the rape. But he gritted his teeth, because Draco was helping him—Draco was the only Veela in the world Harry could believe was unconditionally on his side—and pushed forwards.

"He said that it was impossible for Veela to misuse their powers that way," Harry whispered. "A true Veela took care of his chosen, and made himself responsible for that chosen's safety and pleasure. The allure was only a tool that would be used for protection, to attract the attention of someone the Veela wanted to charm or to push aside those who might get in the way of him being with his chosen."

"Never mind that we'd have to trust that the Veela was always doing that for the best reasons, even if it was true," Draco muttered.

Harry gave him a faint smile. He *knew* it was faint and wavered ridiculously all over his face, like a light turning on and off, but at least it was something other than a moan or a gasp or a cry. "Exactly what I thought. How do we know that those he wants to push or charm aside don't have a legitimate reason for standing between him and his chosen?"

"What did Oblansky say when you told the court that you were Veela-struck?" Draco prompted. His hand, thick with claws, rested like a prod along Harry's spine. Harry licked his lips and tried to think of it as a comfort, too.

"That it wasn't possible," Harry said. "That that was a tactic used only on enemies who could resist the allure, and then only to make them leave the Veela alone. I was lying. And his major evidence was that no one can break free of that influence without aid from the Veela, so I *must* be lying when I said I did."

He heard his voice tremble, and he ground his teeth. He *wouldn't* cry. This was getting ludicrous, how weak he was, how vulnerable to his memories. Besides, he had to keep a steady voice and a calm attitude so that he could tell Draco the story. He wouldn't interrupt his own recitation with sobs or grunts.

Draco cradled him closer and silently urged Harry, with his hands on neck and back, to lean his head on Draco's shoulder. Harry resisted. How could he tell a good story that way? For a moment, there was a little struggle, during which Harry thought he might have to break away, but Draco growled in the end and then let him sit back up. Harry licked his lips and went on before Draco could ask him to.

"The court believed me. But Oblansky resented me. I know he didn't think Laurent was guilty, though what reason I would have to lie about the way he treated me, he never explained. He was still glaring at me when they sentenced Laurent and marched him out to Azkaban."

"There are some Veela whose loyalty is to their own kind first," Draco said quietly. "They think

of all more-human wizards, except their own chosen, as lesser. And it's true, there are people who will chase mindlessly after us and attempt to be with us even when we've told them we don't want them. But he was letting his own prejudices blind him if he thought that was the case here." He paused. "How was Laurent behaving during this?"

"Staring at me like I was his meal who had managed to escape briefly," Harry said, and tried to muster a chuckle. He really did. It wasn't his fault it turned into a revolted moan halfway through.

Draco immediately held him close, body pressed to body, despite Harry's mumbled protests, and began to whisper, "Hush, hush, it's all right."

Harry tried to sit up again, tried to tell him that it *wasn't* all right, and lying about it wouldn't make things better, but Draco was too strong.

And the warmth of the chest beneath his cheek, the heartbeat in his ear, the musky smell of a human body that surrounded him—human bodies really didn't smell that different from Veela—was something he hadn't felt in so long. Maybe he wasn't weak if he closed his eyes and rested here? Maybe it wasn't about a loss of control?

He shut his eyes, and he had no idea when he passed from relaxation and reluctant comfort into sleep.

Draco bowed his head in relief when he heard Harry's breathing steady. He had hoped that just holding Harry close would have the same effect as if he had actually used his allure or his croon to soothe Harry to sleep. He wouldn't do that, because it was a betrayal of what he and Harry had promised each other, but Harry could use some escape from the crushing pressure of the moment.

He had told Draco more than enough to enable him to plan his next move, assuming that Oblansky still felt the same about Laurent's sentencing as he had when it took place.

Go to Pansy second and find out how much she knew. And first, approach Oblansky. Draco did have advantages if Oblansky was a Veela supremacist, because there was a strong chance he wouldn't have told Pansy everything immediately, and he would listen to Draco more politely.

Of course, he would have to go and speak to them without Harry. Draco hated the idea, but there was no way that Harry could face them right now.

He stroked the middle of Harry's back with his claws, making Harry sigh in his sleep, and considered what he could do. He badly wanted to take Harry to Malfoy Manor, where he would be safe behind extensive wards in case anyone sought him out with intent to harm him, but he didn't think Harry would agree. Draco *definitely* didn't think he would agree to tell Lucius and Narcissa all the details yet.

Even though he has no reason to be ashamed of them.

Draco gazed down sadly at the dark head resting against him. Harry hadn't done anything wrong; he had gone out of his way to give Laurent a chance, if he hadn't fled at the first sign of his jealous behavior. And though he had been prejudiced against Veela, he was trying to recover from that. He *needn't* have given Draco a chance to date him, after all. He could have said no, and Draco would just have had to choose someone else.

Even though there's no one I could love as much as I love him. But Draco was wise enough about his own Veela instincts to accept that the thought was partially prompted by them and his growing enthrallment with his chosen.

He wished Harry could stand the fire of public criticism and speculation that would follow the revelation of details about his rape, but he didn't think he could, even if most of the people were on Harry's side. And the wizarding world had always been fickle where their Savior was concerned. Some of them had referred to him as "tainted" when he was dating and having sex frequently. What would they think when they realized he had been raped and "hadn't fought back"? There were those who didn't understand being Veela-struck and those who would reduce it to a mere affair of magical power and declare that, since Harry had more strength than Laurent, he should have won every struggle between them.

Everything just got harder.

None of which lessened his determination to stay with his chosen, or to see Harry happier one day than he probably ever believed he could be right now.

Draco shut his eyes and closed his claws down, not pressing hard enough to wake Harry, but hopefully hard enough to send small flashes of pleasure through Harry's dreams. Small flashes of pleasure might be all he would get for a time.

"You're sure this is all right with you?" Harry found it difficult to look at Hermione. He looked at the wall above the fireplace instead, where a portrait hung that he didn't recognize. It was a tall woman with long blonde hair, in a purple robe, who held a lens to her eye as she examined Harry with interest. The background behind her was an open field and a blue sky with clouds cashing across it. "Who's that?"

"She was Aphrodite Sears, one of the first female lawyers in the Ministry," Hermione said calmly. "And of course it's all right, Harry. Look at me, please. When you're staring into space with that distressed expression, it makes me think that Rose has done something offensive in the smell department."

Harry jerked and turned to face her. His friend gave him a small smile and handed him Rose before he could object. "In fact, it works out well," Hermione went on, sounding as happy as

though Harry really had come to her and Ron's house just to help her. "I'm starting to work from home again, but it's difficult to concentrate on cases when I'm listening with one ear for Rose to cry. You can hold her and rock her and check to make sure she's sleeping, and even feed her if I'm too caught up."

Harry knew the glance he gave her was horrified, but he couldn't help it. Hermione pointed to a neat row of bottles on the table nearby. "They're full of my milk," she said. "She'll need to get used to it at least some of the time when I go back to work, and the spells for filling the bottles are interesting. Shall I tell you? You just—"

Harry would have clamped his hands over his ears, but he was holding Rose. He did manage to glare at her hard enough that she got the point, and laughed and went off to work on her cases. Harry leaned back in the chair and rocked Rose against his chest, trying to keep his mind off what Draco was doing.

He had said that he was going to talk to Parkinson and Oblansky. He had said it mildly, so Harry could have thought it was a business matter if he didn't know who these people were.

But that mild tone was only effective if you didn't look into his eyes. Draco had the silvery sheen that told Harry his Veela instincts were present, and he stroked the wall with claws that made strips of stone peel away. Harry knew he could adjust the hardness and toughness of the claws, but he hadn't realized they were that powerful.

Then he had escorted Harry to Ron and Hermione's house, given him several quite unnecessary instructions about safety, and left. Left Harry to hold the baby and sit in the rocking chair while he went into danger.

Harry ground his teeth. Impatience and other emotions burst like stars in his mind if he thought about that too long. He wasn't some helpless victim who needed to be protected, and leaving him behind made him seem like it. Why did Draco have to do that? There were other ways that he could have faced Parkinson and Oblansky—

And then he calmed down by force, partially because he was squeezing Rose too tightly and he knew it, and shut his eyes. No, he couldn't have done that, and he knew it. The instant he saw Oblansky, he would want to attack, and Draco could never have gained Parkinson's trust if Harry was there with him. If she didn't know the entire truth, she probably would have been able to figure it out then.

He did have to stay here, and murmur to Rose, and try to distract himself by watching the shadows in the fire and wondering why in the world he had been able to submit to Draco's wings holding him.

An ugly word, *submit.* Harry had been upset at the time, he reassured himself. He gave in because he just didn't have the strength to argue right then, and he would have had to argue with Draco to get him to let Harry out of his wings.

He had done what he had to. He was doing what he had to now. He could look forwards to a time when his life wasn't an endless series of duties, but it seemed that it would never arrive unless he let Draco help him.

Rose woke and cried. Harry sniffed, and found that this time, she *had* done something offensive in the smell department. Resigned, he took her up and carried her into the other room to figure out how to change her nappy.

"Young Master Malfoy. I am more honored by a visit from you than I could hope to express. You are one I have wanted to meet for some time." Oblansky's voice was so smooth it might have been oiled.

Draco inclined his head, making sure that his neck was so stiff it looked hinged, and strutted into Oblansky's house. It was dim in every corner, he saw, the walls made of smoke-darkened wood and the table and the chairs ebony or else a material that could imitate it better than any Draco had ever seen. The windows were shuttered. A hot, close scent assaulted Draco, and he cast a surreptitious charm that would lessen his sense of smell while Oblansky had his back turned, getting tea. It seemed that Oblansky was one of those Veela who preferred to go with his predatory instincts and eat raw meat.

Of a piece with the rest of him, Draco thought as his eyes adjusted and Oblansky turned around to face him again.

A collar of dark silver feathers encircled Oblansky's neck, and he had to handle the cups delicately, because of the claws that replaced his nails. His wings fanned slowly from his back, filtering air through the room. He was someone who had dark hair and deep blue eyes—unusual looks for a Veela—and Draco wondered if he had started displaying his Veela features in the first place because he wanted to assert his heritage. Now, it didn't look as if he ever returned to normal human form.

Draco accepted the cup and cast another charm that would test for poison in the tea. Nothing there. There might be later, of course, when Oblansky realized why Draco had come. Draco was going to try and lie, but he would use force if he had to.

His belly rippled, and Draco realized he was in danger of growing feathers there. He tried to will his bloody Veela side down. Yes, he could attack someone in defense of his chosen and get away with it, but it would be harder to do that when Harry wasn't physically here.

"You surprise me, sir," he said, taking a cautious sip of the tea and telling himself that the small object under his foot was probably a child's practice wand and not a bone. "Why would you want to meet me in particular?"

"Because you are one of the few among the current generation who is proud of their heritage,"

said Oblansky passionately, leaning forwards. Draco calmed his rising feathers and his rising agitation in the same breath. "You don't hide what you are. You don't whimper about wanting to be human instead of Veela. Yes, I find that admirable."

Draco raised an eyebrow. He might have an advantage here that he hadn't considered.

"I enjoy your admiration, sir," he said. "But you may not continue to feel it when I reveal what I'm here for."

Oblansky gave him a thin smile. "I try to help my kin in anything that I can. You may be surprised, young Master Malfoy. And please, call me Curtis."

"Then you must call me Draco," Draco said, with the kind of smile he used on elderly friends of his mother's who wanted to pinch his cheeks. "I am here on behalf of my chosen. It seems that he heard rumors some years ago of a trial in which you were involved, a trial that has made him reluctant to continue as my chosen."

Oblansky drew in a sharp breath. "Ah, so the young Parkinson isn't the only one sniffing about, is she?" He leaned confidingly forwards. "I'll wager your chosen wants to know what the likelihood of you abusing him is, eh?"

Draco nodded, and kept his expression curious and his eyes alert. He knew Veela hearing wasn't good enough to make out another's heartbeat from a distance, but he still wished there was a way of stopping that without dying.

"You can tell him to lay his fears to rest," said Oblansky firmly. "Yes, the defendant in that trial was a Veela accused of raping his chosen. Harry Potter, to be exact." He paused, so Draco could make the expected noises of interest and horror. "But a Veela *cannot* rape his chosen. He would have no reason to. The allure can get him everything he wants, and if it can't, then he'll accept that and move on. You must know that yourself, since I'm told you thought the young Parkinson was your chosen for a time."

Draco nodded. "But why would Potter lie about this?" He let a sneer twist his voice, although it made his muscles physically ache to do so. Harry was his chosen, *his*, and he should be doing everything he could to protect his chosen against people like Oblansky, his instincts whispered, not oblige them.

Sometimes having Veela instincts was hard.

"Because he was jealous that Laurent du Michel was about to move on, I imagine." Oblansky nodded impressively. "I know that he was staring at Potter at the trial, but the way you stare at a meal, not your chosen. He must have broken the news that he was considering someone else, and Potter snapped. Who wouldn't want the chance to keep a Veela by their side, if they could take it?" His laughter sounded like a chain hitting a stone floor.

"A rather strange way to keep du Michel by his side," Draco murmured.

"Oh, at that point I'm sure du Michel had elected to leave, and this was Potter's means of getting revenge." Oblansky stared dreamily at the unlit hearth with his eyes glittering. "I would love to get revenge on *him*, if I could."

Draco made a careful decision at that point. Oblansky was still a danger to his chosen. Draco would destroy him. He had to. It didn't have to be physically, but Oblansky must be removed from a position of power in which he could ever hurt Harry again.

"Thank you," Draco said. "I'm sure my chosen will take my word for it, now that I have my memories of this conversation to back me up, but would you be willing to talk to him if necessary?" He needed an excuse for a second interview with Oblansky if he could get it.

Oblansky laughed. "Of course!"

Draco started to rise, and then paused as if he had just realized something. "Have you told anything to Pansy Parkinson?" he asked. "I believe it *is* rather a coincidence that she would start investigating this matter just as I took a new chosen. I think she is jealous that I got rid of her, and I would prefer she not learn many of the details."

Oblansky bowed from his chair. "Then she will not. You have my word of honor as a Veela."

Draco bowed back and left the house, suppressing the urge to cast a Cleaning Charm on himself the moment he was out the door. He turned and Apparated to Pansy's house, already planning out the next part of his strategy in his head. Pansy was going to want an answer as to why Oblansky had suddenly stopped talking to her and why Draco cared.

Draco would have to tell her an—edited—version of the truth.

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Chapter: 26

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Six—Tempted

Rose was sleeping. Harry put his chin in his hands and thought about asking Hermione what he should do next, but he didn't want to bother her while she was in the flurry of flying pages and mutters that usually meant she was hunting down evidence for a case.

Besides, he knew what she would say. She would advise him to relax, and then suggest settling down with a good book. If Harry turned his head, he could see an enormous edition of *Hogwarts, A History*, the binding crowded with gilt letters, on the shelf nearest him. He grimaced and turned his head away. By now, it had become a matter of pride never to read that bloody thing, since he was sure Hermione had already shared all the good or useful bits with him anyway.

The Floo turned bright. Harry sat up, heart pounding, wondering if Draco was in trouble. Of course, he had said that he would come to the door and pick Harry up when he thought it was safe instead of firecalling, but plans could change.

The voice that emerged from the flames wasn't Draco's, though, and it wasn't Ron's, either, which Harry would have thought the second most likely choice. "Hermione?" Kingsley asked. "Are you there?"

Harry caught his breath, his heartbeat turned suddenly rough as he wondered what might have happened to Ron. "I'm here, Kingsley," he said, when he could speak. "Harry. Has something happened to Ron?"

"No," Kingsley said, and the relief in his voice made Harry close his eyes for a second. "No. In fact, I was just about to ask Hermione if she knew where you were. I wanted to speak with you."

"Sir?" Harry asked. He wondered if being asked to consult on a case while he was on holiday would break the rules he and Draco had agreed on. On the other hand, it had been Harry's decision to take the time off, and surely it had to be Harry's decision to speak to Kingsley, or anyone else from the Ministry, excluding Ron, during that time.

Kingsley lowered his voice, as though he had someone in the office who he was afraid would overhear him. "It's about a new case that's just come up. A minor series of robberies has turned out to be connected, and last night we had our first murder. There's no obvious motive this time, because the murder took place far from the site of the last reported robbery, and it wasn't someone who was involved or a witness, either."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Then how do you know that it's connected to the robberies at all?"

Kingsley gave him a grim smile. "Because an amulet taken from the first crime scene was clutched in the victim's fingers."

Harry licked his lips and tried to force down the rising excitement in his veins. "Did it look as though he'd pulled it off accidentally? Or had it been placed there?"

"Placed." Kingsley's chuckle was grim. "Our thief thinks that he's good enough to merit the attentions of Aurors. And there's no doubt that he did use Dark magic to enter the last site. At each one he's taken the same kind of loot: minor magical artifacts, usually made or partially made of silver, usually with an enchantment that its owner was convinced was more than it seemed on the surface. But of course, owners of minor magical artifacts often think that."

Harry nodded, considering. There were times when the tales of those artifacts, special to their owners but no one else, attracted the attention of someone who might have reason to believe that they *were* powerful, or important. Harry had dealt with robberies like this before, and the suspects were often research wizards who had spent enough time learning about enchantments and wards to break through the protections the artifacts' owners usually put around them.

"I would start with that new university they're trying to open," he said. "I don't think they're regulating the people who do research sufficiently, and the teachers have a reputation for gathering books that talk about 'ancient and foreordained' objects and then letting their students to swallow every word." He rolled his eyes.

Kingsley remained motionless, gaze locked on him. Harry frowned. "What? Don't you think that's a good suggestion? It's the only one I can make, unless you want to tell me something more about the case."

"I didn't firecall you because I wanted you to advise me," Kingsley said quietly. "I want you to take the case. I think it's the kind that you'll do best at, and if we can catch this thief before he advances into more killing, it won't be that dangerous."

The skin all over Harry's body seemed to tighten. His chest was shuddering with the force of his heartbeat now, and it took everything he had to meet Kingsley's look evenly. "I'm on holiday," he said. "For a fortnight, and only four days of that have passed."

"I'm asking for you especially," Kingsley said. His voice stayed steady and grave, as did the expression on his face. "Yes, the killer hasn't killed much yet, but I also think he'll escalate unless he's stopped. You're the best in the Department at putting together clues quickly and enabling us to rein in a murderer after only one or two kills."

Harry had thought he knew what temptation was after he woke up in Draco's arms earlier that day. He had wanted to stay still and trust Draco to take care of him—to give up on all this useless striving and the equally useless attempts to protect himself—and just let the world drift by. It had been a powerful dream, one so strong that Harry had felt it drawing him under like a riptide.

But this—

Auror work was what he was meant to do. He had been going mad with boredom because there was nothing else that he liked to do *as much*, and his life couldn't be Draco and being with Draco. He had promised to take a holiday, but he was the one who had made that decision and he should be the one who got to say how long it lasted, shouldn't he? Draco would understand. He didn't want Harry to be miserable.

No, he wouldn't understand, said the iron voice of his conscience, the one Harry usually listened to when he was tempted to hurt one of the murderers he had captured for the damage they had inflicted on others. *You promised to take a fortnight off. He expects you to keep that promise.*

Break it now, and you'll be dealing with trust issues that are entirely your fault. Besides, he thinks you're safe here. Think how crazy he'll be if you walk out of Ron and Hermione's house.

Harry shut his eyes. The longing was swirling all around his feet like dark water, and no one except Draco could possibly blame him if he plunged. He could save lives. Surely that was all right?

Then he remembered that Ron and Hermione had both been approving when he took the time off, and he gritted his teeth, opened his eyes, and shook his head. It was as difficult to move it as if he had lead weights attached to his ears.

"Harry?" Kingsley's voice was small and shocked, his eyes wide now, which destroyed the pretense of steadiness that he'd exhibited before. Harry winced. Kingsley wasn't asking him on the case because he wanted to take away Harry's holiday or put his life in danger; he genuinely thought that Harry would be the best one for it, and didn't know what to do when Harry didn't agree.

"I'm sorry," Harry said. "But I've been sinking too deeply in my work. And if I get hurt, then I can't let anyone else heal me. Really, I should probably stay away from work until that problem gets resolved, but I'm not sure that it ever will be. The two weeks off are my compromise."

Kingsley scowled. "I don't think there's anyone else who will do as well on this case as you."

Harry sighed. His throat hurt. He hadn't known how much work it would take to swallow that longing. "I don't—I appreciate you thinking of me, sir. But that doesn't mean there aren't other people who can work on it. I'd assign them to it, and I'd assign them in a partner team. This sounds like one of those cases that can get nasty quickly, because the criminal thinks he's clever and won't like it when they start cornering him."

Kingsley frowned at him. "You're serious, aren't you?"

Harry nodded and rubbed his hands on his trousers. "I'm sorry, sir, I really am. But I don't think that I should sabotage my own healing so soon after I started taking steps to begin it. I have to think about what I want sometimes, what *I* need." The words would have sounded stronger and braver with Draco beside him, he thought, but he said them anyway.

Kingsley released a sigh that would probably have made the flames flutter if his breath was real to them. "You're sure? You're absolutely sure? I hate to see the case go down in wrack and ruin because you aren't there."

Harry sat upright. Thanks to Draco, he thought wryly, he had become much more of an expert at noticing when people were trying to manipulate him. "You have other Aurors who can handle the case, sir," he said. "Aurors as competent as I am, but with far less of a chance to display their talents. They need a chance, and they don't need to see me called out of a holiday to take the chance away from them. That's the kind of thing that starts rumors about me trying to crowd

other people out of advancement." He smiled, to soften the sting of his next words. "And about you not caring about the mental, or physical, health of your Aurors."

Kingsley slowly nodded. "I've heard some people say the same thing already," he said. "Yes, Harry, all right. If you're sure."

"I am," Harry said firmly. "Goodbye." And he shut the Floo down, which was rude, but which would keep Kingsley from asking anything more of him—including questions he might not have been able to resist.

He sat on the couch for a while, rubbing his face, watching the fire, and listening for Rose to cry.

"Draco!" Pansy rose off the floor on her toes to hug him. She had always been shorter than he was, since they were in fifth year, and had sulked about it for months before she got used to it. "I'm so glad you came! I was trying and trying to contact you, but you weren't at home and you weren't at the Manor, either. Where were you?"

"I was in a private place with my new lover." Draco hugged her shoulders and then sat down in the chair he usually took, not prolonging the hug the way Pansy would have liked to do. Despite himself, despite all the happiness that Harry brought him, and despite the fact that he and Pansy had remained friends, it was still hard for Draco to touch her for long. She had been his first chosen, and he wasn't going to forget the fact. "I want to keep him hidden from the rest of the world for a while. The press is going to fasten on us enough when we first reveal his identity."

Pansy's eyes lit up with the expectation of gossip, and she sat down in the chair across from him with a little wriggle of excitement. "Who is it, Draco?"

Draco took the chance to look around her house a moment before he answered. He had to keep from wrinkling his nose. Pansy's taste ran to bright, clashing colors—deep blues and purples, green and reds—that made him wonder what she must have thought about the positively subdued atmosphere of Slytherin in Hogwarts. There were paintings on her walls that might be flowers or simply large, abstract splashes of the shades she liked; Draco didn't know enough about flowers to be sure. Her chairs were comfortable, but crowded with colored cushions, and her fireplace was set with marble and precious stones in more hues than Draco had known they came in.

Pansy followed his gaze and smiled as if she knew what he was thinking, but didn't say the obvious aloud, that Draco and she would have fought over decorating if they had remained together. "Tell me who it is," she said again, and fluttered her eyelashes at him.

"Harry Potter," Draco said, because that was the hardest part of his news, given the mixture of truth and lies he had to tell, and he wanted to get it out of the way and them both past her reaction as soon as he could.

Pansy's mouth dropped open. "*Draco*," she said, voice so hushed that Draco honestly couldn't tell

whether her voice was admiring, appalled, or some mixture of the two. "I heard you swear up and down once that you wouldn't have him if he offered himself!"

"Things change," Draco said. "He was one of the few people who was decent to me after the war. And you know what he did for my family when my parents were wounded." He felt a glow of expanding happiness in his chest, and he smiled. It was nice being able to talk about his chosen to someone who wasn't one of Harry's friends. He'd had far too little time to revel in the fact that he *knew* who he was going to be with for the rest of his life. "Besides, do you think I'd have spent all that time looking at him during Hogwarts without noticing that he was intelligent and handsome, even if I denied the fact aloud?"

"Things must have changed." Pansy pushed a lock of hair back and stared at him. "You're sure?"

Draco nodded. "And he's accepted me, despite some qualms." He leaned forwards, staring at her. "Qualms that your own actions have directly touched upon, whether you know it or not."

Pansy drew back into herself at once, her face a haughty, cool mask Draco didn't think his mother could have bettered as she folded her hands on her knees. "Oh? I refuse to accept responsibility for your broken heart last time, Draco. I stopped it before we got too serious, and you knew from the beginning that we probably wouldn't last. Or are you suggesting that you lied to me later?"

Draco shook his head. "It has nothing to do with that. It's about your search for Laurent du Michel."

"*Really*?" Pansy cocked her head to the side. "I can't see the connection there, no matter how hard I try."

