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Name: Survivor's Joy
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Chapter 1 to 4

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Chapter: 1

Title: Survivor's Joy

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Word Count: 24,000

Rating: R/M.

Pairings: Harry/Draco

Warnings: DH spoilers (ignores epilogue), language, sex, some violence.

Summary: Harry works for the Aurors. Draco works for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. There's not much reason for them to meet—until someone starts selling diluted Wolfsbane potion, and they find out just how much the years since the war have moved them both on from simply surviving.

Author's Notes: This is an *extremely* belated birthday fic for aldebaran1977. Her request was: *H/D (of course!), first time, mystery plot or at least any plot, one or both of them working as auror(s) or some rare occupation, flangst, ferret!Draco.* Here's hoping I managed to hit them all.

Survivor's Joy

"What does this button do?"

Harry sighed and captured Máire Dobson's hand as she tried to press the lift button that would take them to the ninth floor of the Ministry instead of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. "Don't do that," he said, and pressed the right one.

"I only asked what that button did," said Máire, and leaned against the back of the lift, grinning at him, as it clunked and began to rise. "That's not a crime."

"Unlike some other things you've done, no," Harry said, fighting against the very strong urge to roll his eyes. No one had told him about criminals like Máire when he went through Auror training. They had studied famous cases involving murderers, rapists, kidnappers, Dark wizards who became addicted to the Unforgivable Curses, and, of course, incidents during the war with Voldemort. (Harry had put up with the way the other trainees stared at him by invoking the name of Voldemort loudly and often. Watching the entire class flinch soothed him).

And then there were people like Máire, who committed small crimes often and regularly, but with such a lack of evidence or consequences that it was easier to let them go than take up cell space or paperwork by retaining them. This time, Máire had practiced sleight-of-hand in front of a crowd of Muggles, and *perhaps* she had used magic to aid herself. Harry didn't know for certain if she had, because nothing she said should be trusted. When the report of the crime had come in from a team of tense Obliviators and he'd heard the description of the woman committing it, he'd sat with his head in his hands for several minutes.

Now he sourly studied the woman across from him, who lived to be a nuisance. She was utterly ordinary, with dark hair and brown eyes, save perhaps for her height; she stood only five feet tall. But her gaze wandered restlessly around the lift, trying to find something she could break, steal, cast a spell on—even though her wand rested firmly in Harry's robe pocket—or ask questions about. And she would, inevitably. This was the fifteenth time Harry had arrested her, and every time she caused more trouble in custody than she had out of it.

"Why is the Ministry so ugly?" she asked suddenly. She turned around and blinked at Harry. "You'd think they'd want people to visit, not be kept away by the horror of what they might see if they venture here."

"Actually, there are certain visitors we want to discourage," Harry said, giving her a pointed look as the lift doors opened. He caught Máire's arm. She promptly went limp. Harry shrugged, Body-Bound her, and levitated her in front of him. She frowned reproachfully at him; Hermione could manage a Body-Bind that froze even the muscles of the face, but Harry had never acquired the skill to do so.

"Sorry," said Harry, with total insincerity, and then herded her into the small, crowded office where all captured criminals were brought when first entering the Ministry. Olivia Stone, the witch on duty, looked up with a frown when she saw him; she and Harry had taken an instant dislike to each other from the first day they'd met in Auror training. Stone probably thought she was entirely innocent, of course. Harry didn't take to her because she taught like Umbridge minus the Blood Quill.

Then Stone saw Máire, and her face changed. She disliked constant criminals even more than Harry did. She nodded and shoved the relevant paperwork across the desk to Harry without fuss.

Harry bent down to fill it out, idly aware that Máire was making faces at Stone, who sat stiffly and stared at her. Since he absolutely did not care who won *that* contest, he didn't bother looking up.

He'd just signed his name when the door rattled behind him. Harry turned, wand lifted to float Máire out of the way. From the sound of it, someone was bringing half-a-dozen criminals into Stone's office. Maybe Ron had returned from that raid he'd been sent to help on this morning, which involved an illegal potions ring.

It was Ron, all right, but his face was pale as it never was when he looked at a Dark wizard's handiwork, and he was staring directly at Harry. And, by the sound of his breath, he'd run most of the way from their office.

"Harry," he gasped, leaning on the door. "Andromeda just firecalled. She—something's wrong with Teddy. He took a new kind of Wolfsbane—"

Harry began running. Ron had already prudently ducked out of the way, and a moment later Harry could hear his voice rising, soothing Stone, who had begun to complain about Harry's exit. Harry smiled briefly. He knew he could trust Ron both to make his apologies to Stone (who liked him for some reason) and to take charge of putting Máire in a holding cell, doubtless temporary.

Then he put all such considerations out of his mind and headed to the office he shared with Ron, which had an illegal fireplace and an even more illegal bowl of Floo powder on the mantle. They had glamour spells to conceal its existence from most of the Aurors, but the spells were transparent to anyone who actually belonged in the office. Harry tossed a handful of powder into the flames and called out, "Tonks home!"