Draco smiled. Pansy's mask had melted the moment she thought she might not need it. That was one of the things he had always appreciated about her: he was one of the few people she would show her honest emotions in front of. If she showed that she was puzzled, then she was.

"Harry used to date du Michel," he said. "And du Michel being sentenced to Azkaban for charming key members of the Ministry makes Harry think that du Michel only dated him in the first place for the political influence. He was reluctant to trust Veela, and he only accepted me conditionally. Then he heard that you were looking into finding out what had become of du Michel. You can imagine what it will do to Harry's reputation if you insist on dragging this trial into the light."

Pansy blinked. "I—that's quite a coincidence, Draco. You didn't know that Potter had dated a Veela before when you chose him?"

Draco shook his head. "Harry did his best to put the memories behind him. He was quiet, and bitter, because here was yet *another* person who he thought was in love with him and only turned out to be after what Harry could do for him. In fact, he hasn't dated in the almost three years

since then, he was so bitter about it." He leaned forwards and let Pansy see the rising gleam in his eyes, the way his nails were starting to flex and curve into claws. "I'll do anything to make him happy, Pansy, and if that means the brute has to stay in prison, then I'll strive to keep him there."

Pansy drew a deep breath. Then she said, "You know that we've always been alike in some ways, Draco. That was one of the reasons you gave for choosing me, when we thought we were compatible."

Draco nodded, never taking his eyes away from her face.

"One of my friends, the ones who want to find du Michel because they have almost no family left, is named Russell du Michel." Pansy's face turned a delicate pink. "I—we're almost certainly going to be married soon. And I would do anything to see the ones I love happy, just like you would." She met Draco's gaze again. "Anything."

Draco hissed silently. Yes, he had been afraid that Pansy's persistence resisted on something like this, either friendship or love. There was no reason for her to go so far if all she felt was mere curiosity.

"I didn't want to do this, Pansy," he said.

Pansy didn't bat an eyelash. "You needn't threaten to use your allure on me," she said. "I have wards in the house that will react to its presence and preserve my memory, no matter what you do."

Draco felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. Even Harry, as distrustful as he was of Veela, hadn't done *that*.

"I'm explaining a certain truth to you," he said, when he could recover his breath. "We'd both do anything for the people we love, but I'll do more than you. A Veela can and *will* go further, and there are no words for how I love Harry, already." He released more of his control over his Veela features, letting the skin of his face become porcelain-like and his mouth extend a bit in the shape of a beak. Pansy gasped sharply. Draco nodded, making sure he never blinked. "And a Veela has greater legal resources for defending his chosen, as well. I would advise your lover to be content with knowing what happened to his cousin. Insisting that he be free of Azkaban is too far, and would impinge on Harry's comfort, health, and happiness. *I won't allow it.*"

Pansy was sitting so upright now that Draco thought she must be straining her back. Her hands were white-knuckled in her lap. Her voice was low and insistent. "I won't let a Veela scare me away from doing what's best for Russell, either."

Draco gave her a small, smooth bow from the waist, and rose to his feet. "I had hoped that you would let old friendship prevail over the new," he said. "I see you won't. If not, then I can only hope that I won't have to hurt you too badly."

"I could say the same of *you*," Pansy retorted, and stood up. Despite her wide eyes and the way Draco, with his enhanced senses, could hear her breathing speeding up, she faced him. "You're choosing Potter over me? You're choosing—"

"My new chosen over my old chosen," Draco said when she hesitated on her own. "Yes. You're human, and you can make the decision without the pressure of old magic and instincts on you. I'm Veela, and I can't."

"There's no reason that Russell can't know what happened to his cousin." Pansy's voice lowered.

"And now he does," Draco said. "Why does he want more than that? Does he think that a Veela cousin who would use his allure to affect people—who made a bid for power in the Ministry, and failed badly enough to make the Wizengamot try him—is going to embrace him and make his life have all it's been lacking so far?"

Pansy hesitated again. Then she said, "He wants to look his cousin in the face, trace the resemblance between them, and talk to him about what his life's been like. That's not too much to ask, surely. You could have visited your parents if they had been taken to Azkaban."

"This situation is different," Draco said. "Because the Wizengamot says it is. And there are people invested in making sure that it remains secret. You're going to run into more opposition if you try to open this up, Pansy. The difference is that the rest of them will probably try to bribe you or bargain with you. Not destroy you. I will."

Pansy shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. "You don't understand," she whispered. "This is the *only* thing Russell wants. The rest of his relatives are dead. He *has* to see Laurent. There's no way that he'll be content without that."

Draco began to move his wand in careful circles, but down at his side, so that Pansy, focused on his face, couldn't see what he was doing. "And what if he finds out that Laurent is even worse than he thought? A pitiful, bedraggled Azkaban inmate, with wings that he can't even spread in the cell? Veela are more likely than other prisoners to go mad when they aren't exposed to sunlight, Pansy, and he won't have been."

"Even then," Pansy said. "It's family. *His* family. You know that you wouldn't be put off, no matter what had happened to your parents, from trying to find them."

"I'll ask you one more time," Draco said gently, as the responses to his charms flowed back to him and filled his head with knowledge. "Why can't he rest content with the knowledge that Laurent isn't ever getting out again? It would only pain both of them to be exposed to this. Is your Russell actually going to be mad enough to try to free someone who would use his allure without hesitation on innocent people? Someone who would date *Harry Potter* because he wanted fame and nothing more than that?"

Pansy shook her head. "He won't be able to answer that until he sees him. If he doesn't think his crime is all that great—and it sounds like the sort of thing other people would be reprimanded, not arrested, for—then he might try to get him retried, yes."

The charms he'd cast had checked for the presence of wards that would record and inhibit Veela allure the way Pansy claimed they would, and had told him the truth. There were none. Pansy was lying.

He could use his allure, no more than a gentle touch of it, on her mind, and make her forget about Russell, but remain open to the suggestions and commands of another Veela. He could make her devoted to him for the span of time that would be necessary to ease her past this dangerous moment. He could make her forget what she had learned today, or believe that Laurent's crime was far worse, without revealing the details, so that she would be fanatically opposed to any attempts to free him.

He *could*.

And Harry wasn't here to forbid him.

Draco vibrated, his wings twitching beneath his skin. He wanted to spread them and reach out with the allure. Not much, no more than he had used on Ramsay in the Ministry, would be enough to begin. And if he would really do anything to keep his chosen safe, that had to include using the allure.

Except that perhaps his chosen's mental health was more important than the physical. Ultimately, Draco was confident about his ability to keep Harry safe even if Laurent was freed. He didn't know that he could keep Harry safe from his own broken trust, if he found out that Draco had used the allure on someone who hadn't consented.

The cliff edge trembled beneath his feet. Draco stepped away from the edge of temptation and nodded coldly to Pansy.

"You may get the interview," he said. "You may get du Michel freed. But you'll have to deal with me, and Harry, and the Malfoys." He smiled at Pansy, but it made her turn white. "My parents like him. Very much. They have reason to. They'll do whatever they need to defend him."

"Why do you want him to stay caged so much?" Pansy demanded.

"Why do you want your lover to see him so much?" Draco asked. "The demands are perfectly and equally irrational."

Pansy turned her back with a little huff. "I'm *going* to do this," she said. "Nothing you do can stop me."

"I have better weapons than you do," Draco warned her, and then left, shuddering as he stepped

out of her house. He didn't want to destroy Pansy as much as he wanted to destroy Oblansky, but he could come close.

Right now, though, he really wanted to be back with his chosen.

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Chapter: 27

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Seven—Warded

Harry opened the door of Ron and Hermione's house at the knock and found himself enfolded in Draco's arms. He saw the wings out of the corner of his eye, but Draco kept them upright and trembling, rather than bringing them around in a full sweep, and for that, Harry was grateful.

"Stupid of you not to cast a charm that would tell you who it was first," Draco murmured. His voice was so drowsy, though, as full of contentment as a cat with a full stomach, that Harry did nothing more than roll his eyes.

"My spells could only have told me that it was a Veela, and that might be a temptation to keep the door closed," he retorted, bringing Draco further into the house. Automatically he looked over Draco's shoulder to be sure that no press were lurking about the door, although Ron and Hermione's house, like his, had wards that would active in the presence of a camera. "How did it go?"

"It could have gone better," Draco admitted in a mutter, burying his face in Harry's shoulder. "I wanted to convince Pansy to stop the investigation, but instead she told me that she's in love with one of the idiots who's looking for Laurent, Russell du Michel. That means she won't give up. She's just as determined to protect someone she loves from harm as I am."

Harry shut his eyes and stood there, absorbing the news and trying not to feel as though he should throw up. "And Oblansky?"

"That was better." Draco opened his eyes and stepped back, bringing his hands up to frame Harry's face. He wore an expression of anxiety that was probably, Harry thought, perfectly mirrored on Harry. They both wanted to be the protectors. "He was impressed with my display of my Veela heritage in public, it seems, even before I started dating you. That means he was willing to listen to me about keeping quiet and keeping the information away from Pansy, who after all, in his eyes, is merely human."

Harry nodded. He could feel relief. He *could*.

But what he was most tired of feeling at the moment was useless. He grasped Draco's hand. "We'll need help if Pansy continues her investigation. We can't watch all the people in the Ministry or all the people she might approach."

Draco frowned. "I thought of that, too. But who can we go to? Owen and Lucy live too retired from the world to have that many contacts in the Ministry. Your friends are busy. And the people I bribed can't be trusted with a much more complex lie, or they might very well try to interfere."

Harry licked his lips, wondering if his notion was right or good after all. If Draco hadn't come up with it on his own…

But he would like to banish that expression of pain and worry on Draco's face. He stroked Draco's cheek with two fingers and said, "I was thinking your parents. I—thought we'd tell them the truth, though of course not many details. They could help watch Pansy for us, and that way—"

Draco kissed him, in a rush that caught Harry off-guard and pinned him to the wall across from the door. After his first startled reaction, in which he almost lashed out with his magic, he managed to relax and tilt his head back, accepting the determined probe of Draco's tongue, the movement of his lips, the way his hands rasped down Harry's body to his hips. Harry answered, in fact, with a careful licking of Draco's mouth and a squeeze of his arse.

Draco pulled back at last, but still kept his hands and his eyes on Harry as if he couldn't let him go. His face shone like the heart of the sun. "Harry? You're sure? You're able to bear this?" His hands still roamed, restlessly stroking through Harry's hair and across his chest, lingering on a nipple. Harry smiled, struck, for the first time, by the fact that he could make Draco so *happy*.

"I am," he said. "I thought about it, and it's the best thing to do. And I trust your parents if you vouch for them, because I trust you."

Draco lowered his head and carefully sniffed around Harry's shoulders and neck, his nose finally coming to rest against Harry's throat. Harry turned his head to look down at him, but Draco seized his nape and held him in place until he had apparently absorbed all the scent he needed to and Harry's skin was damp with more than his breath.

"What was that for?" Harry asked, and then scowled. It wasn't a welcome discovery that arousal made his voice so breathy.

"I want to know what you smell like when you trust me," Draco said, and blinked his eyes as if awakening from a dream.

Harry swallowed, both to keep from saying something embarrassing and to try and deal with the sense of pure power that he felt right then.

I can affect him like this. If I want to.

I want to.

Draco hovered protectively, possessively, at Harry's side as he escorted him through the front doors of the Manor. He could feel the wards falling into relaxation ahead of them, only to snap back into place behind, but that didn't reassure him. He had to guard Harry from dangers inside the Manor as well as out of it, and he knew how little warded walls and sturdy doors would do against those dangers.

"Draco." Harry's voice was gentle, but with that undertone of ash and steel that said he was pressing against the boundaries of what Harry would allow. "Step back, please."

Draco managed to retreat a few paces, but he could do nothing about his gaze nailed to Harry's back or the way he reached out automatically to keep Harry from bumping into a sharp corner near the next doorway. Harry glanced back over his shoulder, his mouth tight in exasperation, but his eyes soft.

"I understand," he murmured. "But I really don't think that there's any monster that's going to pounce on me between here and the room where your parents are waiting."

Draco opened his mouth to say that he knew that, and then realized he was about to say that Harry couldn't know that for sure, not when someone might rediscover the lost ability of traveling between parallel worlds at any instant and open a portal right into the Manor, where they would unleash beasts that Draco didn't know how to defend against.

He shut his mouth and rubbed his hands on his trousers. He knew that particular itchy feeling that spread over his skin and made a taste like iron in the back of his mouth. He knew that particular irrationality that insisted the chosen had to be protected against *everything*, including highly unlikely configurations of chance and fate.

It was a signal of the approach of the Blazing Season.

Shivering, he followed Harry on, testing how many times and for how long he was able to look away before his eyes were pulled back to Harry. Both numbers were lower than he would have liked.

Narcissa rose to her feet when they entered the room—wisely, Draco thought, not the room where they had confronted Harry before, though he didn't think even his parents, who didn't know everything about the situation, would be that tone-deaf. This one was decorated with rich shades of silver and green by someone who had probably never got over Slytherin and Hogwarts, and had doors, open doors, leading out into the garden. Draco appreciated that his parents had chosen to offer Harry an escape route if it got overwhelming.

Lucius continued to sit down, his hands clasped over the head of his cane, and stared at Harry searchingly. Draco could practically feel the whizz and dance of his thoughts. He would have no idea why Harry had agreed to return and ask them for help when he had rejected them so violently before. That was what reassured Draco that his parents really could have no idea of what had gone on between Harry and Laurent.

"Be welcome, Draco," and Draco thought he was probably the only one in the room who noticed his mother's hesitation before the next name, "Mr. Potter."

Harry gave her a strained smile. "Please, call me Harry. I'm going to be as close to your son-in-law as I can without marriage, after all."

Draco couldn't help it; he stretched his wings, which he had never fully retracted since meeting Harry at the door of the Weasleys', and arched his neck to the side, showing off like a swan. *He's mine. He said it.*

His mother's gaze grew more speculative, and she shook Harry's hand and embraced Draco before she sat down. "Draco said that you had some momentous news to tell us," she said, wisely keeping her gaze on Harry and letting him take the lead. Draco stood behind Harry's chair and rested his hands on his shoulders to give his chosen moral support.

Harry flashed Draco a single terrified glance before he turned around and nodded. "Yes. Someone has been digging into the same mystery you did, the mystery of what happened to my former Veela boyfriend." He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself, which made Draco ache, because those arms should be his wings. He managed to restrain himself, barely. "The reason I didn't want you to know before, and the reason I want your help now, is that Laurent du Michel raped me."

Draco's parents were quite still, and if someone unfamiliar with them had looked only at their faces, Draco thought, that was all they would have seen. Lucius and Narcissa had trained for long years to keep control of their expressions, because those were the clues to changing mood that enemies would look for first.

But Draco knew to look at their hands, and Lucius's tightened hard enough on the cane to earn a warning creak from the wood. His mother's vanished into the robes piled against her waist. Draco couldn't see her fingers digging into her palm, but then again, he didn't need to.

Harry paused, as if giving them the chance to say something, and then floundered on when they didn't. "He used his Veela allure on me to ensure that I would cooperate, except I was immune to it, and so he went deeper and made me Veela-struck. I spent—three days under his domination, and then managed to break free and arrest him. He went to the Wizengamot for his trial, but it was secret. And now he's in Azkaban under an assumed name." He laughed, but it was a bright, false sound, and Draco wished he hadn't felt he had to make it. "You can see why I was a bit reluctant to talk about it at first."

Draco's parents exchanged glances, and in them a firestorm of emotions passed back and forth. Draco could read them, but Harry didn't seem able to. He shuffled his feet and stared at his hands, and Draco could practically read his thoughts. They didn't react, they didn't care, or they didn't think this was a secret worth keeping.

"I'm sorry to have disturbed you," Harry said stiffly, and started to rise from the chair.

Draco pressed to keep him down, and whispered into his ear when Harry struggled against him, "They're reacting to it. Or they will in just a moment. Sit still, keep your head, and you'll see what I mean."

Harry licked his lips, but stayed seated, and Draco was reminded again that this man trusted him, as his own confession earlier had said. Draco wanted to screech his triumph from the rooftops when he remembered that moment. For now, though, it could stay private, and he waited for his parents to make their verbal response.

"This is—unacceptable news, Mr. Potter," said Lucius at last. His hands had relaxed from around the cane, but he was staring at the wall, and Draco knew exactly what visions of havoc were playing behind his eyes, because he had experienced them himself when he first heard about what Harry had suffered. "Unacceptable indeed."

Harry surged to his feet this time, despite all the calming touch Draco could exert. "I'm sorry if you think being raped means that I'm stained forever and not good enough for your precious son," he began in some heat.

Draco crooned to him, only realizing a moment later that Harry's anger was probably a healthy thing, since he wasn't apologizing for being raped. Harry turned and glared at him. "Don't do that, please," he said through gritted teeth.

Draco shrugged his apology, and then, to his relief, his father began to speak again, his eyes sharply focused on Harry this time. Hopefully, they could correct the misconception.

"I meant no such thing," Lucius said, with enough quiet force that he attracted Harry's attention. "I meant that it was unacceptable that such a thing had happened, and that there was no more severe punishment that could be inflicted. I assume that you had the chance to kill him and rejected that option."

Harry blinked and nodded. His body had relaxed again. Draco nuzzled into his neck and saw a small smile flit across his mother's face, despite the circumstances. He answered her with a smile of his own. Yes, he had made his choice, and he hoped that his parents understood all the senses now in which it was both a wise and a difficult one.

"Yes," Harry said. "I was angry enough to kill him when I first broke free of the thrall, but I forced that rage down and remembered that I was an Auror. So I arrested him instead, and took

him to the Ministry. His trial was immediate." He glared at Lucius again, his head tilting in the way that told Draco he still felt a bit of defiance no matter how much support he was getting in the room right now. "That's the reason why he didn't come out of the Ministry again, and you couldn't find where he had gone."

"My dear," Narcissa said. "I think your response was entirely appropriate given the kind of person you are, though of course all of us wish that the solution could be more permanent." She rose from her chair and came nearer. Draco tightened his hand again, because Harry had flinched as if he was going to bolt. "May I embrace you?"

Harry gaped at her, and then nodded. Narcissa sighed and reached out, carefully folding her arms around Harry, as if she understood all about his issues with touch. Draco was the only one who could see her face over Harry's shoulder, the only one who could see the cold rage shining in her eyes, though he was sure that his father had anticipated and approved it.

Narcissa's hands moved gently over Harry's back before she stepped away from him. "Will you allow me to pay tribute to the strength that *could* make such an arrest, rather than striking out and committing murder?" she asked. Her hands framed Harry's face, and Draco looked away to control his jealousy. "Of course that is the sort of man we would like for a son-in-law."

Harry nodded. His eyes were glassy and overwhelmed. Draco struggled against the impulse to simply spirit him away and hide him in a quiet room until he felt better. That wouldn't actually do any good in the long run. Besides, he had been so proud when Harry suggested that they come here, and that it was *Harry's* suggestion.

"I would wish to, as well," Lucius said, and came up beside Harry, taking Harry's hand in his while staring into his eyes. Harry made a little pulling motion that Draco thought was involuntary, but Lucius ignored it and kept hold of his wrist—probably the best thing for now, Draco decided. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. I do not know anyone else with the strength of will to resist a Veela attack such as this. Nor do I know anyone who could bear to give a second Veela a chance to claim him the way Draco will surely wish to claim you." There was a warning in his voice.

Harry seemed to hear and understand it. He nodded and stood taller. "The Blazing Season is going to be hard," he said. "But I'm committed to going through with this. And we need your help, since Pansy Parkinson is investigating the case because she's in love with a relative of Laurent's who wants to find him."

"He can do nothing about that," Lucius said at once, quickly and angrily. He stepped away, followed by Narcissa. Draco leaned back in and wrapped his arms around Harry in his mother's place. Harry gave him a faint, amused smile, which Draco understood but didn't appreciate. Why shouldn't he touch his chosen if he wanted to? "There is no law that can bring your rapist into the light again. Why do you fear that it might happen?"

They *accepted* him.

That was what was strangest to Harry. They wanted to touch him. They acted angry on his behalf, and not simply embarrassed or glancing away or trying to decide how *they* would live with the knowledge. It was the most amazing thing.

Even in the Wizengamot courtroom, with Harry's testimony on full display before them, there had been people like that, who acted as if being raped was a catching disease. They fidgeted and stared at their fingers. They said they were sorry, but gave him the kind of sidelong glances that said they were trying to figure out how this had happened and why it wouldn't happen to *them*. There had even been a few open, hostile murmurs about how of course Harry Potter should have expected something like this, celebrity as he was, bed-hopper as he was, it was bound to happen and why should it be tried in a secret trial? Everyone understood the way Veela were. Though of course rape was still a crime. It wasn't that they were saying it wasn't, but the circumstances *affected* it, of course they did.

Harry had seen every finely-graded variation of that sort of behavior. It was the reaction he had expected from Draco at first, too, and how he had counted on driving him away when he first revealed his secret. What Veela would stand for damaged goods, after all?

He tried to push away the impulse to gape at them, or to retreat so that he could deal with this revelation in some kind of privacy. Lucius had asked him a question, and he had to answer it. Cautiously, Harry decided that it was probably all right to address him as Lucius instead of Mr. Malfoy.

"Because there are people who won't believe my version," Harry said. "It was a secret trial, and one of the witnesses there, Curtis Oblansky, argued that it was impossible for Laurent to have raped me. And because, whether or not they can free Laurent, they can set the rumors free. I don't know that I can deal with the speculation that's going to come out of this, about whether I liked it or why the trial was secret or—"

"We can't bribe everyone," Draco said, pressing down with his hand in a way that showed how upset he was. Harry reached back to stroke his arm. He reckoned that he wasn't the only one in this partnership who could read his partner's emotions fairly well. "We can't entirely stop the rumor. And now Pansy is more stubborn and intrigued than ever, because someone she loves is involved and because I told her that Harry was my chosen. I don't know what to *do*."

"That seems fairly obvious to me," Narcissa said. "You allow us to protect and defend you. You allow us to help you. That *is* why you came to us in the first place, isn't it?" She leaned forwards, as if Harry's response was important in a way he couldn't fathom.

"Yes," Harry said, looking at her warily. He wondered whether she would be insulted that they had only told her the truth when they needed help.

On the contrary, Narcissa gave a faint shadow of a smile. "And I assume that you will allow us to

protect you in the way *we* see fit? No matter how much they might be tactics that you wouldn't condone as part of an Auror investigation?"

"No killing," Harry said. Would he have to explain his case for why he hadn't killed Laurent all over again? He didn't think he could stand that right now. Draco nuzzled closer to him, as if sensing his tension and wanting to dissipate it.

"Of course not," Narcissa said, eyebrows rising as if she wondered what *was* going through Harry's brain. Harry flushed, but felt better, a little. "But the immediate plan I can think of is going to cause hurt to this lover of Pansy's. Does this matter to you? Will you interfere? I think that the less involvement you have with this, the easier it will be for you."

Harry shook his head. "I won't interfere, but I have to have some part in it. Sitting back and waiting for other people to rescue me isn't something I can do."

"How frustrating that must be for Draco," Narcissa said, with a grave look that made Harry blink, not knowing how far she was teasing. "You can help us with it, as long as you do not care if one member of Laurent's family, or more for that matter, are bewildered."

"I—yes, I can bear that," Harry said. He was still half-braced, he realized, for a bad reaction or an overreaction. He tried to make himself stand a little calmer and looser in Draco's arms, but that just caused his adrenaline level to rise. It was too much like forcing himself calm under combat conditions. "What are you going to do?"

"I want you to speak to Pansy again," Narcissa said, looking at Draco. She reached out a hand, and her husband was there to take it. Harry waited, realizing that delaying the revelation for the sake of drama was apparently something she liked to do, and mostly harmless. "Find out how much du Michel's family knows about their various branches, and how much access to information about it they have."

Draco, Harry was pleased to see, looked just as puzzled as he did. "I had the impression that they didn't know very much," he said slowly. "For that matter, I don't know why Pansy didn't offer them what she had in the Parkinson records. Why come begging to us?"

"Because Pansy knows that we have unmatched genealogical records," Narcissa said. "Including information from centuries ago, on families that are extinct. I plan to change these records slightly." She smiled, and the smile burned in a way that made Harry feel abruptly sorry for Russell du Michel. "Enough to suggest entire *branches* out there that Pansy's lover doesn't know about. If he wants family members to chase, then we will give him ones who do not exist."

"And while he charges about grasping at clouds and air," Lucius murmured, expression alight, "we will have time to act in other ways. Such as by making sure that rumors of Laurent's real crime reach the right ears."

Harry whipped his wand out, an entirely instinctive motion. Lucius looked at him with no hint of

fear, and that as much as anything else made Harry pause long enough for Lucius to say soothingly, "The right ears, in this case, are people who will not tell all the world, because that would make the information lose its secrecy and exclusiveness. And of course we will not tell them who he raped. But I would imagine that calls for Laurent's retrial are less likely to fall on sympathetic ears with rumors circulating."

Harry hesitated. He could see why it made sense, but he kept thinking—"You can't control a rumor once you release it," he muttered.

"No," Narcissa said. "But just as I intend to fill du Michel's world with imaginary relatives, we will fill the air of the Ministry with rumors of imaginary crimes. Multiple crimes. Only no one will be able to say just *who* Laurent hurt. Undoubtedly your name will arise in some minds, in some mouths. We cannot control that, especially if anyone else who was at the trial decides to speak. But with so many names about, who can say which is the true one? Anyone speaking the truth will only release one more stream of polluted water into a swamp." She smiled. Harry had thought that the scar on her face made her smiles more frightening, but in reality, he thought with a little shiver, they added nothing.

"And under the cover of rumor," Lucius added softly, "we plan our next move."

Harry blinked. "You mean that wasn't it?"

Draco kissed the back of his neck. "Of course not," he said. "The Malfoys protect their own, Harry. All their lives."

Lucius and Narcissa nodded at the same time.

Harry shut his eyes. He had thought he would feel ashamed with more people knowing about his secret. Ron and Hermione were the only ones who could make him feel otherwise, and lately Draco.

Instead, he felt as if he had stepped, at last, into a second house of friends.

And as if it wouldn't be a mistake to trust them.

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Chapter: 28

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Eight—Rumored

"What have you *done*?"

Draco opened one blurry eye. He'd gone back to his house last night, although he much rather would have spent it at Harry's. Harry had confessed that he needed some time alone after everything that had happened that day—the revelation about Pansy, the decision to seek Draco's parents' help, the long waiting period—and Draco could have used it, too, after his confrontations. So he had come back home and fallen asleep in front of the fire without a care for his crumpled clothes.

Now a voice was demanding his attention from the flames. But there was no need for him to spring up immediately, because listening had already told him that it wasn't Harry's voice. Draco took his time about yawning, sitting up, and stretching, then reaching back to smooth his mussed hair flat.

"Draco, answer me!"

His slow awakening had another advantage: it allowed his brain to catch up with his ears. Draco smiled lazily at Pansy's outraged face, hovering in the flames in front of him, and crossed his legs. "I don't know what you mean," he drawled.

"There are rumors flying everywhere." Pansy was scowling in the way that had always made her face look pinched and unattractive. "Rumors about Laurent and about other relatives in the du Michel line. The records you gave me said that Laurent was the only one still surviving!"

Draco showed her his teeth and said nothing.

"You can't—you can't have given me the wrong records," Pansy said, but now there was a thread of uncertainty in her voice. "That doesn't make sense. The ones you gave me had all the people in all the correct places and everything."

"Ah," Draco said, leaning back and staring at the ceiling. It had pleasant patterns in the mingled firelight and light of early morning, he noticed absently. He'd never seen that before. Of course, he usually wasn't up at this hour. "I'm sure that you know our genealogical records are the most complete of any of the pure-blood families'."

Pansy was silent—suspicious, Draco knew, though he didn't look down to see the expression on her face.

"We've always kept records of families that have gone extinct, or lost their honor, or married Muggles and lost their magic." Draco looked down and smiled at her. "It's all part of a long project to prove that Muggleborns really come from the inheritance of magic along Muggle lines from pure-blood ancestors. Now, of course, that won't make them part of our world or our culture; it won't entitle them to the honors their ancestors possessed. But it could undercut this rhetoric that magic is something that simply *happens* and isn't inherited from anybody. That in

turn would undercut some of the Muggleborns' political ambitions—"

"*Draco*."

Draco turned his hand up and wriggled his fingers in dismay. "But, Pansy, I was explaining why we have lots of records stored that show du Michel relatives in other branches. I wouldn't want you to think we were lying about it, after all."

"Are you lying?" Pansy leaned nearer, though from Draco's perspective her head seemed to bob in the flames as though someone had wrenched it by the hair. "That's the reason I firecalled in the first place."

Draco dropped the smile. "Continue threatening my chosen and you'll never know."

"I told you we were alike," Pansy said, suddenly deciding that her voice would be more impressive if it was soft. "I told you that we would defend our loved ones. And I've decided to defend Russell. You can't drive us apart with rumors and lies."

Draco said nothing. He had already expressed everything he had to say on that subject. In reality, he thought Pansy rather stupid for calling again and acting as though there was something still to be said between them.

"Russell's not a Veela," Pansy said after a moment's silence. "He hasn't enchanted me. He hasn't used any allure on me. I'm simply in love with him. I wonder if Potter can say the same thing about you?"

Draco bathed for a moment in rage so hot that it felt as if he were standing in the middle of a volcano. The urge to attack and hurt anyone who suggested such a thing, who impugned his relationship with his chosen, was incredible.

But because he was human as well as Veela, and because Pansy probably hoped to provoke an attack like that to wrest information from him or at least make the legal waters muddier, Draco forced himself to stop and think, to analyze her words. And then he smiled, because Pansy had been telling the truth with the phrases she used so far, a truth that could damage her.

"You say that you're in love with him," he said, and his words were a low and soft tone he didn't think Harry could have faulted, though Harry would probably have understood the danger better than Pansy. "That he doesn't share Laurent's Veela blood, and hasn't compelled or corrupted you."

Pansy sniffed and tilted her head so far back that Draco was looking up her nostrils. "That's right."

"But is he in love with you?" Draco asked quietly.

Pansy's head snapped down again.

"I know that you're scrupulous with your words," Draco said. *That you're sometimes self-betraying, as I noticed when you began telling me that you wanted out of our relationship long before you actually said it.* But there was no reason for him to mention that at the moment. "I know that you wouldn't have hesitated to brag about his devotion to you if he had it. Instead, you've only talked about your devotion to him. Does he love you? Or is he only using you because you have access to the information that he wants? Isn't he more in love with the ideal of his family, the idea of meeting Laurent again, than he is with you?"

Pansy was breathing hard, and her eyes were hot with hatred. Draco tilted his head and gave her a winsome smile, and as he had thought it would, that spilled her over the edge and gave her something to prove to him.

"How *dare* you—you say things like that when every love that you pick and choose is false because of your allure and your needs!" Pansy curled her fingers into claws and acted as though she would rake them across the hearth. Draco kept himself tightly under control, though he would have liked to reach through the flames and scoop her eyes out. "You can never know whether something's real. Potter can't know, either. Should I tell him?"

Human weapons would defend his chosen better at the moment than Veela weapons, which was the only reason Draco didn't grow claws. He shrugged, keeping his muscles loose and relaxed. "You can if you like, but I think you'll find that he's already considered that and decided against it. You have no idea how self-doubting he is."

Pansy practically shrieked the next words. "You have no *right!*"

Draco stared at her and let his silence say all the things that she should already know. He had sworn that he would do anything to defend his chosen. He was simply doing it.

Pansy snarled and shut down the Floo. Draco rose to his feet and cast a *Tempus* Charm, then set another charm that would ring when an hour had passed. He could give Harry that much time alone before he invaded.

But he did need to touch his chosen, hear him, smell him. The metallic taste coating the back of his throat now and his immediate violent reaction to even the *thought* of Harry with someone else confirmed that his reactions last night hadn't been chance. The Blazing Season was coming.

Draco grimaced. *Another wonderful thing that I somehow need to open in conversation with him.*

"Good morning, dear."

Harry blinked. He had expected to find Draco in his fireplace that morning, not Narcissa.

She smiled at him, the scar brilliant across her face. "I hope that you don't mind me calling you. I wanted to tell you that both sets of rumors, the one about the du Michels and the one about the victims of Laurent's crimes, are in motion. You're not completely protected yet, but we're drawing the cloak about you."

"I—thank you," Harry said, because that was all he *could* say to such an extraordinary pronouncement at eight-o'clock in the morning. He rubbed his eyes and sat down in the chair in front of the fireplace, wondering if this would be a long conversation. He did have a question he wanted to ask that might prolong it. "Mrs. Malfoy—"

"You gave me permission to use your first name," Narcissa said serenely, gathering what were probably the folds of a cloak around her, though Harry found them difficult to see from this perspective. "Why should I give you less?"

"Um, yes," Harry said, though what he really wanted to say was *But you've given me so much already.* "But—are you sure that you want to do this? Couldn't it be dangerous for you? I know that you don't have the protections that you used to." That was as close as he could come to saying that he knew they had lost prestige and power in the war.

Narcissa raised an eyebrow. "Unless you know an immediate source of danger, I wonder that you ask the question. Did you not approach *us* in the first place because you needed help?"

"Yes," Harry said. "But I didn't think, then, about what it might mean for you to help me. I only thought of it later." It was one of the reasons he'd slept badly last night. "I mean, you don't have Draco's obligations to help me."

Narcissa studied him in silence for some time. Harry found himself unexpectedly comfortable with that. At least he knew she was taking his objections seriously, which wasn't something many people appeared to do.

"Lucius and I do think of it in terms of obligation," Narcissa said at last, "though ones that you may be unfamiliar with. We are bound to you by Draco's choice. And I do believe that, this time, it is his final one," she added, as though she could feel Harry's objection that Draco had chosen once before and been wrong coming. "We wish to see Draco happy, and that means that we wish to see you happy."

"You're right," Harry said. "It wouldn't have occurred to me that you'd see it like that. I mean, he could have chosen someone you disapproved of."

Narcissa sniffed. "He would never choose someone *entirely* unsuitable. He is our son, after all."

Harry found himself smiling. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed someone who could joke with him. He and Draco might make each other laugh more in the future, but for right now, their relationship was simply too fraught for that.

"And we can overcome all lesser objections," Narcissa said. "Besides, your power, your intelligence, your efforts to help our family, all create their own sort of obligation." A small, sly smile tugged at the side of her mouth. "As does your beauty, though it is not the kind of thing I can say in front of Draco for some months yet."

Harry felt his face flame. He tried to clear his throat. "I don't understand that, either. But I have—I mean, I hope I have months and years to understand it."

Narcissa's smile was full-fledged this time. "You do indeed. I wished to tell you that you may receive startling news later today. I ask that you not react to it, other than to calmly nod and accept it. If you rejected it out of hand, or showed too much surprise, it would dishonor us."

"Uh—all right," Harry said, wondering why she didn't simply tell him what the news was beforehand. But maybe, like delaying the revelation of her plans, this was simply a little quirk that he needed to put up with.

Narcissa smiled once more and then vanished into the flames. Harry shook his head and went to make himself breakfast.

Draco knocked twice on Harry's door, and then again. His hand was moving quicker than he liked, and so was his mind. He could imagine Harry wrapped around someone else all too easily. Not that Harry would really want to cheat on him, Harry wasn't that kind of person, but other people would want Harry, of course. How could they help it?

The relief when Harry opened the door, alone, and Draco could clearly see and smell no else in the house, was like a cool bath. Draco reached for his hand and kissed it twice on the back before he stepped in.

"Are you all right?" Harry's gaze was bright and curious.

Draco hated to dim it by speaking the truth, but hiding that truth would be even worse. He swallowed and said, "I'm sorry. I'm feeling these intense jealousies, rages that make no sense, and the need to touch you even when I'm certain that you don't want me to do so."

Harry stiffened at once, smile vanishing, though Draco could see that he'd fought the impulse to move away. "The Blazing Season," he muttered.

Draco nodded, trying not to lick his lips as he watched Harry's face. Harry might take that as threatening at the moment, and besides, if Draco gave in and went with the impulse, he'd probably also go with the impulse to lick the whole of Harry's face, and then his body, and then his cock.

Harry turned his back and paced a few steps, back and forth. Despite that, he remained as close to Draco as before. Draco felt his shoulders relax. Either Harry was thinking carefully about

what he could do to help Draco or he was doing it instinctively, and either was a good sign.

"I've read the books, of course," Harry murmured. "And I remember some of what Laurent told me."

"Don't judge anything that I do by him," Draco said, snapping the words with a viciousness that he didn't consider at all until they were spoken.

Harry only gave him a long, slow look, and then a brilliant smile, though Draco didn't know the reason behind it. "I won't," he said. "But I have to know what you need from me during the Blazing Season. I've tried to guess and tried to think about it rationally and tried to disentangle the knowledge I already have from my memories—" his voice shook for a moment "—but it isn't working. I need you to tell me. I thought at first that I could lock myself in my bedroom for three weeks, but that isn't going to work, is it?"

Draco became aware he was hissing like a teakettle, and probably had been from the moment Harry spoke of locking himself away. He stopped the sound with an effort. "No," he said. "I think—I could get through it, Harry, but I'd end up—" He tried to think of a word, and made a weary gesture instead.

"I know," Harry said. "So we have to think of something different." He clenched his hands, and with his every sense focused on him, Draco heard him softly counting to three under his breath. Then he appeared to hurl himself into what he had to say next, though it made his cheeks burn even more. "I—look, the two hardest things for me to bear are going to be the jealousy and you topping me. Let's discuss the jealousy first. What can help reduce the displays of it?"

"Being close to me," Draco said, and it felt as if the anxiety in his chest had turned to honey. His chosen was trying. "Not touching anyone else for too long. I'm sorry, but even hugs are going to strain me."

Harry nodded. "Would you kill someone if they hugged me?"

"Not if you keep your hands at your sides and don't encourage them," Draco said, and then realized, from Harry's sharp stare, that that wasn't the best answer to the question. "Probably not kill," he admitted. "But I'd hurt them badly."

Harry frowned and rapped his fingers against his elbow. Draco wanted to stop him and take the fingers one by one into his mouth. "All right," he said finally. "We'll see what we can do. And the—how essential is it that you be in control during sex?" He was trying to speak like Granger, Draco thought, distant from the subject, but his eyes turned away and his nails dug hard enough into his palms that Draco could smell blood.

Carefully, Draco stepped forwards and uncurled Harry's fingers. Harry watched him, blinking now and then. Draco lifted Harry's left palm to his face and began to lick at the shallow, bleeding scratches.

Harry seemed frozen, watching the motions of Draco's tongue with gratifying attention, shivering and sweating before the end. While Draco attended to Harry's right palm, Harry shut his eyes and froze between pleasure and anxiety.

Draco nuzzled his face into Harry's neck and returned his mind to the question. "I can tolerate some giving up of control," he said. "If something else compensates for it. If I can direct your movements, for example. Or if I can ride you, which would gratify the Veela instincts by having you beneath me."

Harry made a sudden gagging noise and ripped away from Draco. Then he covered his face with his hands and struggled for breath. Draco watched, longing to go to him, but not sure it was the best thing right now.

"Well, who knew," Harry said at last, voice thick with sarcasm that almost concealed his humiliation. "Apparently being held down beneath someone bothers me more than having something up my arse."

Draco smiled, caught so strongly between conflicting emotions at the moment—distress at his chosen's distress, which he could feel through the influence; an anxiety to promise whatever was needed so that Harry would stay with him; desire and anger that he himself might be hurt during the Blazing Season—that he couldn't move.

Harry made a few gulping noises, and then turned to face Draco. His face was pale, but composed. "We'll fight this," he said. "We'll find a way, just like we found a way to get out of this nasty situation with Pansy and Oblansky because your parents helped us."

"That was *your* suggestion," Draco said, moving a little closer again. He reached out, and Harry nodded, so Draco stroked his shoulder. "But I have to admit, I can't see a way out of the situation right now. Can you?"

"The only thing I can think of is to get me used to it a bit at a time," Harry said, staring at the wall as if he was imagining horrors. "To practice, the way I practiced with seeing a Veela's wings until I could do it."

Draco's cock ached at the idea of "practice." "When do you want to start?" he asked, and his voice was husky. He couldn't help it.

Harry gave him a startled glance, and then laughed. The laugh unwound still more of Draco's tension. He rested his head against the hand on Harry's shoulder and waited, confident his chosen would have the answers.

It was an unexpectedly pleasant sensation, to be able to give up a bit of responsibility to someone else. Perhaps that was a good sign, and he would be able to do the same thing during the Blazing Season.

"Not right away," Harry said, which it took Draco a moment to realize was the answer to his question. "Not until I've got a better idea of what I should do, and how far is too far." He bit one of his knuckles, and Draco claimed his hand so that he could lick it instead. Harry caught his breath, eyes widening, before he continued in a husky voice of his own. "I think we should wait a few days until we see how Parkinson and Oblansky are reacting to the rumors."

"I spoke with Pansy this morning," Draco said, reluctantly stopping his task of learning what his chosen's skin tasted like. He knew some of it already, of course, but every part of Harry's body must be different. "She was infuriated. She seemed inclined to doubt that the rumors were true, but she won't dare ignore them, just in case they turn out to be. And I learned that she's in love with this Russell, but he doesn't seem to be in love with her."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "You think there's something to exploit there?"

"Perhaps," Draco said. "I was thinking of speaking with him face-to-face. Could you do that?"

Harry's color would have done credit to a ghost just then. "Not if he looks anything like Laurent. I can't—King said that the reason I feel such rage for Laurent is magical, an aftereffect of his deep allure. I'm afraid I might feel that rage when I see his relative, and lash out."

He sounded terrified, of himself. Draco stood up and embraced him the way he'd been longing to since he got here, feeling the role of protector settle on his shoulders once more, not that he minded. "Hush," he murmured. "There's no reason that you should have to face him. I'll go and speak with him. It's possible that he's more reasonable than Pansy." Draco didn't hold out much hope of that, actually, since Pansy was unlikely to fall in love with someone much different than she was. But the possibility existed, and mentioning it soothed Harry. There was no reason not to hope.

Harry touched Draco's neck and then his nose as if he was seeking some place to let his hand rest. Draco was about to offer a suggestion when Harry murmured, "I already find it hard to be without you. How did you *do* that?"

Draco arched his neck again, though without spreading his wings, and even though there was no one in the room but Harry to display for. *He says things like that,* he told his invisible audience. *He's mine. I make him happy.*

Before he could reply aloud, a bird knocked on the window. Draco went without asking to retrieve its message, especially when he saw that the bird was a large raven instead of an owl. Ravens were used for communications from a very few specialized sections of the Ministry and Gringotts.

Wondering, he handed the letter to Harry. The raven landed on the mantelpiece and proceeded to preen itself, cocking its head back and forth and fastening one intelligent eye on Draco as if it could sense his avian heritage and disapproved.

Harry undid the seal on the letter and stared at the contents. He stared so long that Draco stalked towards him to read it over his shoulder, fearing what the letter might say.

There was a lot of legal language and flowery congratulations that Draco knew he could dismiss; the real information lay at the heart of the third paragraph.

We are pleased to inform you that you are now the owner of a property known as Mabinogion House, located in Wales. The exact location must remain a secret until you have come to Gringotts to personally claim the key to the wards. This property, a house of two floors and large cellars, contains numerous magical artifacts that…

Draco took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He might have dreamed up such a gesture, but he hadn't, and all thanks were due to the people who had.

"What is this?" Harry's voice was small and shaken, like a child's. "Your mother said there was news coming that would startle me, but—what is this, Draco?"

Draco, in the midst of his wonder and delight, felt another kind of delight that his chosen would turn to him for information now. He put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Mabinogion House belongs—belonged—to my mother's side of the family," he said softly. "No one's lived in it for years, but it has house-elves that keep it up. Her mother willed it to her when she died. And now my mother's chosen to make a present of it to you."

"Look," Harry said in a clipped tone, wheeling around to face Draco so that Draco could see the spark in his eyes, "you can't—she can't just give me a—a *house*. I mean, what the *fuck*?"

Draco laughed and hugged Harry, spinning him in a circle. Harry went along with it, though he was scowling. Draco dropped Harry back in place, smiled at him, and said, "Mabinogion House is the most heavily warded property we have, Harry. When you go in there for the first time and confirm yourself as owner to the house-elves, the wards will become responsive to you only. You can make it a fortress. You can hold anyone, even me, away."

Harry closed his eyes tightly and said nothing. Draco saw the faint light of a tear under one eyelid, but he didn't remark on it.

Partially because Harry had leaned forwards and kissed him with a desperate hunger, of course, but also because he knew Harry's pride. He could be lustful and sensitive at the same time.

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Chapter: 29

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Twenty-Nine—Fought

The next few days were quiet, though Harry kept waiting for more announcements that would transform his life. But no one firecalled him and offered him another house. No one told him that Laurent was freed—the news he had been trying to brace himself for ever since Draco mentioned Parkinson's interest in finding Laurent. No one dashed up screaming about some ridiculously lethal disease you could only get from dating Veela.

He and Draco spent a lot of time together, but not every waking moment. Draco visited his parents and some other friends and informants that Harry didn't know, spreading more false information and tracking the spread of the rumor about Laurent influencing key people in the Ministry with his allure. And Harry visited Ron and Hermione, and the chaos of the Burrow during a family dinner once, and thought about going to King and Lucy, although he didn't do so.

Fleur came up to him during that dinner and surveyed him in silence for long minutes. Harry, who was playing with Dominique, looked up at her warily, wondering if he'd made a mistake.

But instead, Fleur bent down, slowly enough that he could see her coming and decide whether he wanted to accept the gesture, and kissed his head. "It eez so good to see you feeling better," she murmured.

Harry relaxed, though an odd, cool tingle spread out from the place where her lips had touched, not exactly a pleasant sensation. He wondered if that was the attempt of the influence to keep him from finding another Veela attractive.

It didn't need to worry (assuming a kind of magical bond between people could be said to worry). Harry was noticing more and more things about Draco every day that made it hard to even *think* of other Veela.

Draco seemed to spend most of his time now moving around in a kind of white haze, although Harry didn't know how much of that was real and how much a product of the magic between them. His movements were slower, out of consideration for Harry's tendency to be startled, and when he did reach out and lay his hand on Harry's shoulder or back or arm, extra warmth came with it. His smile caused new lines in his face, lines that Harry hadn't seen before and found fascinating to watch.

His fingers itched and his mouth watered when he was around Draco now. He wanted to touch him just because, although he mostly refrained because he thought he would raise expectations in Draco's mind that he couldn't gratify.

And then came the night that he woke up sweating and shaking, the way he often did after nightmares, but with the sheets at his groin wet with more than sweat. The images faded, too, the

images of an ordinary dream, rather than the unnatural clarity that the nightmares and memories attained in his head, a clarity that, Harry knew now, came from his fear of Laurent as much as anything else.

He hadn't had a simple sex dream in…ages. Since before the rape.

Harry sat up, his hand coming to rest on his leg, and shut his eyes. He tried to recapture the images that had made him come, but it was hard. Now and then a glimpse of white, like spread wings, returned to him, or a lash of wetness, a tongue licking down his spine, but they always faded again. He sighed.

But at least it confirmed something he had suspected for some time now: Desire was returning to his life.

After that, he began to touch Draco more when he wanted, to lean on him if he offered his shoulder, to breathe against his ear without terror that Draco would turn around and open his arms and he would run.

Draco noticed, of course, and watched him with eyes as bright as heat lightning. Now and then he coughed, a cough in the middle of which the word "practice" could be clearly discerned.

But Harry didn't think he was ready for that yet. Not exactly. They were waiting for something specific and sure to happen in the saga of Laurent, for Parkinson and Russell du Michel to take some concrete action.

And then it came, in the form of a blunt owl demanding a meeting with Draco on du Michel property.

Draco cradled the letter in his claws—they had grown the moment he realized who the owl was from—and read it again. Harry was reading it over his shoulder. Draco had refused to give it to him yet, because, whether Harry realized it or not, his magic was making the shelves rattle. Draco didn't want the letter destroyed, because it might be valuable evidence.

You are trying to keep me from seeing my cousin Laurent du Michel. You claim to have good reasons for that, solid reasons. I want you to come to me and tell me what those reasons are, and perhaps I'll give up the search if they're good enough. Be at my house tomorrow morning at eight if you're serious. A pair of Apparition coordinates followed, detailed enough that Draco knew he could find the place.

So could Harry, for that matter. But it never occurred to Draco to let Harry go alone, or be the one to Apparate them both there. He might try to leave Draco behind for his own "good."

"I see," Harry said. His voice was heavy, and when Draco glanced over his shoulder, he saw Harry touching his wand and staring into the distance as if he were trying to think about how

many curses he could cast before someone stopped him. "Do you think this is sincere, or an attempt to trick us?"

"I don't know, right now." Draco folded the letter gently. "There are some spells I can cast on the parchment and ink that might tell me more about his state of mind when he wrote it, and since he was likely thinking about the future when he laid down the words, that's a more reliable method than some others. Then I can decide whether I'm going to go."

Harry blinked, looking baffled, and then his eyes focused on Draco again. Draco was pleased to see that. He liked it best when his chosen was looking at him, though those glances were never as desperate as the ones Draco knew he himself tossed at Harry. "You have spells that can do that? Why haven't I heard of them?"

"Because they're illegal?" Draco offered dryly. "I doubt the Ministry wanted to keep them legal when they could be used against their correspondence, too."

Harry laughed. "That makes sense." Then his face changed again. "What do you mean, whether *you're* going to go?"

This was the argument Draco had feared. He faced Harry, outwardly calm, and spread his wings. Harry simply stared back at him, unimpressed, and Draco cursed behind the mask of his serene expression. He hadn't really wanted to *frighten* Harry, but it would have been nice if he had taken the spreading of Draco's wings and what it meant seriously.

"I have to protect you," Draco said. "We're coming up on the Blazing Season, and you know what that means."

"Rape," Harry said, nodding.