He was doubtless going to arrive battered and singed, with holes torn in the elbows of his robe, because he had never mastered Floo travel. But that didn't matter. Something was wrong with his godson.

Harry was not going to *allow* something to be wrong with the people he loved.

Draco had long since decided that he must have been an extraordinarily evil person in a past life, and that was the reason he had paid such a price for his sins in this one. In his spare moments, he liked to try and divine that person's identity. Had he been Gerald Bellingham, who had killed twelve Muggles at once at the end of the nineteenth century and very nearly started a new witch hunt? Or perhaps he'd been Jessica Cutting, a madwoman who had taken ages to be discovered because she was so pretty and smiling and sane in public, not at all like the straggle-haired incarnation of the stereotype his Aunt Bellatrix had been.

Today, he was certain he must have been Grindelwald.

The wire cage he clung to the underside of wobbled on its small wheels, and Draco tightened the

hold of his claws. He was tempted to close his eyes, but unfortunately he needed to be sure of their destination in order to collect evidence. So far, this particular illegal potions ring had been tracked and lost by Aurors, the Hit Wizards, and at least three other divisions of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Draco was determined that the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures would be the one to actually *catch* them. That meant staying awake and not vomiting.

Come to think of it, he'd never been sick in his ferret form. He wasn't sure what would happen if he was. But the very thought of getting vomit on his fur made him tighten his claws again and fight back a squeak. The wizards pulling the cages around and in and out of dilapidated buildings at a rapid pace might not hear him, but the large dogs riding in the cages almost certainly would, and they would bark. And then the wizards might search hard enough to find him.

No, thank you.

The cage swerved to the left, nearly throwing Draco off, and he laid his muzzle parallel to the bottom and rolled one eye in that direction so he could see what was happening. From what he had discovered in his scouting, this was a wizarding estate, one of the many places abandoned when the taxes got too high for it to be attractive anymore, but warded under anti-detection spells so strong that the Ministry couldn't find it in order to assert some ridiculous claim over it. So far, they'd proceeded from potions laboratory to potions laboratory in orderly fashion. Where were they going now?

It was one of the many questions Draco wanted to discover the answer to, along with why wizards were using wire cages instead of levitation spells, how they had found this estate in the first place, and exactly *what* they thought they were brewing.

His irritation increased when he realized the cages were heading towards a wide field, crowded with weeds and the remains of what might once have been handsome topiary hedges. The greenery had been clipped enough to leave a patch of absolutely flat and open grass in the middle. Not good hiding ground for a ferret who needed to take cover suddenly, let alone a white ferret.

Yes, definitely Grindelwald.

On the other hand, the wizards were calling something to each other about testing the potion now. If Draco could observe enough to construct a Pensieve memory, he could leave now, and hand over the evidence to his Department Head, Sarah Cullingford. That would garner him the acclaim he wanted and end the danger at once. That sounded good to Draco.

And really, could it be any harder than the mad dash he'd made in the first place, in order to catch one of the wizards' robes and be Apparated along with him to the estate?

The cage stopped rolling. Draco stretched warily, muscles tensed to run at a moment's notice. But the wizard who had pulled this cage shouted something, and then the wire doors above him

swung open as they removed the large gray dog riding in it, who of course struggled and barked frantically. They never even thought of looking under the cage itself. Draco twitched his whiskers—that always happened when he was in ferret form and tried to smile—and crept forwards as far as he dared to see better.

The wizard he had named Hook-Nose, who looked like Snape but less attractive, seemed to be the leader of the project. He jabbed his wand authoritatively here and there as the other wizards, five in all, ran about, setting the dogs up in the middle of a circle made on the ground with white dust.

Draco narrowed his eyes and wriggled his nose cautiously, twisting his neck back and forth to try and catch the scent of the dust that formed the circle. The wind wasn't blowing strongly enough for him to be certain, but he thought it smelled like a mixture of rotten eggs and rose petals.

His irritation grew. An illegal potions ring playing with Morganna's Debris was cause for concern, even if they were only using it to confine animals, as it appeared they were. Morganna's Debris got everywhere and caused disasters in the end. It was made of the ground fingers of women stoned to death for adultery; it would be stupid to expect it *not* to cause trouble.

Hook-Nose barked out an order that Draco was too far away to hear clearly, but it had the word "dogs" in it. The others quickly backed out of the white ring and scattered a last bit of dust to close it. Draco winced, his fur bristling from the sudden crackle of power in the air. And yes, the scent of rotten eggs and rose petals was coming to him *strongly* now that the wind had shifted.

The dogs in the circle—a mixture of Alsatians, Crups, large gray dogs that looked part wolf, and small fluffy white dogs like the kind his mother had once talked about getting after his father put peacocks in the Manor gardens—milled around, barking at each other. Two of the larger ones started wrestling, snapping their jaws hard enough to make Draco wonder if perhaps the wizards he watched had decided to take up dog-fighting as a sideline to their illegal potions brewing. Then Hook-Nose raised his wand, collected the eyes of the others, and cast a spell that Draco recognized the motions of at once. It would trigger any time-delayed potion in the body of the person it was cast at.