Draco shot him an intense irritated glance, breaking the calm, and saw by Harry's sly smile that that was exactly what his little remark had been intended to do. Draco took another deep breath and then said, "It's more than that. I *have* to protect you. I'm already having trouble sleeping because I imagine that someone's going to come through the window and hurt you. I've fought myself not to suggest that you move to Mabinogion House now. And to stay apart from you at night is—painful." He'd been going back to his own house at ten each night, and his muscles ached and twitched for an hour after he lay down in his empty bed.

Harry blinked. "I don't understand. I thought the whole point of Blazing Season was to parade me around and show other people they couldn't have me. How can you do that if I'm hidden away?"

He sounded interested, not hurt, Draco thought gratefully. Maybe there was the chance that he could persuade him after all. "I'll want to show you off as we get closer to the Season itself, and as long as this situation with Laurent and Pansy and Russell is resolved by then. But right now, with you in danger and my instincts awakening for the first time with a new chosen, I want you

safe."

Harry regarded him in silence for a few moments, then said, "That makes sense. But I'm going with you to this meeting with du Michel."

"You *can't*," Draco said.

"I'm not most chosen," Harry said, folding his arms. "And you're not most Veela. Most Veela wouldn't have had the time and the patience to court me like you have, to go slowly, to put up with my fears and insecurities. And now, I don't want you to ruin it for us by denying me something as simple as the right to face my accuser."

"Harry," Draco said, his wings fluttering a little as the emotions rose and dashed through him like colliding waves. On the one hand, Harry's determination to stand by his side was romantic, adorable, endearing. Draco didn't know how to express his pride that Harry wanted to face someone related to his rapist, that he had the *courage* to do that.

On the other hand, let Harry come along, and Draco's whole mind would be focused on keeping Harry safe, instead of on countering Russell the way he must.

"You can't," he settled for saying again, leaning forwards and trying to catch Harry's eye. He thought he would have more of a chance of persuading him if Harry wasn't deliberately staring past him at the wall. "I'll be distracted. I have to keep calm and watch for Russell's suspicious actions, if there are any." He still didn't know whether the summons to this meeting was genuine or not. "Please stay here."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "A few minutes ago, *here* wasn't sufficient for you, no matter how good my wards."

Draco clenched his teeth. Anxiety of this kind felt a lot like heartburn. "Yes, I want you to go to Mabinogion House. Will you do that for me, Harry? Please? There's no other way I can satisfy my instincts and still do what we have to do to counter Pansy and Russell. And both of these are *important*."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'll come along with you, but I'll be under my Invisibility Cloak. Those are so rare that most people don't spend money on the wards to counter them. All right?"

"Not all right," Draco whispered.

Harry stepped in and hugged him. Draco wrapped his wings around him without thinking of the implications, and Harry stiffened once and then spoke on, as though he hadn't noticed. "I'm sorry this is so difficult for you. But, among other things, I want to see Russell before we have to meet him in a more hostile environment, like the Wizengamot courtroom. I want to make sure I can handle it."

Draco bent his head and sniffed as much as he could reach of Harry's neck and back. He fought for calm. It sounded as though Harry was going to go along, and there was nothing Draco could do about it, unless he wanted a much worse argument than the one they were currently having. With some other people, Draco might have locked them in a room and trusted them to forgive him, but that wasn't going to happen with Harry, and he should never try it given what he knew about Harry's past.

But right now, he had his wings around his chosen, and Harry was tolerating it, despite a slightly accelerated pulse rate and a flush on his skin that Draco didn't think was the result of arousal. If his chosen could overcome that—if he could give Draco all the gifts he had so far—then surely Draco could struggle against his protective instincts enough to give this gift in return.

Then he thought of something else, brought into his mind by the word *protective*, and he relaxed more than he had since the owl came. Stepping back enough to look into Harry's face, though he kept his wings in place, he asked, "Would you let me give you one more Malfoy heirloom as a gift?"

That at least got Harry's attention; he'd been turning his head from side to side, eyes widening as he looked at the height and thickness of the silvery-white feathers around him. "Wh-what?" he asked, and swallowed.

Draco reluctantly pulled his wings back. Someday, he thought, Harry would go to sleep cradled in his wings, but this wasn't the day. "Because it's something that will help keep you safe, and keep me from going mad with you there," he explained, stroking Harry's shoulder with one fingertip. "Will you?"

Harry's jaw firmed for a second, as though he was considering an argument, and then he nodded. Draco smiled at him, knowing it was a drunken and adoring smile and not caring, and then turned to summon a house-elf.

Harry hadn't known what to expect when the house-elf came back, but it wasn't a huge, overlapping, necklace-*thing* made of what looked like jade and gold. And in the shape of a serpent, he saw as Draco held it up, a serpent coiled over itself with its head draped so that it would point down the chest of someone wearing it. It was supposed to go around his neck, Harry could tell that much, and click closed with a clasp that he located after searching for it a moment, a clasp shaped like a slightly wider scale.

The snake shimmered with light as if moving, as if alive. It was exquisite, although Harry couldn't tell what kind it was meant to be. It had no fangs, but he thought nervously that it might, when the proper danger presented itself.

"What is *that*?" he asked, ducking when Draco tried to lock it around his neck.

Draco clucked his tongue in exasperation. He sounded so much like Mrs. Weasley that Harry

stood still in spite of himself, and the next moment the necklace was fastened in place and Draco was smoothing down the clasp as if he thought it might come off on its own. Harry stared at his own shoulders and neck, as much as he could of them, now buried beneath expensive artificial snake. The jade and gold were warming much faster than they should.

"This is something that keeps you safe from all magic outside yourself," Draco said quietly. "The snake will catch curses, dissipate spells that are meant to break your bones or do other internal damage to you, and bite attackers who try to hit you physically. Its poison is extremely potent," he added, and his smirk made him resemble the old Draco Harry had known.

Harry reached back to touch the clasp. Draco promptly put up a hand to cover his. "Don't do that, please," he said quietly.

"Can it unlock that easily?" Harry tried to twist around and see it, but of course all he did was move Draco's hand a little further, down to clasping his back. "Maybe I shouldn't wear it if it's going to come undone every time I move."

"No," Draco said. "I just—let me look at you, please, without fearing that you're going to take it off."

Harry raised an eyebrow and stood still. Draco moved back from him, eyes taking the same journey Harry's had, over his chest and neck, over the snake's drooping head and coils that made Harry nervous. Why was he wearing something that luxurious? He would have liked to take it off not because he found it confining, but just because, if he ran around with that much wealth around his neck, something would happen to it.

"Yes," Draco whispered. "Perfect."

Harry smiled uncertainly. There was a note in Draco's voice that he didn't understand, and bad things usually happened when that occurred. "What?"

Draco's eyes rose to his face, and Harry thought the heat in them was pure human, without a trace of the Veela. "I like to see you surrounded and embraced by something of mine," he said softly, "if it can't yet be me."

Harry felt his face flame. He never knew how to *respond* to words like that, and not because it was a compliment. It was because Draco put so much behind the words that they never seemed like a mere compliment. He wasn't saying this to get Harry's attention or flatter him or seduce him; he really believed it.

Harry clenched his fingers one more time on the jade-and-gold snake, and then told himself that Draco wouldn't have lent it to him if he thought Harry would damage it permanently. "All right," he said. "Can we make our plans now?"

Draco adjusted the snake to a non-existent better fit, smiled at it, and then nodded. "Now we

can."

"What is this about, du Michel?"

Draco was impressed with himself. He managed the perfect bored, drawling tone, the perfect mixture of resignation and patience, as he moved across the grass towards the house where Pansy's Russell stood.

All that, all those emotions balanced in his voice, despite his hyper-awareness of Harry standing under the Invisibility Cloak off to the side. Well, the cloak and the snake. The thought of the snake kept Draco from spreading his wings and bellowing a challenge to the man who stood watching them come with cold eyes.

Russell du Michel was shorter than Draco had been expecting for a man who could take Pansy's fancy, and also more intense, with an expression on his face that suggested he almost never smiled. His hair was bright blond, enough to make Draco squint in the sun, and had to have been touched with charms. His eyes were dark, his skin pale, as if he'd spent years in a dungeon.

And his hands twisted together with a strength that suggested he wasn't about to feign calm the way Draco had thought he would, the way the spells he'd cast on the ink in the letter had told him the man was trying to do when he wrote it.

"You know," Russell said. "You seemed friendly and helpful at first to my quest to find my cousin, and then you turned against me. I want to know why. Laurent can't have done something so wrong that you would want to hold me away from him as if we had been lifelong enemies."

Draco shook his head. *More blunt than I expected, too. That's what being raised outside of England will do for you.* "I told Pansy the truth. It concerns my chosen. If you have Veela relatives, you must know how protective we can be of our chosen."

"Laurent isn't like that," Russell said.

"Isn't like what?" Draco wondered if this would be easier than he thought. Russell seemed to have bull-headed determination only, with no sign of intelligence or tact. "Someone who would defend his chosen, or someone who could be a threat to mine?" Saying the word *mine* felt wonderful, although this wasn't the context he would have selected if he could have.

"Someone who could be a threat to yours." Russell stood as straight as a spear, staring at Draco with a contempt that Draco reckoned he could understand. He might feel the same if someone had tried to prevent him from visiting his imprisoned parents. Then again, even in a world that hated them, his parents had been intelligent enough not to do something that would land them in Azkaban. "I don't know much about Veela. I don't know much about him. But I do know that the rumors you're spreading are only rumors."

"So," Draco said, widening his eyes and moving to a tone of faux-innocence to emphasize his words, "you don't know anything about your cousin, or the allure that he might have been taken to prison for, and you admit that, but you still expect me to trust your opinions about the general situation?" He paused. He had to admit it was an exquisite pause.

There was a slight shuffle of feet in the grass as Harry moved around him to the side. Draco rapidly calculated distances in his head, and then relaxed. Harry could still be covered by his wings if Draco spread them, and shielded from any curse thrown.

Of course, he wore the snake, too, as Draco remembered after a moment's thought. That didn't make as much difference as he had hoped it would to his desire to hold Harry safe.

Russell's face darkened, as if he had finally begun to see how ridiculous his behavior was. "Laurent is the only family I have left, excluding the ones I grew up with," he said. "I want to see him, yes. You can't stop me."

"I'm only trying to prevent unnecessary grief," Draco said. "To me and to my chosen, and to my family. I couldn't care about your grief if you paid me, but you might consider that I'm doing you a favor, as well. If you found Laurent and he didn't match your dream of him, what would happen to your faith and your trust in your own conclusions?"

Russell abruptly leaned forwards, hands reaching out as if he could choke an answer from Draco. "Have you seen him? Do you know him? What is he like?"

Draco gave him a smile as thin as the edge of the crescent moon. "Why would you trust anything I say, when you have only recently accused me of spreading false information?"

Russell shut his eyes and sprawled back against the doorway of his house, a smaller structure than Draco would have expected. On the other hand, he could easily have used wizardspace inside it. "I want to know," he whispered. "And the longing will never ease until I see him with my own eyes."

"So finding out that he's mad or a real criminal wouldn't deter you at all?" Draco asked. He wanted to be sure, and he thought Russell was too honest for his own good and would probably give Draco the real truth.

"He can't be," Russell said. "Madness doesn't run in our family."

"Just like Veela heritage doesn't?" Draco turned his head at another shuffle, and then realized it had to be Harry again, since it was coming from behind him. Harry was still within reach of his wings, luckily.

"Don't be stupid," Russell said. His face was flushing now. "I never claimed that Veela heritage didn't."

"But you seem as familiar with the possibility of one as of the other," Draco said. "Your cousin is a Veela, and you aren't. And your cousin is mad, and you aren't."

"Rumors," Russell said. "Lies. Nothing that would make it possible for me to believe you, and nothing that will substitute for seeing Laurent for myself."

Draco rolled his eyes, and didn't care if Russell saw. He had hoped to find Laurent's cousin more reasonable than Laurent was. When he had realized that the man wasn't a Veela, he had held out even more hope. Russell wouldn't have the same instincts that might, as could sometimes happen when a Veela idolized someone he had never seen, have decided that his cousin was his chosen. And like many human wizards, he might be willing to accept that there were some things that he didn't know about Veela.

But he was at least as stubborn and stupid as Laurent, if not as much of a rapist.

"Then why did you call me here?" he asked. "I can't persuade you, and you can't persuade me, not when it's a matter of love for both of us."

Russell flashed him a small, mean smile that made Draco narrow his eyes. At the same moment, a scuffle broke out behind him.

Draco whirled around. Two muffled figures struggled there, and then both of them appeared. One was Pansy, tearing off *two* Invisibility Cloaks, one that she had obviously been wearing herself, and Harry's.

The other person was Harry, standing very still. When Draco moved to the side, he saw why. Pansy had her wand inside the clasp holding the snake around Harry's neck, placing the wand firmly against the skin.

"If I can threaten your chosen," Pansy told Draco, her eyes bright with triumph, "then I can control you. And that means that you'll step aside, or even aid us in our search for Laurent." Her hand clenched down warningly when Draco lifted a foot. "I'll use the curse that boils his bone marrow, Draco, I swear I will."

She had probably expected Draco to crumple helplessly to the ground, weeping and begging her not to hurt his chosen. That was the stereotype of Veela that persisted in popular novels by authors who had never met one.

Instead, Draco went mad.

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Chapter: 30

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty—Flayed

Harry was still cursing himself for having allowed Parkinson to creep up on him. It was true, he hadn't been looking for someone who was also under an Invisibility Cloak, and he had been focused on Draco, wondering if he would have to intervene and rescue Russell from himself.

And he had been focused, too, on comparing Russell to Laurent in his head, finding the similarities and the differences, and willing himself to stand there instead of run away.

But now Parkinson had her wand under the snake, and Harry was standing still because that was what Auror training dictated in these situations: calmness to put your captors off-guard, until you could understand what they wanted, their weaknesses, and the best way to throw them.

When Draco began to transform, though, Harry understood that he might not have much choice about acting.

Draco half-fell to the ground. Harry's gaze immediately snapped to Russell, his first thought that the bastard might have cast something at his Draco. But Russell's mouth was open, his eyes as protruding as Luna Lovegood's, and one hand had risen as though to hold away the impact of the change.

Harry looked back in time to see the white blaze spared around Draco, riding the edges of his spreading wings, ruffling the feathers into the sharp brilliance of scales. At the same moment, his face rippled and erupted, growing a long beak, and talons replaced his hands. Yes, the fingernails were claws, but hard scales also raced up his arms, crooking his hands into weapons and guarding his skin from danger. Close white flaps cloaked the rest of his body, shredding his clothes aside; Harry wasn't actually sure if they were feathers or scales.

The most horrifying thing, perhaps, was that, even transformed like that, Draco was stunningly beautiful. More beautiful than he had been when he looked human. More beautiful than Laurent. More beautiful than the wizards and witches Harry had seen trying to spare their lives with Enhanced Glamour Charms during his years as an Auror, mostly by charming the ones hunting them.

The air around Draco wavered as if it was made of heated glass. A continual low trill accompanied him, rather like the white light. He stalked forwards, half-standing and half-supporting himself with his slowly beating wings, and he was more beautiful than death.

Parkinson stood absolutely still. Harry whirled away from her without a problem and then cast *Incarcerous* on her, so that she fell over, bound. Not even that disrupted her trance or the way her gaze stayed locked on Draco, Harry saw, with a mixture of disgust and fear.

He turned in time to catch Russell's Stunner on his Shield Charm. The Stunner ricocheted off into the air, and Russell ran forwards to meet him, face pale. Maybe he was more resistant to Draco's charms than Parkinson was because of his Veela heritage, Harry thought, whether or not he expressed it.

"Stop!" Harry shouted at him. "He's going to kill Parkinson if we don't stop him!"

"Tell me what you know about Laurent, and I'll stop," Russell retorted, hurling an Earth-Popping Curse that tore open small explosions of dirt and grass at Harry's feet.

Harry swore and sneaked one glance over his shoulder. Parkinson lay flat, staring dreamily upwards, and Draco hunched over her, wings working open and then shut again. The white glare and the music were both diminished. Harry didn't have any hope that that was because Draco had turned human again, though. It was because he was focusing all his efforts on one particular victim.

If Draco harmed her…

Harry knew more now, after studying those books Draco had gifted him with, about what Veela were capable of when pushed far enough to transform.

If he could have, he would have broken away from the fight with Russell and gone to Draco. His chosen's presence would help calm and soothe him. It might spare Parkinson's life. But he was locked into this *stupid fight* instead.

Harry threw a vicious Stunner, hoping that would hit Russell and end the conflict. But Russell darted aside, with a smug grin, and then whirled Harry into the chaos of a duel, using more and more spells that verged closer and closer to Dark Arts.

Grimly, Harry made his decision. Draco *might* kill Parkinson, but Russell would almost certainly kill one of them, either Harry or Draco, if Harry turned his back. He had to deal with Russell first, and hope that Draco wanted to take his time and play with Parkinson, the way most books about Veela said he would.

I hate this, knowing I might be the instrument of someone's death.

Harry gritted his teeth, forced himself to remember that Parkinson and Russell had been the ones who decided to push for information about Laurent instead of leaving well enough alone—who had been stupid enough to assault a Veela's chosen near the Blazing Season—and went into battle.

She had tried to hurt his chosen. Draco knew that, and it was the only thing he wanted or needed to know. His chosen was away from her now, and safe. Draco would have known in an instant if

he was wounded or dying, so that had to mean he was safe.

She lay on the ground, staring up at him. Draco crouched over her and spread his wings, while using his claws to cut the ropes that bound her arms. She shivered dreamily and reached out as if she would stroke the edge of his left wing. Draco moved it away, though he kept it near enough, tantalizingly so, that she continued to reach. No one but his chosen was going to touch his wings, but almost letting her do so put her arm in the perfect position.

"I'll teach you a lesson," he said. He didn't recognize his own voice, wouldn't have known it for his own except that he felt the thrum of it in his mouth and chest. He felt highly disconnected from his body, from everything except his intentions. "You don't threaten my chosen."

"Hmmm," she agreed mindlessly, still reaching. She felt what he wanted her to feel, and right now that was incoherent desire.

That would change soon.

Draco lowered his claws delicately towards her arm, watching her face so that he could judge the depth of her enchantment. She didn't blink, and her gaze stayed fixed on the white light Draco knew reflected from his wings. He clacked his beak in satisfaction and drew his claws along her arm.

Her skin slid off in neat layers, sifting down like plaster knocked from a wall. The blood that followed was a smaller amount than a knife of the same size would have caused. Draco cocked his head, admiring his own skill. He had never done this before, but that didn't matter.

A Veela's claws were made for caressing his chosen, for holding him close, for defending him. And they were delicate tools that could flay an enemy.

She gave a little gasp now and stared up at him with eyes welling with tears. Draco could see the struggle in her face, as conscious thought tried to surface enough to tell her what the cause of the pain was. He lifted the music that tingled around him, and once again her face smoothed out, consciousness lapsing. She reached for his wings again, only moaning like a child who had fallen and skinned her knee.

Draco would keep her like that all through the flaying, tilting back and forth between realization of pain and enslavement in his thrall, only letting her come fully back to herself when he had removed all the skin on both arms.

With precision, with the desire to protect foremost in his mind, with delight in her pain, Draco began to remove another layer of skin.

Russell had trained as a formal duelist, that was certain. Harry had already rolled aside from Transfiguration spells, dodged curses that would have ruptured his head from the inside or

deprived him of sight or hearing, and used his shields to batter back the storms of knives and rocks and lightning that Russell tried to release on him. He could never manage to take the offensive, because he was worried about hurting Russell and he knew Russell wasn't concerned at all about hurting him.

And all the while, Draco was torturing Parkinson behind him. Harry could make out muffled sobs and cries of pain, all of which faded again, so he was probably keeping her under with the thrall.

If this goes on much longer, then I'm going to be responsible for any guilt that Draco might feel, and I'm going to be responsible for someone else being hurt by a Veela.

That thought delved into Harry's head and finally made him frantic enough to use a Dark Arts spell of his own. "*Rapio!*" he bellowed, and jerked his wand in the expected direction, up and to the side, so hard that he nearly lost his grip.

Russell shrieked as his legs went out from under him and the spell rolled him neatly into a ball, dropping him into an invisible box or cage that would prevent him from unwinding at all from a highly uncomfortable position. Harry only waited long enough to be sure that it had truly caught him before he had turned and was running towards Draco and Parkinson.

Parkinson offered up another little sob. Draco's white light and music *tilted*—Harry wasn't sure how else to describe it—and Harry thought that meant he was pleased by the effect he was having on her. Harry grimaced and flung himself the last small distance, landing so that he knelt beside Parkinson, in the shadow of Draco's wings.

Parkinson's right arm was a bloody mess. Harry could see the outlines of muscle, bone, and tendon, and could also see the expression on her face, which was one of drunken, dazed pleasure.

I can't let him do this. Harry turned to face Draco, moving so that Draco's eyes—directed towards Parkinson—would have no choice but to focus on him. *If he sees me, maybe he'll care more about my presence than about hers.*

Draco was pleased with his progress. He had stripped all the skin from one of her arms, and next he would begin on her shoulder. Then there would be the neck, the breasts, and the other arm. He wasn't entirely sure if he would proceed to her face or her legs next. Probably the legs, since he wanted to leave her eyes undamaged enough to see what he was doing to her when he chose to release her from the thrall.

A movement behind him startled him, but it wasn't repeated. Draco started to return to his work.

The next moment, his chosen was kneeling beside him, reaching out one hand as though to touch his wing. Draco tilted his head back, warbled in glad surprise, and held out his bloody talons. They couldn't harm Harry, of course, and he hoped Harry would excuse their state at the moment

and accept their touch.

Harry flinched a little, but didn't move away when the talons landed on his shoulder. Draco didn't like the flinch, though, and moved closer to him, releasing *her* without care. His thrall would keep her in place more effectively than any chains while he tended to the needs of his chosen.

"Draco," Harry said, his voice richer to Draco than his own music. "Please don't do this."

Draco blinked and tilted his head. The words were pleasant for him to hear, but they made no sense. How could he *not* take vengeance on someone who had hurt his chosen the way she had hurt Harry? Or perhaps Harry was objecting to being greeted with blood. Draco quickly clenched his talon and shook it so that the blood flew away, then offered it again.

"You're going to wake up afterwards and feel sorry for torturing her," Harry said quietly, never moving. He didn't look at Draco's newly cleaned talon, either, which Draco allowed himself to feel a shiver of indignation for. "Please believe me. Torture doesn't help anything. I thought about torturing Laurent, too, but I was a better person for not doing it."

Oh. That was his argument. Draco leaned back on his heels and carefully rearranged his face so that he could talk. He didn't need his beak until the end, when he would pluck her eyes out with it.

"I'm not you," he told Harry. "I'm not the same person, with the same instincts. The only reason I would regret this after I 'wake up' is because I haven't hurt her enough."

Harry shivered, and then shook his head. "This isn't you, Draco," he said, though his tone of desperate reason had begun to falter a bit. "You don't hurt people for no reason."

Draco stretched his wings and moved forwards. Harry was on his back in moments, just like her, with Draco hovering over him. Draco had no malicious intent this time, but he wasn't about to let even his chosen get away with a statement like that.

"It isn't for no reason," he said. "She would have hurt you." He took a moment to check that the snake was still around Harry's neck, but it did little good, when he could imagine her wand stabbing Harry easily beneath it. He fought back the ringing scream that wanted to rise up his throat. This close to Harry, all it would do was deafen his chosen, not proclaim his ownership of Harry in the way he wanted to do. "I can never hurt her enough for that, but when she dies with the skin stripped off her body, then I will have come as close as I can."

Harry stared up at him with a look of horror. Draco crooned and fought to keep from reaching out with his allure, which could soothe Harry and take that emotion away that must be as uncomfortable for him to feel as it was for Draco to see it.

"You're mine," Draco said, deciding that it would be best to explain it in simple words and without reference to blood. "If someone hurts you, that person has to die. That's all."

Harry came as close as he ever would to kicking Draco away from him and running off. He couldn't, he *couldn't* love someone who would torture like this.

And then he told himself not to be stupid. Draco was still Draco, and Harry had always known that he had the Veela instincts and thus this potential for violence, and he had accepted him anyway. Running away now was tantamount to declaring that he had never loved Draco in the first place.

Besides, how easily things could have gone the other way when he confronted Laurent. Harry's principles had barely won the struggle against his rage.

Would Draco have been right to declare that he could never love Harry, that no one could ever love him, if Harry had broken and killed or tortured Laurent?

His rage was kindred to Draco's rage. Harry sighed out and reached up to stroke Draco's cheek, concentrating hard on the strange feeling of sharp feathers and soft skin under his fingers to keep from panicking. *A Veela is looming over me.*

But Laurent had never transformed this far, and that helped. Harry's voice was only a little shaky when he said, "I understand. But I would *prefer* it if you didn't hurt her anymore. Taking all the skin off one arm is enough, isn't it?"

Draco lowered his head further and stared into Harry's eyes from so close that panic set Harry on fire. He never knew how he managed to ride through it and keep lying still, to let Draco look at him. Maybe the same way that he ridden through his desire to kill when he had first come out of Laurent's thrall.

Everything seems determined to remind me of those memories today, Harry thought, and felt his belly fluttering. He really, really hoped that he wouldn't vomit into Draco's face.

"You're asking me?" Draco whispered. "You're asking me to make you this gift because it's near the Blazing Season and you're my chosen?"

"Yes," Harry said, and hoped that this would work out. He really had no idea what he was doing. He wouldn't have known what to do in a *normal* situation like this, with an infuriated lover protecting him, and the Veela instincts made everything more complicated. "Yes, please."

"Then I can do that," Draco said, and gave him a smile that was truly disturbing in how much it dazzled Harry. He shouldn't be that beautiful, he really shouldn't, Harry thought, in his transformed state. At least he'd got rid of the beak. "I can do that happily. Come here, Harry."

He reared back up, holding Harry in his arms, pulling him along. Harry gritted his teeth and fought another battle, this time not to lash out and stand on his own. Draco's arms around his

waist and shoulders were strong, sure. Harry knew Draco wasn't about to let him drop, but also not about to let him go, and fighting would make it worse.

So Harry relaxed by main force and leaned his head back against Draco's shoulder as Draco set him gently on his feet. He felt the rasp of feathers and scales against his cheek as Draco dug his nose into the crook between Harry's neck and shoulder and sniffed.

"You smell so good," Draco moaned, and the words, as much as anything else, set Harry's face on fire again. They were so…unabashed. Draco didn't seem to care that they were standing in the middle of a field with Parkinson there, even if she was under thrall, and Russell possibly watching them, although the spell was probably keeping him too compressed to pay much attention to anything but the thunder of his heart. "Mine."

I can endure this. Harry reached back and smoothed his hand gently along Draco's arm, reminding himself again that he had known this could happen, and that it *wouldn't* have if he'd been more alert and considered for one minute that someone else could have an Invisibility Cloak. *I really can.* "Yours," he responded, softly.

Draco crooned again, and one of his hands brushed across Harry's groin. Harry groaned, and Draco responded with a croon that went deeper this time, rattling his bones, rousing the dormant arousal that curled through his veins.

I want him.

Harry wondered for a minute how much of this was real lust and how much was induced by the Veela thrall, and then remembered that he had been as immune to Draco's light and song as Russell had seemed. He couldn't completely let go and enjoy it, because he was keeping their audience in mind—an audience they had questions to ask—but he thought he could relax about being influenced in that way, at least.

He opened his eyes and studied Draco's face bent over him, mostly human, but made pale here and there by the touch of those feathers, gracefully backed by the sweep of his great wings, and his eyes, silvery and dazzling. A realization hit Harry so hard that it made him sway. Perhaps he would have fallen if Draco hadn't been there to hold him up.

I want him even like this, even knowing what he just did, what he might do.

Draco bent further over him, as if he could sense that, and moved his wings forwards, enclosing Harry in a fluttering, feathery tent. Like being in a grove of silvery leaves, Harry thought, and once again swallowed panic. He reached out, without thinking about it, and trailed his finger down the edge of the nearest wing.

Draco jerked, and Harry pulled his hand back hastily, opening his mouth to give an apology. His daze had begun to fade. He wouldn't have done that in an ordinary mood; he would have considered that it might be painful for Draco or at least touch a sensitive spot. He shouldn't

have—

Draco locked his lips on Harry's and acted as if he wanted to suck his soul out of his mouth. Harry shuddered and thought he knew now how Draco had felt when Harry touched his wing.

"Mine," Draco said as he moved his head back. "Want." He reached out with one bloody claw and sliced Harry's shirt back as if he was unpeeling an apple with a knife.

Harry blessed the daze that still half-enclosed him; it helped him not to think about Draco flaying him the way he had flayed Parkinson. "Not yet," he whispered. "I don't want to do this in the open, right now."

Draco drew back and looked at him doubtfully. His eyes had taken on a steady shimmer which Harry found fascinating to look at. Draco seemed to sense that, because he gave an entirely new, predatory smile and stepped forwards, driving his knee between Harry's legs.

Harry gasped, and his world spiraled down and collapsed in new directions. He reached out to steady himself with his hands on Draco's shoulders, and found that Draco had ducked and come smoothly up again, so that Harry's hands dropped onto his wings instead.

This time, Harry could feel what Draco felt, the sweet shock that ran through him like someone filling his blood with sugar, and the irresistible urge to fuck that followed that, surging back up from his belly, out through his wings, and into another body. Harry was at once Draco and himself, at once the one experiencing the touch and the one touching, and he didn't know how to make sense of the sensations except to whine and press closer.

Draco finished shredding his shirt off and lowered him to the ground, spreading his wings out so that Harry was sheltered fully from both the sun and everyone else's sight. The light came through to them in a silvery haze because of the overlapping feather-scales. Harry gasped and blinked, and Draco whispered soothing nonsense words and reached for his trousers.

Merlin knew what would have happened if Harry hadn't heard the sharp *pop* at that moment which signaled the end of the spell he'd used on Russell.

He pushed up against Draco, who was now kneeling between his legs and caressing his groin with the edge of one wing. Draco caught his wrists and held them easily, smiling at him. "Hush, Harry," he said, voice deep and musical. "We'll be there in a moment." He bent, arching his neck farther than Harry would have thought he could, and licked a stripe across Harry's stomach, not *that* far from his cock.

Harry was grateful for his self-control then, because it made him able to writhe for a moment only before he regretfully shook his head. "I love you," he whispered. "I want you. But soon—" and he could only describe the impulse that made him say this as pure inspiration "—Russell du Michel and Pansy Parkinson are going to be standing up and trying to look at me."

Draco reared back, the lust in his mind dissipating as fury like sunlight burned through it.

He couldn't allow anyone else to see *his* Harry. He couldn't allow anyone else to touch *his* Harry.

And if either Pansy or Russell saw Harry the way he looked now—half-naked, lying on the ground, staring up with bright eyes and parted, swollen lips and swollen cock—they would try.

Draco stood up, pulled Harry into his arms, wrapped his wings around Harry's chest so that his chosen would have the dignity of a covering without a shirt, and then waggled one wing in the direction of Russell, who was getting back to his feet, shaking his head.

In a moment, Russell was off his feet and lying on the ground again as brilliant flashes of blue-green fire chased themselves over his skin. Draco smirked and faced Pansy. Another wing-waggle tied her down with more fire, though he didn't think she would be coming out of the trance any time soon.

Then he turned back to Harry. A Harry standing quietly within the embrace of his wings and not complaining. A Harry who was glorious and trusting and not recoiling or turning his face away because Draco had flayed the skin off Pansy's arm.

"This is what I am," Draco said. "Can you live with that?"

He didn't say any more, because Harry should know what he meant perfectly well, and Harry would either accept it or not.

Harry turned his head and thoughtfully surveyed the bloody ruin of Pansy's arm. Then he looked back up at Draco again and seemed to silently absorb the changes Draco knew had occurred in his own body: the full talons, the wings, the feathers and scales and things in between that were both littered across his skin.

Harry kissed him and said, "At the moment, I'm more concerned about how they discovered I was here and hiding under an Invisibility Cloak."

Draco tugged him closer and rubbed his cock against Harry's leg for a moment. He couldn't have done anything else. Harry tensed, but didn't move away, and then began working the tension out of his muscles with a series of individual sharp shakes.

"Good," Draco whispered. "Good. We'll get answers to that and other questions before we take them to the Aurors."

He could feel the ragged strips of his shirt and robes against his wings, the tackiness of drying blood on his talons, and the still-present rage and fear butting against the back of his mind. But none of that meant anything next to Harry's weight and warmth, or the quiet way he stood close.

He can be right next to me and not want to back away. He can look at the worst I'll do in defense of my chosen and not tell me that I'm a horrible person.

He's mine.

Draco gave in to temptation one more time and wrapped his wings around Harry from hair to boots, cradling him, keeping him safe from the world.

Harry went pale, and exhaled hard.

But he didn't move away.

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Chapter: 31

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-One—Identified

"I don't see why I should have to explain anything to you."

Harry offered Russell a thin smile as he settled into the chair across from him. He had been the Auror who made the formal arrest, so he was the one who would get to interrogate him. Kingsley had tried to object to that, pointing out Harry might not want to speak with someone who had attacked him and that he was still technically on holiday, but Harry had turned his head and looked at him. After that, Kingsley couldn't leave them alone in one of the warded rooms fast enough.

Harry himself had worried about whether he would feel upset, confined in a small space with someone who looked like Laurent, but Russell didn't have the same kind of dangerous grace or lightness about him that Laurent did. Besides, Harry had just survived Draco's full transformation. He felt calm and smug.

"Because," Harry said, "it might have escaped your notice, but you've been arrested now, for assault on an Auror and conspiracy to take hostages and commit blackmail. It's to your advantage to cooperate."

Russell, who sat with his hands bound behind his back, only turned his head away. Harry rolled his eyes. *He isn't a Veela, but he has Laurent's pride.*

As moments passed and Russell still didn't speak, some of Harry's anger and excitement faded.

He wondered if he should think about this situation as an Auror, rather than a victim.

"Something intrigues me," he said casually. "Pansy told me that there was more than one of you, members of the family that Laurent belonged to. But you're the only one we've heard of who's tried to pursue him to this extent. What motivates you, what *could* motivate you, to spend so much of your time seeking out a cousin whom you don't know?"

Russell glared at him, but didn't respond. There was a tightening of the lines around his mouth that made Harry sure he was going in the right direction, though.

"Family," he said. "Family means a lot to pure-bloods, I know. But I also know that disgrace means a lot to most of them. They won't seek out someone they find was in trouble with the law or did something stupid. In fact, if possible, they prefer to disassociate themselves from the person as much as possible and pretend that they never existed. That would be easy for you to do, since you never knew Laurent in the first place. You could have come back to England and lived without the shadow of his crime. Instead, you tried to make sure that it would be cast over you, to the point of getting arrested yourself. Why?"

"You can't speak as though pure-bloods were a single monolithic entity," Russell said, apparently stung into speech.

"Why not? You do it with Muggleborns," Harry murmured. "And anyway, you don't need to look so upset at what I'm saying. Just thinking aloud, you see."

"I demand someone else speak to me." Russell managed to look as though he would stand up and storm out of the room at any second, despite his arms being bound. "It's surely not Ministry policy to let the Auror who weathered an attack speak to his attacker."

"There are times when that's not allowed," Harry said, and adopted an earnest expression. They were actually skimming close to one of those times right now, but he saw no reason why Russell should know that. "But Aurors do have the right to interrogate Dark wizards who dueled them. Otherwise, they would continually have to bring in Aurors who didn't work those cases."

"I'm not a Dark wizard!" Russell's eyes were practically bulging out of his head.

"And yet you used Dark spells." Harry linked his hands together over his stomach and let himself slump back in his chair. "I wonder. What could be the motivation to make you do that, when you must have known what would happen if someone from the Aurors managed to corner you?"

Russell's glare grew sharper, but he finally seemed to have realized that anything he said might count against him. He was silent.

Harry nodded. "We have the combination of a motive that drives you to seek out a disgraced member of your family, attack an Auror, and try to blackmail Draco Malfoy—member of a family that happens to have the most substantial genealogical records of any of the pure-bloods.

You want to know what I think?"

"I don't, but I can see that I'm going to hear it anyway," Russell said, with an attempt at a bored drawl that Draco could have bettered on his worst day.

"I think that this was about Draco all along, not about me," Harry said. "Pansy approached him for help. You asked for him to come to that meeting, not me. You figured out that I would come along anyway, I'm sure, and that's why you knew to have Pansy search the lawn for me under the Invisibility Cloak until she found me." He paused, then added, "I *would* like to know how she located me and where you got the Cloak she was under. I know everyone knows about mine by now, since it's been in the *Prophet* numerous times."

"I used to work with the French Aurors," Russell said. He leaned forwards, as if he had decided that surrendering this particular information might benefit him after all. "They had a rash of criminals using the Cloaks to commit crimes, and they developed spells that could detect them. When they captured the criminals, they gave out the Cloaks to those who understood their proper use."

"Was that where you also picked up those Dark spells?" Harry asked sweetly, while making a mental note of what Russell had said. It would be easy enough to contact the French Aurors and ask if it was true.

Russell looked suddenly wary, and didn't respond.

"So," Harry went on, when he had waited a few minutes to give Russell a chance to pick up some good sense (an effort that was probably doomed). "You *really* wanted to see Laurent. And then you were desperate to know the truth behind those rumors. I think you wanted to know whether or not he was mad, whether or not he was a criminal. And why? Why not accept the word of those who knew him better, who had known him for far longer than you did?" Harry felt his breath catch, but he didn't think Russell noticed. "Why did it have to be your own eyes?"

Russell curled into himself a little.

"I think I know," Harry said. "Shall I tell you?"

Russell tried to make some response, but his voice squeaked and dried up in his throat. Harry nodded. "I think it's about a will. Inheritance. Someone along the way left money to you and to other members of your family that were still alive, or possibly to you and to Laurent specifically. But many pure-blood families will leave a codicil that says a legatee can be cut out of the will if they turn out to be criminals or otherwise in disgrace. That desire of separating themselves from people who can harm the family again. If you could prove Laurent had done something specific and heinous enough, then you would be able to take for yourself whatever was left to him, or other living relatives, under the will."

"You know nothing," Russell whispered, but his face was white. "You don't know anything about

this particular situation."

"Particular situations often respond to general rules." Harry stood, shaking his head. "Of course, I might be wrong. There are a few other explanations that could make sense. Do you want to give them?"

Russell glared at him in silence. Harry smiled, not caring that the smile was cruel, and left the room. He would ask someone else to speak with Russell in turn, in case he was more forthcoming with others, but he had the explanation that satisfied him.

Draco had noticed something strange when they brought Pansy into the Ministry. He had said nothing, but asked if he might sit in on her interrogation.

The Aurors had stared at him warily, and then exchanged glances. They were a blonde woman with a nose like a ferret's and a tall man with glasses that looked as if they might fall off his face at any moment. Draco knew he could charm them. It would be so easy to change the doubt in their eyes to trust that his back teeth ached with not doing it.

But Harry was the powerful one in this environment, something Draco had forgotten. He leaned around Draco's shoulder and raised an eyebrow, and suddenly the man and woman were stumbling all over themselves to give Draco a place in the interrogation room, though they warned him he would have to keep quiet.

Draco nodded innocently. He had called his feathers back into his skin, and his claws and wings were retracted. He could look calm and normal. Pansy had been so deeply under his thrall that it was unlikely she would remember to be afraid of him.

Her arm had been healed by the Aurors immediately, something Draco saw with regret. But then, he would have liked to do even worse to Russell, who had actually attacked Harry, so he was already resigned to not having perfect satisfaction of his feelings.

He noticed the strange thing again as he sat in his chair behind the Aurors. Pansy raised her head and stared at them, but her left eye focused over their shoulders, and it was darker than the right.

Draco narrowed his own eyes. *Veela heritage, but not fully manifested, and Russell certainly wanted to see Laurent enough. I wouldn't have thought she was susceptible, but then, I wouldn't know, since I'm full Veela.*

The Aurors asked Pansy a few preliminary questions to begin. She answered the ones about her relationship with Russell and her desire to see Laurent easily enough, but when they asked why she'd attacked Harry, she stared and said, "I didn't do that."

Draco leaned forwards. "I think I know why," he murmured.

Pansy looked at him and then away, as though to say that no one could punish her for a quick glance. Her hands locked together as she peered at the knuckles. "I don't remember everything, but I know enough," she said. "You shouldn't have any part in this, Draco."

"Were you aware that because Russell has Veela heritage in his family, he might be able to influence you, even though he couldn't use the allure?" Draco asked calmly.

The Aurors shifted their weight, and the woman, who'd been introduced to him as Auror Penhollow, suddenly looked thoughtful. Pansy flinched once, and then sat up and met his gaze with the calmness that meant she'd decided not to react visibly. "I don't believe that," she said. "I know what allure feels like, thanks to having dated you. He couldn't have used that on me without my noticing."

Draco sighed. "I'm not talking about the allure. I'm talking about something else, which doesn't have a proper name. It's rare, and I'm not surprised I didn't think of it at first. It needs someone with Veela heritage and a burning purpose, as well as a susceptible person, to come together, and that doesn't happen very often."

Only the slight tick of Pansy's head showed that she was listening. The Aurors looked fascinated, and Penhollow was scribbling notes on a piece of parchment Draco hadn't realized she had with her.

"That ability isn't conscious," Draco said. "I'm sure that du Michel didn't realize he was doing it. He didn't know he *could*; most of those who wield it don't. But he transferred his burning purpose to you, and made you desperate to accomplish it in turn. That explains why you went as far as you did in trying to find out the truth about Laurent du Michel, when you should have been satisfied with the fact that he was in Azkaban."

Pansy sighed out between her clenched teeth. "Let's say that you're right," she said. "Why am I here?"

Draco almost smiled, and could have if he didn't remember her holding the wand against Harry's neck. Pansy had recovered enough balance to try and throw her captors off-guard, and she would insist on her rights.

"Because you still did things under that influence that could be considered criminal," he said. "Such as provoking a Veela by threatening his chosen. Near the Blazing Season, no less." Pansy knew the date of the Blazing Season as well as Draco did; Draco had always suspected she had left him when she did partially to avoid it. But the desire Russell had implanted in her head would have driven her far enough for that not to matter.

"Then I've been punished, haven't I?" This time, Pansy looked at her tightly bandaged arm.

"That's for the Aurors to decide," Penhollow said, apparently having decided that Draco had gone far enough in controlling the interrogation. "Of course, if you acted under the influence of

this—this," she said, after a look at Draco that invited him to contribute a name, "all charges will be dropped, the same way that they would be if you had acted under an Imperius Curse or a compulsion potion."

"Thank you," Pansy said with some dignity.

Draco unfolded his wings. He'd repaired his clothes in the front with quick charms, but used only an illusion across the scraps on his back, because he'd known that he might have to free his wings again. The two Aurors both reared backwards in their chairs. Pansy kept herself still, but Draco could see how hard that was for her.

"A warning," Draco said, staring into her eyes. "You're still my friend. And if you acted under this binding from Russell, without knowing what it was, then I can forgive you—eventually."

Pansy raised her eyebrows. Balanced on the edge of a threat, she still retained more of her composure than Draco thought he might be able to. "Then what is the point of your looming at me like this? I assure you that I don't find it impressive."

"You still threatened my chosen," Draco said. "I won't forgive that. And the Blazing Season is about to start. Veela have got away with murder when defending their chosen during that time before. Keep that in mind, if you start thinking that you require vengeance for what happened today."

Pansy clenched her hands down in her lap, started to reply, and then seemed to remember that Draco hadn't been punished for what he did to her arm. She nodded with pinched lips. "You needn't fear," she said. "I don't have an intention of coming near you or your precious *chosen* again."

"Jealousy doesn't become you," Draco said, and furled his wings and bowed to the Aurors before she could reply. As he strode out of the room, he heard her voice raised in protest. He smiled.

Harry was waiting for him in the corridor, and it made Draco's heart quiescent for a moment when he realized how much weariness fell away from Harry's face as he saw Draco. "Russell was doing what he did because of the du Michel inheritance," Harry said. "One of those cases where he could have got Laurent disqualified under the law, as long as what he did was sufficiently criminal. He won't admit it, of course, but I'm virtually certain. And right now, I think I'll let someone else handle the more detailed questioning."

"Good," Draco said. "Pansy was acting under an unconscious impulse from Russell because of his Veela heritage. Not the allure, but something like it, something that only those who are the carriers of Veela traits without having my most glorious accoutrements can use." He spread his wings so that they filled the corridor from end to end and fanned them towards Harry, watching for his reaction.

Harry shut his eyes for a moment, but nodded and managed to speak without a stutter. Draco

knew he was sensitive right now because the adrenaline had diminished without giving him any support in its place. "That sounds about right. I'm glad that she's unlikely to go to Azkaban, then."

"Are you?" Draco murmured, stalking a little closer. He lowered his wings from their arched position and held them at his sides. "Why?"

"Because she wasn't the one who tried to hurt me," Harry said. "That was Russell. And because she's your friend."

"She threatened you," Draco said. "That's enough." He cocked his head and studied Harry. Yes, his hands had started to shake, and his face was a bit grey. "You need to get home."

"Yes," Harry said. "And I don't—Draco, you can come with me, but please, can you put the wings away?"

Draco folded them back into his shoulders, though it was hard. He wanted to defend his chosen, and Harry actually looked as if he needed defending more now than he had on the battlefield with Pansy and Russell. Of course, he knew how to handle a fight, Draco thought. He didn't think Harry had ever really known how to handle the recovery.

"Thank you for thinking that my friendship with her matters," he said.

Harry blinked at him. "Of course it does." He held out his arm, as if he thought Draco was the one who might need to lean on *him*. "Let's figure out what we're going to tell your parents and my friends. Ron's probably heard about it already, but Hermione and your parents will appreciate details."

"Yes, they will," Draco said, dipping his head so that his face briefly rested against Harry's shoulder. "If only to know where to send the poison."

Harry didn't give him a lecture about morality, as Draco had half-expected, or a shocked denial that his precious friend Granger would ever do such a thing. Instead, he gave Draco the beginning of a glare and then sighed and grabbed his arm, tugging it. "Come on."

That so pleased Draco that it made up for not being able to parade through the Ministry, wings stretched out and draped over Harry, at once sheltering him from harmful gazes and courting the envious and covetous ones.

Yes, the Blazing Season is coming.

"But have you seen someone?" Hermione's voice was so serious that Harry winced. "I know most of the Healers at St. Mungo's aren't good for you, but what about that Healer Malfoy said you'd been to see a few times? You *might* have been hurt, Harry."

"I wasn't," Harry snapped, and then tried to calm down. He *knew* that the only thing wrong with him was shock, but he couldn't expect his friends to, when they hadn't been in the battle themselves. Hell, Draco had made him sit down when they got to Harry's house, brought him fruit drinks—ones that Harry had had to cast a few spells on—and then watched him like a hawk until he went into the bedroom to use the Floo connection there.

"It was unexpected," he said. "And dealing with Draco in full Veela form was hard." He hadn't elaborated on all the details of that, because he didn't want to hear, at the moment, how Draco was wrong for ripping Parkinson's arm apart. Harry had come to terms with that on his own. "But neither of us was so much as scratched."

"If he used Dark spells, you might be affected by something that you don't know about until it starts showing up," Hermione began authoritatively.

"He's well, Granger. Do you think I would let him simply sit here, arguing with you for minutes at a time, if he wasn't?"

Harry jumped badly. He had assumed, without knowing why, that Draco's conversation with his parents would take much longer than his own conversation with Hermione, and so he hadn't paid attention to any sounds that would have indicated he was coming out of the bedroom. Draco put a hand on Harry's shoulder as he tried to move away and bent down, supposedly watching Hermione but eyeing Harry at the same time.

Harry could feel the silent question that beat between them like strokes of Draco's wings: *Do you need me to leave?*

He settled down again and shook his head. He knew his cheeks were flushed, and Hermione's eyes were darting curiously back and forth between him and Draco. Harry hoped that she wouldn't try to figure out—whatever it was that she thought she should figure out. Draco walked around the couch to sit beside him and loop an arm about Harry's shoulders, and that was enough to deal with.

"No, I suppose not," Hermione said at last. "But I think someone should stay with him tonight."

"I will, if he permits it," Draco said, and looked at her until Hermione nodded a little. Harry didn't understand what was so funny, but she wore a faint smile.

"Good," she said. "If you're sure that Russell du Michel is in custody and Ron doesn't need to go and beat him up, then I'll end the call." She shook her head at Harry. "Stay as safe as you can."

"I will," Harry said, and smiled at her. Hermione ended the firecall with a chuckle that he didn't understand and a mutter that sounded as though she had begun speaking to someone else, probably Ron. The last thing he heard was a wail from Rose, abruptly cut off as the flames disappeared from the hearth.

They sat in silence for a minute or so, until Draco stirred and Harry turned to look at him.

"There are things we need to talk about," Draco said.

Harry nodded. He recognized that. "One of them is that you aren't sorry for what you did to Pansy," he said, "and you would do it again if you thought someone put me in danger." He paused. "I don't understand why you didn't react the same way to Russell, though."

Draco grimaced and raked a hand through his hair. "Because the Veela instincts aren't rational," he said. "I didn't *see* him dueling you, although I was aware that it was happening, and I would have known at once if he'd hurt you and turned around to deal with that. But Pansy was the visible threat."

"And you probably felt more betrayed by her than you did by Russell, right?" Harry touched his arm, trying to imagine what he would feel if it turned out that Hermione or Ron had attacked someone important to him—Draco, for example. "I'm sorry. It can't have been easy to lose her friendship."

Draco jerked, as though Harry had drawn attention to a hidden wound after all, and then shook his head. "It does now. It didn't at the time. I was only thinking about you and how she might have hurt you, despite all the precautions we took." He gripped Harry's hand and squeezed it, hard. "That's the worst thing about the Blazing Season, Harry. I'm going to focus on you whether the focus makes any sense or not, whether it's what I *should* do, or whether it's what I would do if I was in my right mind. That's why the jealousy isn't rational and I might get upset if Granger or Weasley touches you. Most of the time, I would know they were no threat. But this isn't most of the time."

Harry nodded. "I know," he said. *Easy to discuss, hard to live with.* But he ignored the temptation to scoot away from Draco and push himself into a corner of the couch. He had seen Draco in full Veela form, felt those wings wrap around him with intent to hide, and had survived. That would make future victories a bit easier. "I'm prepared to do what I have to to help you with that."

Draco closed his eyes. He had thought Harry's instincts would push him away from Draco during this approach to the Blazing Season. After all, he still insisted on testing the food Draco brought him for spells. What were the chances he would understand, emotionally as well as intellectually, what Draco had to ask of him?

But he should have remembered those other instincts Harry had. If he could help someone, protect them, or at least think he was, it was always easier for him.

"Thank you," he said, taking Harry's hand and kissing the back of it. Harry flushed and flinched in the same moment, but kept still, watching him with bright eyes. "Then I think we'll start the practice in a few days, once we can be assured that Pansy and Russell aren't any more danger to

us."

Harry must have caught a hint of smugness in his tone, because he frowned. "Why can we be sure of that in a few days?"

"Mother and Father will make sure," Draco said, with a casual shrug that he knew didn't fool Harry.

"I don't want them to go to prison for murder," Harry said.

Draco had to snort at that. "Do you think they're so crude? No, it will only be a little bit of temporary suffering, less than what I did to Pansy."

Harry didn't look convinced. Draco pulled him close, resting his chin on Harry's head and hoping that would soothe the restlessness that continually darted around the center of his chest like a hummingbird made of fire.

"They're going to protect you," Draco whispered. "That's one thing you'll have to be aware of and accept. No, their protective instincts aren't the same as mine, but they're still part of the bargain."

Harry inhaled so long and deep that Draco was sure he was going to shout a protest. Then he released it and muttered, "I can live with that."

Draco kissed his ear. "I hope that I can help you go beyond living with it, and show you how to desire it, as well," he whispered.

Harry turned his head and kissed him back, on the mouth, fingers digging into his shoulders. Draco shuddered, and Harry caught his eye with a fierce look that didn't disguise the fear in his face, but which Draco loved all the better for that.

"You won't be the only one doing the teaching," Harry said.

Draco didn't extend his wings to wrap around Harry. He didn't have to, when the contentment, triumph, and pride of possession could be expressed by his hands and mouth.

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Chapter: 32

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Two—Practiced

"Will you be able to come back to work soon?"

Harry rolled his eyes and didn't bother trying to hide it. Kingsley had asked him the same question with the same ill-concealed eagerness in his voice when Harry first stepped back into the office to talk about what had happened with Russell. And now Harry was getting up to leave, and he decided he had to ask again.

"I don't think so," Harry said now, and caught Kingsley's eye with an expression that he hoped was a sufficient warning. Probably not, though, given that Kingsley simply looked puzzled. "My holiday continues for another week."

Kingsley grimaced and waved one hand. "Forgive me, Harry. My need for my best Auror keeps overcoming my memory."

Harry hesitated. He wondered if he should ask to see the case that Kingsley needed his "best Auror" for.

And then he caught himself and smiled grimly. That was the way to become trapped in the endless cycle of the Department again. He didn't want to give in now and lose all his progress, and even the slightest yielding could help him begin to do that—not because it was Kingsley's fault, necessarily, but because Harry had an obsessive personality.

"Sorry," he said. "I can't do it. In fact," he added, keeping his eyes carefully on Kingsley's face so he could see what would happen when he asked it, "I was thinking of taking a longer holiday than that, if it was necessary to overcome some of the psychic wounds that I've taken in the past few years."

Kingsley stared at him, mouth literally open. Harry had never seen him so disconcerted, and while it was sort of fun in one way, it was also sad. Harry gestured, and Kingsley coughed and hid his face behind one of the reports sprawled across the desk.

"You won't reconsider?" he asked, voice muffled.

"Reconsider *what*?" Harry tried to soften his voice when Kingsley glanced up at him. "I've taken this holiday. You were the one who's tried to interrupt it with cases, both in the past and now. It's just—I can't do that, sir. I'm going home to Draco now, and I'll contact you at the end of next week to let you know when I'm coming back." He turned and marched out of the office before Kingsley's shame-faced expression could become another argument.

As he started to near the lift, he found himself digging his nails into the back of his left hand, and sighed. He looked up and down the corridor make sure that no one could see him, and then leaned on the wall next to the lift and sucked in a deep breath, closing his eyes.

It wasn't the half-row with Kingsley that had upset him. It was the thought of what waited at home, the practice he knew he would have to start engaging in with Draco soon, if they were to be anything like ready for the Blazing Season when it came around.

Harry wiped his mouth with his hand and sighed. *Draco won't make you do anything that you can't face yet,* he told himself. *If you want to wait a few days, then I'm sure he'd let you. He wants you to be happy and comfortable.*

But against Harry's needs, he had to weigh Draco's. And Draco's eyes were permanently silver now, and he'd been unable to spend any time in his own house since the battle with Pansy and Russell. When Harry woke up and fought free of his embrace in the night, he would nod, kiss Harry's forehead, and then go to sleep on a chair next to the bed. Harry would find him there when he woke in the morning, sprawled over the chair with his wings fluttering around him, feathers blowing in the wind of his snore.

He'd taken to staring obsessively at Harry's neck and shoulder, too. Harry knew why from the books on Veela that Draco had bought him the same day as that enormous bed. Veela often marked their chosen there, at least for the Blazing Season, so that anyone who might have a troublesome claim to the chosen would know they were taken. If the chosen found a bite or scratch mark objectionable, then they could wear a necklace or collar.

Harry was uneasy about both ideas, but far more about the idea of chaining *himself*. So that left the mark.

And you're far more afraid than you should be, considering how well you did a few days ago, he told himself, straightening up. *Draco would never hurt you. He managed to hold back from hurting Pansy worse than he had when you interfered, and that was in full Veela form.*

Further on in the Blazing Season, though, Harry wasn't sure that he would have that level of authority over Draco. In fact, he was sure he wouldn't.

Harry shook his head. He knew by now that he wouldn't get past this by standing here alone and whinging to himself in silence. They both needed to make decisions about the Blazing Season, since it affected them both, and that meant he needed Draco.

There was at least one sign of progress, Harry admitted to himself as he turned and punched the button for the lift. He didn't think of needing Draco as a weakness any longer.

Draco's hands trembled as he clenched them on Harry's shoulders. His mouth watered, and no matter how much he wanted to glance up and study the side view of Harry's face for lines of strain, he couldn't remove his eyes from the expanse of skin in front of him. The nape of Harry's neck, his shoulder blades, the beginning of his spine…all of it smelled heated and nervous and attractive.

"You're sure?" he whispered. He was afraid that the words sounded distorted. A Veela's teeth didn't actually lengthen during the Blazing Season, but there might be a problem with the sheer amounts of saliva sliding down his lips.

"Yeah," Harry whispered. He leaned forwards, pillowing his head on his arms, which in turn rested on a table in front of him. His muscles trembled and flexed, and Draco almost bit down then, to hold them still. "Do it."

Draco caressed Harry's shoulder. "I think you'll find this pleasurable," he said softly.

Harry laughed a little. Draco was pleased to note another emotion besides fear in the laugh, though perhaps not a very attractive one: contempt. "I don't think so," he said. "I never liked being bitten or marked like that even when my sexual response was normal, and now—"

"Your sexual response is absolutely normal for what you've been through," Draco said firmly. He had to bite, yes, but he wasn't going to allow Harry to put himself down with his usual combination of self-loathing and desire to achieve things he hadn't.

There was a startled silence, and then all Harry's muscles relaxed with a twitch. "When you say it like that," he muttered, "I can't help believing it."

"Good, good," Draco whispered, and caressed his shoulder again. And then he really couldn't wait any longer.

He bent and fastened his teeth in the flesh of Harry's neck, grinding and biting down, half-closing his eyes as he felt the saliva leak across his lips and the different texture of Harry's skin in his mouth. His hips jolted with the satisfaction, and his wings unfolded even though he hadn't told them to. Luckily, he could keep them high and flap them so that they wouldn't drop across Harry's body and panic him even more.

Although, if he was right, then Harry should start feeling the effects of the bite right about—

Harry gave a hoarse, shuddering cry, and jerked almost hard enough to wrench Draco's teeth away from their place.

Draco smiled contentedly. *Now*.

A Veela's claws were meant to please his chosen, ultimately, however they might be used during the Blazing Season or outside it to defend. His teeth were the same way. As Draco bit and marked the skin, magic traveled into Harry's body and into his nerves, causing pleasure from every direction.

Harry was gasping and whimpering almost soundlessly, but that first sudden movement, if nothing else, had reassured Draco about what he was feeling. He pulled back and licked the mark he had left, admiring the size and jagged nature of it, before he turned Harry around.

Harry reached out and clung to his arms. His eyes were wide, close to wild. Draco touched his forehead.

"You're still fighting it," he whispered. "Let go."

Harry took a breath that made his eyelashes flutter. Then he leaned back—Draco hastily wound his arms around him so that he wouldn't topple—and seemed to relax the way he might if he was floating in water.

And then he cried out in earnest, and Draco stroked his back again and again, eyes locked on Harry's face so that he wouldn't miss a single one of his expressions.

Harry could have said that he never just *let go*. He had been with plenty of men before Laurent, sure, and he had had sex with Laurent plenty of times before the rape. But what he had was plenty of fun, and sometimes plenty of closeness. There was no headlong fall into sensation the way some people he knew described.

This time, he knew there would be, if he could release his hold on his control. But for long moments, he couldn't. He spun sickeningly like someone on a long thread connected to the side of a cliff, and the drop below was terrifying.

Draco's arms were around him. Draco was whispering for him to let go, and Harry knew that Draco wouldn't ask him to do something that would hurt him deliberately. He knew more about this than Harry did. Harry should trust him.

He let go of his thread.

Promptly, he jerked, as the pleasure came at him from every direction, striking along his nerves, his joints, his muscles. The slightest movement of a finger made him feel good. Heat pulsed in his belly, and he knew he was hard, but it wasn't agony the way it sometimes had been around Draco. This wasn't orgasm, but its own kind of satisfaction, and he couldn't keep his voice silent or his body still.

Draco gathered him closer, murmuring something over and over. The exact words didn't matter—and would probably only embarrass him if he could hear them, Harry thought in an unexpected moment of clarity—but the tone told him Draco didn't think this little display of his stupid or foolish. It was what Draco had expected, maybe even *wanted*, and that was what gave Harry the courage to continue.

The pleasure radiated back to the bite mark, and Harry fell still as he realized that it could feel even better. All he had to do was reach up and touch the bite mark.

He licked his lips. He didn't know if he was *ready* to feel more than what he'd been feeling so far,

frankly.

But he could sense Draco's waiting eagerness, and he *wanted* to feel more of this. It was the least complicated desire he'd had since the rape.

So he reached up, arching around awkwardly behind his back so that he could use his own hand, and brushed his fingers over the bite mark.

A white flare connected the bite mark and his cock, and Harry reached out, clawing for some support. Draco caught his hands and murmured something else, and even the touch of the words against his ears contributed to the light. Harry trembled, caught on the brink of something, perhaps another fall.

The light turned around and drove into him.

Harry came more helplessly than he could remember doing, jerking as if he'd been caught on a wire. His muscles clamped and clenched, his legs stiffened and then lashed out, and he felt the scrape and catch of cloth against his erection as though the fabric had suddenly become more coarse. Draco drew his fingertips gently along his arm, and it felt like someone reaching beneath his skin and starting another orgasm. Harry rolled over at the end of it, his pants sagging soaked and full, and lay there, exhausted.

Draco kissed his chin and murmured, "How do you feel?"

"Drained," Harry said, and managed to lift his head and open his eyes when he realized that that confession might not reassure Draco. Sure enough, Draco's face looked anxious, and his fingers were twitching as if he wanted to grow his claws and use them on himself for giving Harry too much sensation to deal with. Harry smiled, although he didn't think he could raise his hand to touch Draco's face. "And really, really good."

Draco lowered his head, buried it against Harry's shoulder, and, from the motion of his lashes, closed his eyes. Harry yawned once and leaned back, resting against some combination of the table, the chair, and Draco's arms that he would certainly find uncomfortable later.

But that would only be after he had woken up.

Draco couldn't keep his eyes away from Harry at breakfast the next morning, and he didn't think that he should have to. He had made Harry come yesterday, which he had frankly not expected to do this early in the game. The bite mark had various effects on different people, and most of the time, it was simply relaxing and comforting.

But Harry wasn't the ordinary chosen, and Draco was realistic enough to admit that he wasn't the ordinary Veela, either.

Harry blushed and avoided his gaze at first, fixing it on his plate, but Draco reached out and gently touched the bite mark. That made Harry blink and stutter and brought his eyes and his attention both up.

"What's the matter?" Draco asked. "I know that your lovers have seen you come before. Is that what worries you?"

Harry turned so red that Draco was afraid he would get up and stalk away from the table for a minute. But then Harry stabbed a piece of bacon with his fork, cleared his throat, and mumbled, "None of the others have ever seen me that out of control. I reckon—I reckon that I didn't like you potentially getting frightened or disgusted because I did that and then just fell asleep."

Draco smiled. "Do you know how immensely *flattering* it is that I made you come so hard you were practically unconscious afterwards?" he asked. "I can more than easily take care of myself if I need to." He had, in fact, had two wanks yesterday and one this morning before Harry awoke. All he really needed to remember was the expression on Harry's face if he wanted to climax.

Harry buried his head in his hands. Draco waited a moment. If Harry needed to hide until he got used to this, then Draco could allow that, but he didn't want Harry to feel ashamed.

"I have that fear of getting out of control," Harry whispered. "You know that."

Draco nodded. "I know."

"And I keep thinking about how I must have *looked*," Harry said. He dropped his hands away and turned to face Draco just when Draco was deciding he'd have to make Harry do so. "Stupid. Silly. Gaping at nothing and flopping around."

"Flattering, like I said," Draco said. He wanted to laugh, but he kept his voice serious and serene, because he didn't think Harry could deal well right now with what he might perceive as mockery. "Exactly the way I might have wanted my chosen during the Blazing Season to look." He paused, noted that Harry was still studying him, and added, "Do you think I would have looked silly if I'd been the one enjoying myself like that?"

"Enjoying myself," Harry muttered, as though he was testing out the name for it. Then he looked up and shook his head. "No."

"Well, then." Draco leaned back in his chair and raised his eyebrows, inviting further commentary.

Harry's face cracked into a reluctant smile. "You've made your point," he said. "Although I think I'd still find it horribly embarrassing if I saw it from outside."

Draco let his instincts take over at that point, knowing that his eyes had brightened and his claws had lengthened. He leaned forwards and murmured, "Well, you can't do that, I don't think it's

silly or embarrassing, and no one else is *ever* going to see you that way. So you don't need to worry about it."

Harry stared at him with parted lips, his cheeks flushed, and then seemed to realize what he was doing. He jerked away again and started eating.

But his flush gradually faded, and he didn't complain about it or smell ashamed and worried again that morning. Draco stretched his claws out, the only visible sign of satisfaction he would permit himself. *My chosen is learning to trust me.*

"I'm not sure that you're ready for this, Harry." Draco's voice was soft and blurred at the edges, like he was talking from a distance through that bloody awful Wireless Spell the Aurors had been pressured into using for a while.

"I have to be ready," Harry replied, and took off his shirt.

He could hear Draco swallow. He wondered if Draco could hear him do the same thing, or if he was too focused on the expanse of naked skin. Harry tossed the shirt aside and lay down on the bed, arms stretched before him and head buried in them, the way he had done the other night when Draco wanted to mark him.

He wanted to do this because he knew they would have to do it sooner or later, and it was better to get things over with now.

Draco stood behind him, not making the movement that Harry had supposed would follow his stripping: reaching out to touch and caress his back. "Harry," he said at last, and his voice was infinitely gentle. "You don't know what you're doing."

Harry gritted his teeth. "I know that I've put up pretty well with the marking, and even the jealousy," he said. They'd had an argument yesterday over whether he should to go Ron and Hermione's house. It had escalated into shouting and Draco stalking off to the fireplace, only to turn around and snap that Harry had *known* this would happen. Harry had agreed, apologized for his part of the row, and told Draco to come with him.

Ron and Hermione had been more than a bit surprised to see him show up, but they'd accepted him, and everyone had eaten dinner, and Draco had got to watch Harry as much as he wanted to be sure that no one touched him "inappropriately," and everyone was happy.

Harry, lying on the bed now and waiting for Draco to get over *his* fear, which seemed more intense even than Harry's, wondered why he didn't remember negotiating anything like this in his other relationships. There had been rows, sure, and apologies, but nothing had ever seemed this *fraught*, this ridiculously important and fragile.

Then he sighed. *It's because he's a Veela, you dolt, and you were raped. If you know the answers,*

don't ask the questions.

"I can feel what you feel," Draco said. "And I know that you're far more afraid of this than you were of the marking or the jealousy."

"I wouldn't be so certain of that," Harry said, and tried to relax his teeth so that his tongue could move and form the words normally. "Laurent's jealousy was one of the things I dreamed about and woke screaming from—"

In one smooth movement, Draco draped himself over Harry, chest to back, hands reaching out so that his fingers entwined with Harry's.

Harry screamed soundlessly into the blankets as an explosion went off in his brain. And then Draco was sitting up, pulling back, and turning Harry around so that he could face him and look into his eyes.

"You're not ready," Draco said. "Not ready to be pinned down, or fucked, or…" He let his voice trail off, and Harry could guess what fantasies filled his mind. He swallowed any drool that might have dripped down his face, though, and shook his head. "Not ready for things that make you face your worst fears."

"But I'll *have* to be ready." Harry hit his forehead with the palm of his hand and tried to ignore the small shocks that still shook his limbs. "That the problem. The Blazing Season is unforgiving. How are we going to get there if I can't endure something this simple?"

"Whose standards are you using?" Draco asked quietly. "By what you suffered, it's not simple."

Harry clenched his fingers down into the blankets and ripped upwards, causing handfuls of cloth to come out. Draco murmured wordlessly, the way he had a few nights ago when he marked Harry, and reached out to let his hand hover above Harry's cheek.

"I want it to *go away*," Harry said. "I want to be the person I was again, before Laurent changed me."

"I'm sorry," Draco said, in such a calm voice that Harry didn't think he could have taken offense to it if he tried. "I can't give you that. But I can tell you what I can give you. Will you look at me?"

Harry breathed in until he thought his chest would explode from the pressure of the air, and then looked at Draco. Draco promptly offered him a gentle smile and brought his hand into contact with Harry's skin, tracing over his stubble.

"I can give you as much time as you need," Draco said. "I can give you some patience, although my own instincts and needs will get rid of that at times. I can give you variations of the ordinary things that I would do during the Blazing Season, so that I can get close to you without

self-destructing or panicking you."

"That's not the point, though," Harry said. "Why should you have to give up everything while I give up nothing?"

Draco laughed. Harry bristled, but the glance Draco gave him a moment later indicated that he didn't intend for this to be insulting, either. He settled back on hands and heels and tried to resign himself to listening.

"I couldn't give up everything even if I tried," Draco said. "My instincts would never let me. What I need to do is *manage* what I need, and in particular the pace we take it at. I'll be fine, Harry. This is what I want, to be close to you and with you, and nudge you gently into being comfortable with me."

"Bollocks," Harry said, and saw Draco flinch as though the word was a slap in the face. Harry sighed. "Sorry. But you want more than that, don't you? You wanted to mark me. You'd probably like to lock me up in a room and make sure that no one else could touch me between now and the end of the Blazing Season."

Draco paused. "Would you like to hear what I *want* right now?"

Harry hesitated. There was a heaviness in Draco's eyes and face that reminded him of what Draco had looked like before he bent Harry over the table to mark him. But that hadn't been dangerous, and he didn't think this would be, either. Besides, he wanted to take risks.

"What?" he asked.

Draco leaned near and lowered his voice into a smooth, dark murmur, like the voice of an underground river, so that they seemed to be alone in an isolated cave. "I'd like to make you come with the touch of the back of my hand to your cheek. I'd like to lie down beside you and sleep with you, and for your sleep to be deep and dreamless. I'd like to be inside you and rock for hours, so that you can't come and hover helplessly on the edge and moan and cry beneath me. I'd like to see the whole of the Auror Department staring enviously at me for having captured you. I'd like to see you look at me entirely without fear."

Harry licked his dry lips. "But—"

"The Blazing Season isn't all one thing, isn't all one set of desires." Draco leaned back against the nearest pillow and stared at him, eyes half-lidded. "Do you understand? I'm not settling for something lesser because I can't pin you down and fuck you right now. If I can't ever do that, I'll find something that satisfies me just as much or more, and which you can handle. The Blazing Season changes from moment to moment and in the intensity of the desires, which is why it's so difficult to handle in the first place. It *would* be a lot easier, I agree, if I could just tell you what I need by a certain date and we could only practice that. But it doesn't work that way." He shot Harry a wicked smile. "And I fully intend to be demanding."

Harry muttered when he could get his breath, "No one ever explained that to me before."

Draco shrugged. "It's something that it's hard to talk about to someone who hasn't experienced it before, and not all Veela feel it the same way. A few of them *do* have steady desires, and more have one wish that predominates over all the others." He reached out and caught Harry's hands, tapping them with gentle claws. Harry realized that he hadn't even noticed this time when Draco grew his claws, where before he would have been hyper-alert the moment he no longer looked fully human. "I'm lucky to be one of the more extreme ones, I think. I'm adaptable. I'm flexible." He bent his mouth closer to Harry's ear. "You wouldn't *believe* all the ways that I'm flexible."

Harry gasped out a laugh and leaned closer for a kiss. Draco returned it not only with every appearance of complete contentment, but eagerly, his tongue darting and brushing against Harry's in a delicate dance.

Maybe that was another way he should trust Draco, Harry thought: trust him to say it if he needed something.

And I should start trusting him with my own needs, as well.

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Chapter: 33

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirty-Three—Enchanted

"You look happier," Hermione whispered to him at one point when they were alone in the kitchen.

Harry looked up, surprised. He and Draco had come to dinner at Ron and Hermione's house again, and Hermione had made sure to stay on her side of the table, restricting herself to one quick shake of Harry's hand and plenty of conversation. Harry had thought she understood about coming so close.

"I am," he took the opportunity to say, while he checked over Hermione's shoulder. Draco was still engaged in arguing about Quidditch with Ron, and he looked no more Veela than he normally did now, when the silver eyes were constant and the claws almost always out. "A lot more than I expected to be. I'd better go back to him, though, or he might get more upset."

"I don't understand that," Hermione admitted with a small frown. "How can you be happy with

someone who's that jealous over you?"

"Because those instincts are a part of him, too," Harry said. "I know it's not all year round, either. It'd be a lot harder to live with if it was." He ducked past Hermione and had made it to the entrance of the kitchen before two things happened at once.

Hermione reached out to put a hand on his shoulder, and Draco looked up and saw them.

He grew his wings so fast it looked more as though he had begun to shine with silver sunlight, and then he beat them down and actually left the ground, skimming through Ron and Hermione's drawing room and straight towards both of them.

Harry turned instinctively, putting himself between Hermione and Draco, but making sure that he was looking over his shoulder at Draco. Draco landed behind him and grabbed him, wings sweeping around his chest, hands closing on his shoulders, holding him so firmly that Harry knew he couldn't have broken free even if he wanted to.

His heart was fast in a moment; he went short of breath. Harry shook his head and brutally reminded himself of his magical strength, much greater than his physical strength and capable of throwing even Draco back. There was no reason to panic. He was being held by someone who would never hurt him, someone who simply needed him to remain still in his arms so that Draco could assert his claim.

Draco leaned past Harry and gave a weird mixture of a warbling croon and a screech, and Harry remembered that Draco wouldn't hurt *him*, but that was no guarantee that he wouldn't hurt others. Harry reached out and grasped the back of Draco's neck. The silver eyes focused on his face and might have dimmed a bit.

"It's all right," Harry said firmly. "I'm yours, you know that." He paused, then, knowing he was taking a risk, added, "And you're mine, aren't you? Or did you *mean* to smile at that witch who passed us in the street after we Apparated to Diagon Alley today?"

Draco blinked, and his wings sagged a bit. "No," he said. "I only—I didn't think." He leaned his head on Harry's shoulder, rubbing Harry's face with a rough mixture of stubble and pinfeathers, and closed his eyes.

"Of course you didn't," Harry said. "You don't, often. And I know it's hard during the Blazing Season, but I would appreciate it if you didn't attack my best friends." Brisk and calm was the ticket, he thought. That helped him ignore, among things, the way his hand was shaking and the way the skin on his chest seemed to flinch from contact with the wings.

"They shouldn't touch you." Draco's voice deepened again, though in more human registers this time. He glared at Hermione. "She knows better."

"I'm sorry, Malfoy." Hermione was flushed, and she looked more contrite than Harry was used to

seeing her unless she'd got a fact wrong. "I didn't think, either." She looked over Draco's shoulder, and Harry turned in time to see Ron, cradling Rose in one hand, quietly slip his wand back into his pocket with the other.

"Now that we've established everyone's a little thoughtless," Harry said brightly, "perhaps you could let me go, Draco?"

Draco clenched his hands down and refused to respond.

"We do need to sit down and have dinner," Harry said. He thought about applying an elbow to Draco's ribs and decided against it. Draco didn't look in the mood to appreciate casual touches right now. "Unless you want Hermione to hand us plates so we can eat standing up, but then she'd have to touch me again."

Draco swallowed. Some of the feathers had sunk back into his skin, Harry thought, but new ones had emerged, making his face a fascinating shimmer and play of light. "Can—can you sit on my lap, Harry?"

Harry was light-headed with the surge of embarrassment that followed. Letting go in front of Draco alone, as he had done when he was marked, was one thing, but to do something so dependent and helpless in front of his best friends was another.

Draco made a face that Harry suspected was his attempt to conceal his own humiliation, but he didn't look away. Harry realized how much courage it must take for him to keep standing here, suggesting the one thing that would make it possible for him to soothe his Veela instincts and continue eating dinner with someone who had touched his chosen.

And if *he* could get over it, with his instincts screaming at him and the Blazing Season urging murder, then why couldn't Harry?

"Yeah," Harry said, trying to ignore the way Hermione took a big, deep gulp of air and Ron looked utterly shocked. "Come on." He grabbed Draco's arm and tugged him towards the larger of the two chairs Ron and Hermione had set out, focusing his mind more on the clasp of his hands and the sheer pull his muscles could exert than the incredulous glances he knew would be coming his way. or the way Draco stumbled as if he hadn't expected this, or his fear.

Well, it *would* have been nice if he could think more about the way he was handling Draco than about his fear, but he couldn't.

Draco sat down in the chair, looking as if he were still dazed. Harry sat on his lap and pushed Draco's wings away when they automatically tried to curl around him. "If you have them there, then I can't eat," he said in the same brisk, authoritative tone as before. He didn't know if the Veela would care about practical realities, but perhaps he could make it care.

Sure enough, Draco shifted so that his wings slid through the loops on the back of the chair

instead and cast Harry a hesitant glance. Harry nodded and smiled to him, then decided that wasn't enough and leaned in for a kiss. Draco gasped and greedily opened his mouth, trying to intertwine their tongues.

Ron gave the loudest throat-clearing in the history of the universe. Harry pulled back and touched Draco on the cheek. "More later, when we get home," he whispered.

Draco nodded and then reached for the plate Hermione was handing across the table. He took great care to make sure that Hermione's hands came nowhere near Harry's skin, Harry noticed. Hermione rolled her eyes, but Harry gave her a silent glance to tell her to shut up. She sat back in her chair and shook her head rather than saying something, which made Harry decide that he'd have to thank her, too, later.

Harry started to cast the round of charms that would reassure him there were no potions or curses in the food, but Draco picked up a forkful of fish, took a bite, chewed it for a moment, and announced, "Nothing in there. I'd recognize it." Then he held the rest of the forkful towards Harry.

A sense memory of Laurent force-feeding him chicken made Harry gag. He shied back against Draco's chest and tried to control his breathing.

Draco caught him with one arm, holding the fork steady with the other, and whispered, "What's wrong?"

Harry licked his lips. He'd thought he'd told Draco about Laurent not allowing him to choose his meals, but perhaps he hadn't provided enough detail. "I—*he* used to shove food down my throat like that, all the time reassuring me that it was good and what I liked to eat, I just didn't know it. Draco, please, do I *have* to?" He reckoned he would have to if that was what it took to content the Veela, but he honestly wasn't sure the food would stay down.

Draco dropped the fork at once and crooned in his ear. "Of course not," he whispered. "Why don't you check the food and feed *me* from the pieces that you decide are all right?"

And that was what they did, with Harry testing each dish with his round of spells and then feeding Draco from the same fork. As long as he could control the speed with which the fork approached his mouth, Harry found out, and as long as Draco didn't hold Harry too tightly at the same time, then it worked.

He caught Ron's eye, and Ron gave him a frankly incredulous look, followed by a grin. Hermione was struggling to control her smile. Harry shook his head and mouthed, *Not one word,* to them more than once, and to their credit, they did manage to keep the conversation mostly normal.

"Draco? What is all this?"

Draco took a deep breath and turned around. His vision swayed as he did so, and he braced himself with one hand on the sofa. God knew he wouldn't impress Harry if he *fainted* right at the beginning of something as important as this.

Harry stood with his cloak—the cloak Draco had given him—draped over his arm, his eyes fixed on the table that dominated the middle of Draco's kitchen. Draco knew what he would be seeing, and for that reason among others, he kept his eyes fastened on Harry for a minute before he turned to look himself. Harry seemed to have returned sound and safe from the end of his first week back at work, but Draco knew that appearances were deceptive, and he sniffed for the scent of blood before he was satisfied that it didn't exist.

Then he turned and looked at the table.

Across the table were spread meat pies, platters of scrambled eggs, a whole roast boar, glasses of milk and pumpkin juice and wine, bowls of cereal, omelets in delicate pans, fish and chicken in all the different and marvelous sauces that the house-elves knew how to prepare, sandwiches that dazed Draco with their variety, cherries and oranges and plums and pears and apples cut into tiny triangular sections, desserts buried under chocolate and cream, and soups that had made Draco drool and which he'd carefully preserved under Stasis Charms so that they would smell as good to Harry as they did to him when first-made.

"What is all this?" Harry repeated, but with a different tone in his voice. Draco hadn't told him about what would happen in advance, only invited him over for dinner, with the promise that Harry could test every bit of food with spells and charms the way he had at Weasley and Granger's house.

"I want to help you overcome the issues that you still have about food," Draco said, and waited.

Harry held up a hand in what looked like a gesture of denial, and then dropped it again. He stared at the meal, or, Draco had to admit, feast. "Draco…"

"You can cast all the spells you want," Draco said quietly. "I would never prevent you from doing that. But I don't think it's fair that you should have to cook all your meals, and when the Blazing Season officially starts, in a few weeks, then I'll *have* to feed you some things. Please? This is another kind of practice, in its own way."

Harry looked at him, then at the table again. "And I can pick what I want to eat?"

Draco's wings plumed out from his shoulders. Luckily, he had worn one of those specially modified shirts that Madam Malkin's sold for Veela, with the front looking normal but the back attached only by thin straps across the shoulders, so the wings could stretch out without interference. "Yes," he said. "Of course. Will you tell me what Laurent did?"

Harry grimaced and dropped his cloak on the nearest chair. "He used to limit my choices of food

and insist that other stuff was so unhealthy I should never eat it. He used the Veela instincts to claim that he was merely protecting me and couldn't bear the thought of losing me. And then it got to the point where he was force-feeding me what he thought was good, such as cream and chicken sandwiches." He looked as though he'd vomit from the mere mention of the food. Draco unobtrusively flicked his wand and banished all the dishes covered in cream and all the chicken sandwiches and roasted chicken from the table.

"The food had potions in it that controlled me." Harry shook his head and then paused. "I think I told you that bit already."

"Can you imagine that I'm bored or wouldn't want to hear it again?" Draco whispered, and stepped nearer to run his hands over Harry's shoulders. "Everything you can say interests me."

Harry watched him with his head on one side. "I'm starting to understand that. But it's still hard to grasp."

"Why?' Draco buried his head in Harry's neck and sniffed once, then turned him around so that he could stand with his chest to Harry's back. Harry tensed a bit, but relaxed when Draco kept his wings back. "Do you think you're uninteresting, or did *he* convince you that he was the only one who could admire you?"

"Nothing like that." Harry shrugged, and Draco allowed it, but kept his hands in place, so that they merely rode up with Harry's shrug and then fell back. Harry drew a breath as if he was going to object and then let it lapse again. "I just…I kept myself separate from most people after the trial. I didn't go out of my way to attract anyone, and the only people who tried to date me, until you, were people I *knew* were after me for my fame and money. And now here you are, someone I have to accept isn't."

Draco crooned. Harry's shoulders dropped. Draco waited a few moments to see if he would object to the croon and then whispered, "Will you be able to try the meal? You can go at your own pace. You can cast all the spells you want."

"You said that already," Harry muttered, but without much rancor. After a second, he nodded decisively and moved forwards. "All right, then. Let's."

Draco moved behind him, and drew his chair out for him, and crooned at him again when Harry hesitated before sitting down. Harry reached back and tugged on his wing in response. Draco gasped as the shiver of pleasure seemed to slide all the way down his spine to his feet, and Harry gave him a peculiar smile. Draco hoped he would get to see more of that smile, and feel more of those touches, soon.

Harry started with the fruit, casting spells that dug into the slices without disturbing them. Draco watched the movements of his wand, more delicate and skilled than he could have mustered himself or seen anyone else muster, and felt incoherent with lust and longing and admiration. He told Harry so.

Harry flushed. "You only think that because of the Blazing Season," he muttered. "I'm not that much more skillful than anyone else."

"Yes, you are," Draco said, and reached out to lock his hand gently into place around Harry's, holding the wand still. "Look at the way you handle it. Your fingers don't move nervously up and down the shaft, the way some wizards' do. You know exactly where each little pulse of magic is going to go before you cast it. That's something I can't do. And you know how to control and channel the power of spells that other people release in one big, messy explosion. That's skill."

Harry gave a tiny moan that could well have been a scream for the way it made Draco suddenly feel lighter, more confident, happier. He looked down and realized that he'd been stroking Harry's fingers with his own, sliding them across the small free portion of Harry's palm and caressing the heel of his hand.

"Oh, your hands are sensitive, are they?" Draco whispered, and spread his wings further, flapping them once. Small bolts of white magic broke away from them, flipping over and entwining themselves in midair, changing color to silver as they entered his fingers. "What about this?" He stroked down again, but now with the Veela magic that normally stayed in his wings firmly ensconced in his hands.

Harry cried out hoarsely and bowed his head. "I thought—I thought we were supposed to practice eating food," he said.

"That can wait for later," Draco said, still light, still dancing on the edge, and pulled Harry out of the chair, laying him down on the floor. Harry stared up at him, face tight with desperation. Draco waved his fingers delicately at Harry's robe and trouser buttons, and they slid out of the way and let his cock free.

Harry closed his eyes and sucked in a long breath. He seemed to be trying to hide it, but Draco knew when someone was aroused by his power.

"I told you," he whispered, "you have no need to be embarrassed here," and he bowed his head and swallowed the head of Harry's cock.

Harry bucked, which was no trouble for Draco to absorb with his light hold. He licked a few times and then drew back to ask conscientiously, "Do you give me permission to practice this with you?"

"Yes, *bastard*," Harry said, and his words were heartfelt enough that Draco dropped to the carpet beside him, wings still held high, and began to suck in earnest.

The taste of Harry's skin was enchanting, of course, just as it should be, slick and salty and sweet with magic. Draco reached down to caress his balls as Harry half-shrieked and shouted, and then, trembling with his own daring, reached back to run his fingers over Harry's hole and arse.

Harry doubled up his legs like a rabbit kicking in a trap, and Draco was sure he'd be shoved away. But Harry simply moaned, "Oh, so *good*," let his head roll to the side, and mumbled something about needing forgiveness.

Draco knew what he was talking about when he came in the next moment. Draco swallowed neatly, feeling the working of his throat while a glittering haze settled into place throughout his mind, his body loose and warm. He leaned close to Harry's leg and came, too, the tension in his muscles flooding out and dissolving into pleasure so glorious that only the way he was touching Harry, *finally*, could compare to it.

When he raised his head, Harry's face was once again a study in embarrassment. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Do you know how *flattering* that is, that you came like that, for me?" Draco murmured, and drew him up into his arms for a kiss that at last made Harry flush for different reasons.

Harry had been weighing certain things in his mind for what felt like years now, although it was less than a week since Draco had sucked him off and then helped him back into a chair and caressed his back until he was ready to try the food.

And Harry had, and nothing had attacked him, and he didn't feel any of the side-effects from potions or charms that he knew he could have expected to.

It had been a wonderful evening. Draco had touched Harry's cheek with the backs of his fingers before he let him go and gazed at him in serene contentment, and that had made Harry flush worse than ever, because it seemed he'd done so little to give Draco that pleasure. He wanted to do something more—more active, more giving. He couldn't continue being a passive plaything that Draco touched and made orgasm and took care of.

The fact that Draco didn't mind that didn't matter. *Harry* minded it.

So he considered what he could do and what Draco had done so far, and what he could stand, based on the memories that still haunted him sometimes when Draco reached towards him with wings or arms. And then he planned his ambush.

It began innocently with him inviting Draco over for dinner, and mentioning that he could help cook it. Draco had agreed, his voice trembling with eagerness. Harry had smiled, winked, and then shut down the Floo connection before Draco could ask extensive questions.

And then he had braced his hands on the mantle and shut his eyes, leaning his head down between his arms. Was he *sure* that he wanted to do this? Beginning it and then having it stop it because of his fear would be more devastating for Draco than never beginning it at all, Harry knew. Draco would be happy to let things go along as they were during this buildup to the

Then he remembered the way he had thought about Draco all during work that day, to the point that Ron had waved his hand in front of Harry's face and asked him to pay attention to the case they were discussing, when he never used to think about anything but work.

Yes. He was sure.

When Draco came through the Floo connection, Harry had even decided how he would do it. Draco was the one who was good with seduction, the way Veela were supposed to be, and Harry could never match him in sheer enticement. He would attack directly instead, and dare Draco not to be overwhelmed by what he could do.

It helped that the gift he'd chosen to give Draco was one that Laurent hadn't preferred, though of course they'd done it. Harry could draw a deep breath and step forwards more positively when Draco stepped out of the flames.

He staggered, of course, the way everyone did because of the unusual shape of Harry's hearth. That gave Harry the chance to catch Draco in his arms and kiss him thoroughly.

He was used to the taste of Draco's mouth by now, so he didn't expect it to make his body thrum as though he was a harp whose strings someone was touching, but it did. Harry shuddered, and then shuddered again for a different reason when Draco's wings blazed into existence.

Well. Obviously the best way to control his fear was to drown it with pleasure. Harry pressed forwards even more, thrusting his knee in between Draco's legs the way he'd done to Harry on the battlefield outside Russell's house and rubbing fiercely up and down.

Draco's knees gave out and he sagged back against the fireplace. Harry followed him down, crowing in silent triumph, tearing at Draco's clothes with both hands but also trying to cradle his head to make sure that he wouldn't crack his skull open on the brick and stone of the hearth.

"Harry," Draco gasped. His hands reached out, and Harry turned his head to kiss the palm once before concentrating on his goal.

Draco's cock sprang free. Harry stared down at it, knowing he must look like an idiot, but not caring for the moment. Draco was right, after all; he was the only one around to see.

Draco's cock was long, pale, and straight, already hard but just beginning to flush with blood. Harry took a deep breath—and remembered only later that that was a gesture he used to make all the time before this, a gesture from his old self—and plunged his head straight down.

For a minute, he feared he'd done something wrong, as Draco made a moaning, grunting sound like a fish dying. Three years and more since he'd done this. He'd slipped up, or let a tooth scrape through—

Draco's hand flailed out and settled on Harry's bite mark, the fingernails curved into claws. Harry lurched at the pleasure that tore through him, but more at Draco's hiss of, "*Don't stop."*

Harry kissed the side of Draco's erection as a way of saying that he wouldn't, and then began to suck in earnest.

He'd once known how to do this, and it came back to him as he moved his mouth up and down, as he swirled his tongue, as he switched his hands into new positions continually, from stroling Draco's stomach to touching his balls, to caressing just behind his cock, to reaching up and teasing at his arse, to squeezing it. Draco turned his head to the side, panting, and more feathers broke out over his skin, soft and fluttering, mottling his face and neck, and then popping out on his belly. Harry stirred his finger through them.

Draco jerked in his mouth. The word that came out of his mouth started at first as Harry's name, modulated into a croon, and became a helpless wail.

Helpless. *Harry* was doing that to him.

Power mingled with the pleasure, and the panic retreated, swept away on the same rising waves that made Harry suck harder and touch the feathers again, this time tweaking and pinching them between two fingers as he did the edge of Draco's wing.

He looked up, and Draco's silver eyes caught and held him. Harry couldn't look away from them, could barely swallow when Draco's hips flexed up for the last time and he came.

Draco lay back, wings spread out beneath him as a blanket, and extended a languid hand. Harry climbed on top of him, already yanking his trousers and pants down impatiently. Draco touched a finger to his cock, and Harry hissed; it was like being caressed by a gentle lightning storm. He'd probably put magic in his hands again, the bastard.

"Thank you," Draco whispered. "Made me feel so good. Going to make *you* feel so good." His hand began to glide up and down.

Harry joined in, wanking himself fast at first, but Draco shook his head, his smile bright and dazed and mysterious, and Harry slowed down. He would have liked to watch, but he didn't catch more than a glimpse or two, because it was so hard to take his eyes from Draco's face.

The pleasure that stabbed through him wasn't as brilliant as the orgasm that had consumed him when Draco marked him, but it still made his mark throb and his breath come out in little stabbing pants. Draco caught him and kissed him as he crumpled, cradling Harry in both arms. His wings twitched once, but Harry shook his head.

He did think, though, that with a bit more practice, he might be able to bear even that.

In the meantime, he had something important to say, and levered himself up on his elbows, peering down at Draco. Draco, who had started to speak, stopped and frowned at him.

"It's nothing bad," Harry reassured him. "It's just that I love you."

Draco crooned before he took Harry's mouth almost viciously, and hours later Harry was still hearing it, that sound that filled the air with the motion of light and the shimmer of bells.

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Chapter: 34

Thank you again for all the reviews! This is the last chapter of *Veela-Struck.* I hope you've enjoyed the story.

Chapter Thirty-Four—Blazed

Harry knew the Blazing Season had begun the day Draco arrived at his house wrapped in pale light and stared at him with silent, burning eyes. The back of his neck and back were overgrown with silvery feathers, and his wings were out, and his claws had taken over his hands in much the same way they had when he battled Pansy and Russell, making them into talons.

Harry swallowed. They had practiced for this, he reminded himself as he sat up in his bed and reached out a steady hand. Draco had spent the last few days in sudden isolation, as though struggling with something. The books said that Veela often did this because they were trying to come to terms with their emerging instincts, which would begin to challenge their human mindset for supremacy.

He was not going to think of someone else who had done the same thing.

Draco grabbed Harry's hand and rubbed his face against it, his expression soft and rapturous. When he opened his mouth—strangely elongated but not quite a beak—what came forth was a croon. Harry shuddered as the croon seemed to work its way down his spine like those hooked fingers.

"I know," he told Draco, and ignored the quickening of his breath. "Take what you need."

Draco climbed into the bed and behind him, spreading his wings. Harry braced himself a moment before the wings swept around him.

This was still the hardest thing for him to bear, being cut off from the world by walls of feathers that it was hard for even magic to get through. He couldn't punch or fight his way out. Well, he

could, but he would hurt Draco. And so would the explosion of his wild magic, the magic that he had once counted on to defend him from a Veela. He could only sit here, tense, while Draco glared vigilantly from side to side, looking for some challenger that didn't exist, and wait until the moment ended.

Then Draco stuck his head down between the wings and crooned, and Harry realized that he couldn't do that, either, because he would distress Draco.

He took in a deep breath, told himself this was no harder than diving underwater after a case where the criminal in question had almost drowned him, and lay back, forcing the breath and the tension out all at once.

Draco's wings received him. Draco's arms cradled him, and his voice began a low, steady trill that wound in and out of Harry's hearing the way he imagined a lullaby might have done. He couldn't remember his mother singing a lullaby to him. Just another loss that he'd learned to live with.

Draco's hands, digging deep into his shoulders to massage, the hard claws incapable of hurting him, said that he didn't have to live with it and struggle and suffer alone. He could trust someone else to support him, and that person would gladly do so. He could trust Draco to take care of him.

With enormous effort that gradually, imperceptibly, stopped being effort and became the truth, Harry turned his head to the side and relaxed.

Draco knew people were staring at him as he paraded through the Ministry with his gift on a leash. That didn't matter. He *wanted* people to stare, so that everyone would know Harry was his and that Draco obtained such gifts for him that no one else could compete or compare.

The gift behind him snorted and once tried to dig in its feet. Draco ignored that. In fact, since he had fixed one impressive silver eye on the gift back at the shop and stared at it for a few moments, all the struggles had been for appearance's sake only. The gift knew what would happen if it delayed too much.

He came to the door of Harry and Weasley's office and knocked. He knocked impressively too, of course, with a ringing sound that traveled further than any other knock would and made other people stick their heads out of their offices. Draco looked haughtily back at them, silently inviting them to be the audience for the next part of the play. They would probably never see anything so wonderful in their lives, anyway, and he ought to do his part in providing entertainment to the plebeians.

Weasley opened the door, stared for a moment at Draco and the gift, and then gestured within. "You want Harry."

Draco nodded, but didn't move. First of all, he wanted Harry's reaction to be public. Second, he

wanted the chance to shield Harry with his wings from curious gazes and so tell them who he belonged to."

"Right," Weasley said, his eyebrows creeping up slowly, and then turned and called Harry's name over his shoulder.

Harry stood up from his desk and came forwards. The color of his eyes was enough to make Draco's heart speed up. And the apprehension in them made him move his wings forwards at once, but then he remembered Harry wouldn't be able to see the gift if he did that and moved them back again.

Harry stopped, and his eyes widened. "Draco. You didn't."

Draco swallowed. "You don't like it, then?" His voice was higher and harsher than it would be ordinarily when he was in human guise, but Harry showed no sign of not understanding it. He simply fell to one knee and reached out a hand. The miniature Abraxan foal trotted towards him and reached out with its nose, snorting as though to say that Draco had treated it horribly and would Harry help? Its palomino coat, pale mane and tail, and wings were perfect. Draco knew they were, because he had spent hours in the shop this morning choosing the most beautiful one. Harry couldn't dislike it because he found fault with it, so it must be for some other reason.

Harry glanced up and then rose swiftly to his feet. "I love it," he said softly. "It's just—Draco, how can I feed it and spend time with it the way it deserves? Being an Auror is demanding."

"If you think that I wouldn't be happy to take care of it for you, then you're wrong," Draco said, and the Veela instincts took over. He drew Harry to him and embraced him, then lifted his wings like a hovering wall. All those jealous eyes peering from the corridor could see the Abraxan foal; its purpose was to be seen. But not Harry.

Harry huffed out his breath once, then nodded. "All right. But how big is it going to grow?"

"Not much bigger than a tall dog," Draco said. "And if your house is too small for it, I'll get you a bigger house."

He didn't understand why Harry chuckled at that, at least until Harry whispered, "You don't need to do that, Draco. Even promise it."

"*Yes, I do.*" Draco felt Harry stiffen at the tone of his voice, but he couldn't help himself. They had discussed and *discussed* the Blazing Season, and still Harry didn't seem to understand what it meant. "Everything you need, you can have. Everything you want, you *will* have. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

For a few moments more, he thought Harry might make the objection that gifts like this weren't part of what he wanted, in which case Draco would retort that he needed to give them. But then Harry, as he had with the cloak and the books and the bed that Draco had bought him months

ago, softened and nodded his acceptance. "Thank you." He looked down at the foal. "Can he be house-trained?"

"I never would have bought him as an indoor pet if he couldn't," Draco said, a bit offended. "I would have bought you a farm instead."

He *really* didn't understand why Harry laughed, but it didn't seem to be at him, so he fanned his wings out and offered the watchers a screech of triumph. Most of them scurried back into their offices.

Harry leaned back against the door of Mabinogion House and closed his eyes. He had left a note for Draco telling him where he would be; one of the first things Draco had insisted on when he felt the Blazing Season coming was that Harry let him know where he was at all times, so he didn't tear apart other people in a jealous rage. But Harry simply hadn't been able to remain in the house right now.

Strangely, the hardest aspect of Blazing Season for him wasn't the gifts, or being wrapped in Draco's wings. He had at least some practice with those things beforehand. The hardest thing was just being the focus of Draco's concentrated *attention*.

Draco was always looking at him. He always wanted to know what Harry was thinking if he smiled or laughed. Harry only had to glance at something before Draco was offering to buy it, or give it to Harry if it was something he owned. And he had begun to sing—not croon, not trill, but offer him small, swift, beautiful songs like a bird courting its mate.

Harry could bear it, really. But for a while, he just needed a few hours by himself. He had left the note and Apparated to the coordinates Narcissa had given him when Draco had gone into the shower to wash himself. It took him much longer with his wings and the feathers that covered his neck and back.

He turned around and looked curiously at the house. The entrance hall in front of him opened quickly into a broad, high central room, which was circular and had doors in every direction. Harry turned around in the middle of it, gaping at the ceiling, which looked as if it went up for at least three floors.

The decoration was soft colors for the most part, smoke-greys and wood-browns and a few shades of pastel green and silver. Harry wondered if Narcissa had decorated it for him, or if the last owner who'd lived here had been someone with a similar personality to his, just by coincidence.

Then he shook his head. *It must have been the former owner, of course. How in the world would she know that I liked these colors?*

He walked further into the house, reaching out to test each door he passed. Most of them seemed

to lead to neutral rooms that could have been studies, libraries, bedrooms, guest rooms, or drawing rooms when the house was in use. Not all of them had furniture, but all of them *did* have windows, and the glow of wards that Harry had to respect. Some wards strengthened when left in place for a long time, and these felt as if they had been there for centuries.

He opened one door on the far side of the central room from the hall and simply stood there with his throat tightening. If not for the walls and the windows, he would have thought he was outside. There was a fountain in the middle of this room, arching up and splashing gently into its basin, which was made of light arches of stone. The "carpet" was a thick dusting of moss and grass, as well as tiny flowers like violets that wouldn't make it hard to walk. And yet the sunlight was clearly framed by the windows. Harry moved into it, shaking his head.

"Whoever built this house put a lot of effort into making it work," he muttered, and trailed his hands through the water. It felt perfectly cool, looked perfectly clear, and, when he dared to drink it, filled his mouth with a spark of coolness that wasn't quite a taste.

He lost track of how long he sat on the side of the fountain, tracing the course of individual drops of water and forgetting about himself, until the first blow fell against the wards.

Harry was on his feet in seconds, wand out, neck prickling as the little hairs there rose to attention, and then he heard the demanding screech and felt the shimmer of familiar magic crackling along the wards, looking for the way in.

Harry could feel himself flush. He hadn't *meant* to use the wards to keep Draco out. He'd just come here for some distance, and of course the wards had closed in behind him again when he came through the door. He was sorry for that, because if he wanted to hold Draco away from him, it should have been a conscious decision.

"Sorry!" he shouted, and concentrated on the silent spell that Narcissa had told him would unlock all the wards for a single instant, long enough to allow the passage of one person.

He heard the door boom open and then the sound of stamping footsteps as Draco searched for him. Deciding that he should confront him before anything was destroyed, Harry stepped out of the fountain room and shut the door behind him.

Draco was in the middle of the large central room, wings fanned out, gaze darting as though he didn't care what was behind any of the doors unless they could lead him to Harry. He had once again transformed fully, with talons in the place of his feet as well as his hands, and his clothes hanging in tatters from him. A crest of what looked simultaneously like branching feathers and waving scales rose from the back of his head. Harry winced. He knew Draco had liked that particular robe.

"I'm right here," he said, stepping forwards.

Draco shrieked and leaped into the air, flying this time, coming down on him from above like a

great hawk. Harry flinched, but stood as still as he could when he was fighting Auror instincts along with the ones that Laurent had inspired in him.

Draco seemed to notice the flinch, because somehow he halted himself in the middle of his plunge, hovering above Harry with a questioning sound. Harry nodded and reached out his arms, trying to smile.

Draco dropped down the rest of the way and landed pressed up against Harry, holding his jaw in his talons as he turned it back and forth. Harry shivered. He had almost got used to the brightness of Draco's eyes in the past little while—so brilliant a silver that they no longer looked human—but not the intensity with which he studied Harry, or his *silence*. He did still talk since the Blazing Season had begun, but he relied more on touch and looks. That was part of the reason Harry had felt he had to break away for a short time.

"I'm all right," Harry whispered. "I didn't mean to keep you away from me. I'm still yours."

A single soft sound that Harry could have called a chirp if he was feeling daring enough, and Draco turned him around and began to groom Harry's hair with his beak, drawing out individual strands and nibbling on them gently. Harry hesitated, then leaned forwards against the clutch of his arms. They were solid enough that he thought he wouldn't fall.

"Talk to me."

Harry blinked. It took him a moment to recognize the words, which were distorted by the current shape of Draco's mouth, and then he had the urge to ask what he should talk about. But he thought he knew, and trying to feign ignorance would be stupid for both him and Draco. He shut his eyes and gave himself over, as much as he could, to the same impulse that had once made him babble to his boyfriends about everything and nothing.

"I was thinking today about this case I worked on earlier, the one I mentioned hiding from you," he muttered. Draco's arms tightened, but he said nothing, going on with the grooming. Harry smiled. "I enjoy the feeling that I can talk about anything to you, at least during the Blazing Season, and you won't be upset."

Draco said nothing, though his claws might have pricked into Harry's arms a bit harder than normal.

"It's about the disappearance of a man called Sandys," Harry murmured. "Our only witness isn't very reliable. There have been multiple attempts to solve it, and neither worked. I thought I could find out enough, but one of the families involved is pure-blood, and they've been stymieing me…"

He talked on, almost losing track of the words, his voice rising and falling like the fountain. Draco remained with him, clucking and chirruping, or asking a question when Harry paused in his recitation. So Harry told him the whole story of the case, and it no longer felt like a secret he

had to hold onto, but a gift they could share together.

Harry had almost fallen asleep when Draco said, "Thank you."

Harry blinked, yawned, and stood upright, glancing over his shoulder. Draco's beak had gone, although his silver eyes remained and he still looked at Harry with that daunting intensity. But Harry had withstood it for the last—hour? Half-hour? That in itself was unusual. He kept track of time automatically, without thinking about it.

"You're welcome," Harry said. "Honestly, Draco, I didn't mean to shut you out."

"I know," Draco said. "And I didn't mean to panic when I discovered that you were gone, especially because your note told me exactly where you were going and Mabinogion House is a lot safer than some destinations." He remained motionless for some time, searching Harry's eyes as if he required some sort of acknowledgment.

Harry nodded back, and Draco's face melted into a smile and he leaned forwards to rest his head heavily on Harry's shoulder. "I don't care if we have to apologize to each other a lot more often than most Veela and their chosen have to do," he whispered. "I wouldn't trade you for anything."

"Neither would I," Harry said, and astonished himself a little by speaking the absolute truth.

Draco stepped out of the shower and beat his wings rapidly, sending the last drops of water spiraling out so that they struck the walls. The walls immediately and greedily absorbed them. Draco arched his back and reached down to scratch the feathers between his wings, which tended to itch after a thorough cleansing like this one.

He had needed it, though. He had the answer to Harry's problem with the Sandys case, but spending too much time with that pure-blood family—who had once been the family of Mariella, Sandys's lover—had made him feel unclean.

Draco shook his head. He didn't want to think about that anymore, and he didn't have to, except to keep the details fresh in his mind as a gift to his chosen. And he should be spending more thought on the test that this evening would be, anyway.

Tonight was the evening that he would both present Harry with food, and, hopefully, sleep with him. If they could find a position that would be agreeable to both of them.

Draco had a few ideas.

This Blazing Season had been swifter and brighter than any other he could remember. Of course, he had a chosen this time, which made all the difference and kept him from brooding and sulking. But it could still have been so much more difficult than it was. The endless practice—which Draco hadn't minded *at all*—had definitely helped.

And so did the fact that Harry was simply more large-hearted, compassionate, generous, and brave than the vast majority of people.

Draco smiled. He knew that he sounded like he was hopelessly in love, but there was no problem with that, since he *was*.

He spread his wings before the mirror and turned carefully in a circle. The silver feathers covered the nape of his neck and his shoulder blades now, in a swirl of colors richer and brighter than the ordinary white, marked here and there with curves of black, and grew deeper and thicker between his wings. He didn't have a tail, but that only made matters easier, and in any case, the feathers grew into fine ruffs and ruffles just above the ending of his spine. Draco thought them handsome enough.

If all went well, he would be displaying for his chosen tonight.

He turned away from the mirror and began carefully to dry his feathers with a series of charms. He had tried to use soft towels earlier, but had learned his lesson when they bent and broke some of the smaller plumes. No need to show up before Harry looking as though he had just rolled out of the nest.

"Welcome."

Harry stared. He had seen Draco's drawing room before, but he wouldn't have recognized the place if he hadn't just come out of the Floo. Draco had utterly transformed it, making it look as if the room centered around the small table with glowing lamps carefully encased in glass. Harry wondered if that was because an open flame had almost singed one of Draco's wings last week.

The food was simple but sweet: oranges, bread with honey, scones with butter, and a cut of silvery fish that made Harry's mouth water. He carefully took his wand out of his pocket and laid it on the chair where he had already hung his cloak, though, because he knew that tonight's ritual required an absolute demonstration of trust. He wouldn't be able to cast spells on the food now.

The water in his mouth changed to something else. Harry swallowed it, though, and turned to face Draco.

Draco stood before him with wings extended and feathers erect in a crown around his neck, staring with that same silver intensity at Harry. He wore no clothing except a few pieces of cloth over his chest, groin, and legs, to cover the parts that didn't have feathers. He stepped forwards, and Harry saw that he once again had talons in the place of feet.

When he seemed certain that Harry was watching, he turned in a slow circle.

Harry's fingers itched to reach out and touch the softness of the feathers he saw there. Then he

realized that he probably *could* do that and Draco wouldn't mind, so he stepped forwards and let his hand sweep across a black curve at the base of Draco's spine.

Draco tilted his head back and warbled. Harry looked up to see his eyes shut. Then he turned around, caught Harry's hand in one of those talons that couldn't hurt him, and smiled.

"None of that yet," he said, "unless you want me to embarrass myself before I sit down." He lifted Harry's hand and kissed the backs of his fingers one by one, and then added, "I have a gift for you. I think I may have solved the Sandys case."

It took Harry a long moment to make sense of what Draco was saying, because his mind was so far away from Auror cases and everything they meant, drifting in a hazy world inspired by the glow that Draco's feathers cast. Then he blinked. "What?"

"I went and interviewed that pure-blood family you told me about," Draco said, and lifted Harry's hand to bite delicately at the skin around his nail. Harry hissed. Draco soothed it with his tongue and continued as though they were holding a perfectly ordinary conversation, and not one where he was slowly sliding his hands up Harry's arms to his shoulders. "The one that wouldn't speak to you because you weren't pure-blood? They were happy to tell me everything they knew, and once I saw the spellbooks that that woman Mariella left behind, I knew what happened."

"Well, tell me," Harry said, a bit breathlessly. He let his head fall back so that Draco could stroke up the front of his throat and then run his hands through Harry's hair. His own fear felt faint and muffled behind the pleasure the claws inspired in him.

"It seems that she and Sandys were far more in love than your witness Jenkins, or anyone else, ever knew," Draco said softly. "She was the woman whose hand Jenkins saw him touch that night, though disguised so that no one else would recognize her. The touch triggered a spell that melted them both into sparks. Pure essence of being. Apparently they thought that was the only way they could be together. Or she did," he added, with a faint shiver. "I don't know that she saw the difference between what she wanted and what they both did. Some wizards who use Dark Arts are like that, and assume that their will and desires *are* the will and desires of everyone else."

"But the body?" Harry could barely concentrate on Draco's words, although he knew they were important. He wanted to lean back further, and only didn't because there was nothing to catch him if he did. He rolled his head to the side, and Draco purred and stroked more of his collarbone and shoulder than he'd been able to reach before.

"The body was a construct," Draco said. "Created from the side of her magic that hated him for parting from her, no matter how briefly, and inflicted with the kind of wounds that she would have inflicted on him if she had decided to murder him. I don't think she knew if she *was* going to murder him or not until she confronted him."

"Our labs said that it was Sandys." The contradiction pulled Harry a bit more back towards

reality, and he shook his head and frowned at Draco. "She couldn't have magic so advanced that she fooled the whole Auror Department."

"And if you cut the hair from the head of a person transformed with Polyjuice and cast spells on it, it would seem to be the hair of the person they *appeared* to be, too," Draco said patiently. "She used hair and skin from Sandys's body to create the construct. She apparently had had them for a long time. As I said, I don't think she knew what she was going to do, kill him or vanish with him, until the last moment."

His stroking hands had stopped, and the solemn tone of his voice made Harry shiver. "You could say that she did murder him," he murmured. "Since she made him cease to exist, although she also did it to herself."

Draco nodded. "And I don't think we'll ever know whether he knew about it or not when he reached out to touch the witch she appeared to be. The spellbooks revealed only her side of the story."

"Huh." Harry's breath was coming more normally now. He didn't like that. He pressed back against Draco. "I'm glad that I've never been the victim of a lover quite that obsessive."

"You were," Draco whispered to him, and looped his talons into place over Harry's chest again. "But you're not now."

Harry caught one of the talons and squeezed down. "No, I'm not. Can we eat now?"

Draco had only one seat at the table, because he *needed* to ease Harry onto his lap for this meal, as he had for the one at Weasley and Granger's house, and feed him the food bit by bit. He kept his gaze on Harry's face the whole time, and of course they were pressed close to one another, his chest against Harry's back, his arm around Harry's body at the waist. He would know in a moment if Harry was distressed.

There were several times Harry closed his eyes and turned his head away. The fish, he refused entirely. Draco wondered if he had a special problem with meat in general. The spells Harry had cast at the meals they'd shared before had always been deeper and more searching on the meat, whatever it was.

But he ate peeled orange slices from Draco's claws, even licking at the juice so it didn't escape, and he shivered with pleasure when Draco caressed his back in approval. And he ate bread dripping with honey that stained his mouth and *required* Draco to lick it away. And he did it without demurring, though he did shake and sometimes shut his eyes and once grabbed Draco's arm and squeezed down as if he was going to crush the life out of it before he let go.

None of that mattered, though. His chosen was *touching* him. Draco appreciated that far more than him flinching back and curling into a ball. Harry had come so far, it was an honor to eat

with him, and Draco tried to tell him that with every silent caress, every nibble at his ear or throat, every stroke over his stomach and groin.

By the end of the meal—which Harry insisted he share, to the point of cramming bread down Draco's throat instead of simply letting him watch—Draco was singing softly, constantly. His feathers on his neck were permanently on end, and he nuzzled his face into Harry's throat and sang against his skin. The notes were high, clear, liquid things that Draco could never have produced outside the Blazing Season, and his mind couldn't hang onto them, either. But Harry shook and sighed, and that was enough.

Easing Harry back on the stool, Draco rose. Harry looked up swiftly, a question in his eyes, but Draco shook his head and turned his back. He had been displaying for his chosen for the past fortnight, in certain ways, by singing to him and buying him gifts and showing how far he was willing to go, but there was one more to go through first before they could join each other in bed: the formal display.

Harry opened his mouth as if to object, but closed it again and stared as Draco turned in his circle, lifting the feathers just above his tailbone and using them to beat slow time to the movement of his feet. He looked over his shoulder, well aware of how his face would appear, framed by feathers and wings, and sang again.

This time, the liquid notes connected into a single, flowing piece of music, and light filled the room, attending the invisible air waves the sound produced. Draco sang the light into being, and it rose and fell and shimmered sideways in silvery curtains of beauty. Harry swallowed and swallowed again, looking dazed, and leaned forwards, staring.

That was all Draco could have asked for: his chosen fixed on him, the way Draco had been fixed on him since the Season began.

He extended his wings and lazily beat them, creating wings that changed the composition of the air and thus altered the patterns of sound and light. Then he began to bend and bow and gesture and turn, and the whole came together in a glittering dance that worked as powerfully as the allure to enchant, while still leaving one's free will intact.

Harry stood up. He was shivering, wide eyes locked on Draco. He stepped forwards and into the dance, within reach of Draco's wings, adapting himself to their movements half a beat behind.

Draco moved with him, lowering his voice and reaching out with his hands so that Harry might have less chance to panic. But it didn't seem as though he would. Harry grasped Draco's hands and laughed aloud as Draco had never heard him laugh, careless, carefree, like the man he might have been without Laurent.

But not even the thought of Laurent could anger Draco as it usually did. All he felt was a territorial smugness. Laurent had had his chance to possess Harry, and failed. And that failure had partially made it possible for Draco to succeed.

He moved closer to Harry, diminishing his circles, singing softly to him and him alone now, rather than an immense admiring audience. Harry stroked his arms in reaction, blinking slowly. Draco thought he saw the shine of tears in his eyes, and was pleased, choosing to think of the tears as a reaction to the beauty of the dance rather than a sign of fear.

In fact, he would have sensed the fear if his chosen was experiencing too much. Fear damped desire, and this moment was about desire.

Draco ended the dance clasping Harry in arms and wings, and Harry was pressed close against him without struggling, breath quick, one leg rising of its own volition to loop around Draco's waist. "Can we?" Harry whispered, almost without breath.

"Can we what?" Draco echoed, and nipped at the side of his face. This close to the height of the Blazing Season, he didn't have to will magic from his wings into his teeth; Harry gasped, half-cursed, and arched his back from the simple bite, and even more when Draco's fingers pressed into the mark he had already given Harry on his back.

"Can we go to bed?" Harry's voice was thick enough that the words sagged in the middle. He began again. "Please—I have to—"

That was all Draco had been waiting for. He scooped Harry up in his wings and arms and carried him off.

Harry was riding a constantly changing, tossing tide. One component of it was fear and anger; it made the waves rise and lash high when he thought of the things that had happened the last time he was in bed with someone.

But the other part of the current was desire and fierceness, longing and impatience. Laurent would always be there, but Harry no longer wanted to let him control what Harry did in bed. Besides, he had shared sleep and sex with Draco, and he had survived.

Tossed from moment to moment, caught and dragged deep and then sent spiraling back to the surface, Harry was actually grateful to be carried. He didn't know if he could have walked and struggled with his emotions at the same time.

Draco laid him on the bed and literally hovered over him, wings fanning out. Harry watched even them with an ache of yearning that he had never thought he'd feel. They were part of Draco, and he wanted Draco.

"This is what I thought would happen," Draco said, voice calm and warm, as if they had this kind of discussion every day. "I'll lie down. You can ride me. Would that work for you?"

Harry nodded. "I—thank you," he said. He couldn't say what he was thanking Draco for, but

Draco knew and turned his head to the side, displaying the brilliant silvery feathers along his neck in response.

Then he leaned down, kissed Harry, and rolled them so that Harry was straddling his hips. Harry breathed more deeply once he was in no danger of being pinned down. Then he looked down and realized that Draco's wings were spread out beneath *him* like a rippling blanket, and frowned. "Won't it hurt you to lie on them?"

"One of the great benefits of magical wings," Draco said softly, and shrugged. The wings diminished into thin, silvery streamers that extended from his shoulders only. "Right now, the hesitation hurts far more."

Harry gulped, nodded, and started undressing completely in front of a lover for the first time in three years.

Draco watched him in greedy silence, stroking his limbs and stomach as they were revealed, once leaning up to kiss his chest. Harry had to rise off Draco to pull his trousers and pants completely from his hips and legs, and promptly felt a surge of irritation run through him at the loss of skin-to-skin contact.

That reassured him more than anything else. *He* wanted this, not the helpless, Veela-struck creature Laurent had raped, or the Harry he might have become if Draco had used the allure and it had worked. This was him.

At last.

He dropped down again and smiled. Draco had started to reach out, but Harry waved his hand and negligently summoned the lube Draco had left on the bedroom table with a small nip of wandless magic.

Draco's eyes widened, and his prick surged beneath Harry. Harry laughed. "You like that?"

"You have no idea." Draco choked the words out, and then reached up and gripped Harry's cock, pumping once.

Harry rolled his hips back, hissing, enjoying the *normal* fact of warm skin under him and the hand on his cock and the fact that he was about to have a cock up his arse. The fear was still there, yes, but he could control it more easily now, and bury it under the warm, continuous anticipation. And he was looking forwards to what other ways he could make Draco's eyes widen.

"I wonder," he said breathlessly. He thought about worrying about that, and then decided that most of what he said tonight would be breathless and he ought to get used to it. "Would you like to prepare me, or watch me prepare myself?"

Draco gasped and looked as if he might faint. Harry laughed again and tipped the lube out on his fingers.

He took his time. He thought Draco would like that.

Draco would have challenged any other Veela who might show up in his room that moment and declare that his or her chosen was beautiful, sexy, handsome, or inspiring to look at. Because none of them were, and Harry *was.*

Harry braced himself with one hand on Draco's chest, leaning forwards while the other worked behind him. He kept trying to lift up so that Draco could see, but it didn't always work. That didn't matter, not when Draco was ready to be lit on fire by the glimpses that he *did* receive.

Harry's fingers pumped and slipped in and out, faltered and fell to rest briefly and then went to work again. Harry was grimacing and moaning, and Draco knew some of that came from pain. He stroked Harry's stomach, flattening his fingers over the hairs there and tugging on them, to give Harry some minor distraction from any unpleasant emotions he was experiencing.

His arse pumped up and down with the fingers, slipped back into place, and then fell decisively. Harry gasped at the same time, tipping his head back and shaking it as though he were on the verge of a fit, and Draco discovered that it was possible to feel jealous of a pair of fingers.

Then Harry was suddenly poised above him, shaking his head again and trying to find the right angle, and Draco grabbed his cock even as his mouth babbled, "Are you sure that you're ready?"

"I'm sure that I can't wait any longer," Harry snapped, and dropped down.

Draco cried out at the same moment as Harry did, though he was aware that he had much less reason and tried to keep as much of his attention on his chosen as he could. But suddenly to be inside Harry, to know that Harry *wanted* him there and had put him there and had welcomed him there…

Draco had no words for what that meant. He had only sensations, heat and tightness and Harry groaning above him and the sharp smell of sweat and the urge to move outweighed by the churning, soaring desire that climbed through him. He had displayed to his chosen, he had fed his chosen, he had danced for his chosen, and now he was loving him.

Harry bobbed back and forth, eyes shut, forehead crisscrossed with so many lines that Draco reached up to him. "Are you all right?" he whispered in a voice that startled him with its hoarseness and faintness.

Harry nodded and opened his eyes. He didn't quite smile, but the expression on his lips was more than enough to reassure Draco, along with the shine in his face. "Yes. Just—watch."

He began to move.

Draco clamped his hands on Harry's hips and struggled a moment with the instinct that told him to take control, that he should be pinning his chosen to the bed and driving into him, the way so many Veela had over the years with so many human chosen.

But he remembered again who he was with, and the control that he had in this situation that Laurent didn't and never would, and the instinct went to sleep again, leaving him to watch Harry rock.

Harry didn't feel quite mortal anymore.

It was strange, because he had never been so aware of his body, of the muscles that clamped and clenched around Draco, of the way his neck ached as he held it back, of the bruises on his hips that Draco's fingers were probably forming. His teeth hurt. His lips were swollen. His hands rested not on things that he could just notice and then dismiss, like the arms of chairs, but real flesh and bone. He could feel the circulation of Draco's blood beneath his palms.

But at the same time, he had snapped free and was ascending, flying as if he were the one with wings, in the middle of pleasure that sparked around him and excitement like the fountain in Mabinogion House and triumph like a conflagration.

Take that, Laurent. You didn't win.

He laughed aloud, and rocked back to impale himself again on Draco's cock—his choice, his choice to have it there—and then moved forwards again, wriggling in a way that caused Draco to gasp and spasm, and then back, and this time he managed to make Draco's cock reach his prostate.

Draco thrust up, joining the game, the dance. Harry spiraled higher. More and more laughter bubbled in his throat, especially when he looked down and Draco was watching him as if he was some sort of miracle, or angel come to earth.

I won. I'm still in control and surrendering it at the same time. It doesn't make sense, and I don't care.

Higher, and higher, and his body grew tense and his pleasure more insistent. That was the part he had always missed before, Harry thought, half-mindlessly; the pleasure held back, patient, until he invited it forwards. This time, it was just *there*, and Draco's wings, beating around them like water flowing upwards, were part of it, and Draco's odd faces as he tried to deal with what he was feeling, and Harry's thrusting hips and Draco's thrusting hips, and the complexity and weight of the past behind them.

And the future before them.

The spiral snapped, and Harry fell, burning, on wings of melted wax, wings of fire, wings of sunlight, and meanwhile the pleasure tore through him, and Draco began to come a moment later, and even *that* was pleasurable, and he was still laughing, because he had won, and he had survived.

Not unscathed, but no longer broken.

Draco could remember the aftereffects of the orgasm better than he could remember the orgasm itself. The pleasure made his limbs shake and his head spin and his consciousness simply dissolve for long moments after it—the first time he hadn't been conscious of Harry since the Blazing Season began. But he couldn't remember the moment when he had come.

He returned to himself piece by piece, scent first with the skin pressed against his nose, and then touch with the feeling of Harry slumped over him, and then sight as he opened his eyes and saw a scar a few inches in front of them. He kissed it without thinking.

Harry laughed, groaned, and then said, "I don't think I should do that again soon. My ribs hurt."

The statement wasn't serious, Draco knew, or his senses would have told him sooner. He turned and buried his head against Harry, wrapping his arms and then his wings around and up, and then lay still, too overwhelmed to move.

"It seems simpler than it should be," Harry murmured. Draco didn't know where he was getting the strength of will to talk. "I love you. You love me. I wonder if that really changes anything, but I feel like it does."

Draco locked a hand into place on Harry's back, hoping that would convey all the words he was too tired to speak right now. By the way Harry seized and kissed his other hand, it seemed to.

A cocoon of warmth. A cocoon of light. A cocoon of wonder, that Harry Potter, his chosen, was here with him and already well on his way to sleeping, if the tenor of his breath didn't lie.

Draco could usually *think* of things he wanted and didn't have yet, even if he had no means to speak of them or possess them. Harry had been on his mind as something he wanted for years, even before he decided on him as his chosen. His friendship, his attention, his hatred, had all been things Draco coveted in Hogwarts.

But now…

Now, wanting had reached an end for the moment, and desire had fulfilled itself.

Draco did not know a better definition of love.

The End.