Or animals, in this case.

The dogs stiffened. Some fell over. A few barked as though the sound was being yanked out of their guts with fishhooks. The wrestling dogs dropped to their haunches and began to nip frantically at their flanks.

The large gray dogs who looked to be part wolf stood calmly, panting and staring at the chaos around them with bewildered eyes. None of them moved to attack, however, even when one of the barking dogs ran into them.

Hook-Nose shouted triumphantly, and two of the witches next to him actually started dancing. Then they began holding an excited conversation in which the word "Wolfsbane" featured

prominently.

Draco narrowed his eyes further. He'd watched every movement and every ingredient they'd used in the potions laboratory. Whatever they were brewing, it wasn't Wolfsbane.

And of course, he had no way of finding out what it was just from the reactions of the dogs. They were such careless brewers they could have produced a potion that did nothing, and mistaken the mixed reactions from the dogs for what they actually wanted to see, whatever that was. Their conversation on the topic had proven spectacularly unenlightening; they weren't like the sorts of criminals in wizarding war novels who always explained their plans to each other just in case there was a hidden hero who needed to overhear them. Had they actually produced an illegal potion? He had no way of telling.

One thing was certain, however. Draco didn't think he could do anything more here. He had tracked the brewers to their home estate, and he could at least have them arrested for using Morganna's Debris. Once they were in custody, they could be interrogated on other matters.

Now he only had to decide how he was going to get out of here.

A sharp crack came from behind him. Draco froze, his body tensing, and barely controlled the instincts that were urging him to make a spring into the open. He managed to turn around instead, by hooking his claws carefully into the bottom of the cage, and see a woman rushing towards them across the field. He sneezed in contempt. Whoever she was, she wasn't very skilled at Apparition.

She halted in front of Hook-Nose and babbled something, too fast for Draco to make out most of it from this distance. Once again, though, he heard "Wolfsbane," and then "sick.' And then one whole sentence:

"It harmed a child who's close to Harry Potter!"

Before Draco could sneeze again at the fear that filled their faces at the sound of that name, Hook-Nose whirled around and lifted his wand high. He shouted, with the sound of desperation in his voice, "*Flagrare immortalis!*"

Draco felt every single part of him freeze in dread. Then he leaped free from the cage and raced towards the edge of the nearest building, his body flat and parallel to the ground. He counted the pops of Apparition behind him for a moment, trying to determine the time when he would be free to resume his human form and Apparate himself, but the sound of them was overwhelmed by the roar of the fire that Hook-Nose had called.

A blast of superheated air traveled past Draco's head. Then he felt his tail singe, and the ground became hot under his paws. He squeaked and ran faster, looking for a hole before he remembered that he was not a true ferret.

And he would have to risk changing back, because there was no way he could survive the fire of this spell—the fire that would destroy the Morganna's Debris, the dogs, and every other piece of evidence Draco had—without his magic.

He reached inwards and twisted the imaginary dial that pointed to "ferret" at the moment to "wizard." He had envisioned that dial from the first time he made the Animagus transformation, and it had never failed him.

Nor did it now. He came back to himself between one step and another, awkwardly running on his fingers and toes. He collapsed for a moment, then rolled to his feet and seized his wand, turning briefly, just to make sure nothing could be salvaged.

The middle of the field was one towering column of white and blue flame, striking for the sky in such a way that anyone who could actually see it beyond the anti-detection spells would probably think it was a forest fire—or a rogue dragon, if they were wizards. A few white flakes, all that remained of the Morganna's Debris, drifted high, then fell low and were sucked into the flames. Draco heard the screams of dying dogs, smelled burning grass and hair, and felt the air around him turn desert-like.

And he saw Hook-Nose standing next to the fire, waving his wand as though to fan it on. He caught sight of Draco and stared, eyes widening, then lifted his wand and aimed a curse at him.

Draco knew the better part of valor. He Apparated out before the curse could hit him, and sagged against the gates of the Manor, swearing under his breath. No evidence except for his own memories—which wouldn't be enough if no one recognized the wizards in question—the wizards' hiding place destroyed and no idea of where they would go next, and the ringleader recognizing him. Not good.

I have nothing more than a few accusations that probably won't do much good in the first place, he thought, running a hand through his hair in agitation. *And Cullingford won't authorize me to continue with the case if I can't prove that it has some connection to magical creatures.* Draco had planned to use the rumor that the ring was brewing Wolfsbane as his connection if his superior asked him exactly what he thought he was doing, but he had seen them *not* brewing Wolfsbane with his own eyes.

How am I going to continue working on this, and prove I'm not a failure?

Then Draco's head came up, and his eyes widened.

They made a child Potter cares for sick, somehow. He'll be on a hunt for vengeance. I could do worse than go to him and offer my—services.

Potter might still refuse, but Draco had learned something about civility in the seven years since the war, in addition to what he'd always known about flattery and feigning respect. And he doubted that Potter would have changed as far as angrily trying to revenge himself on those who

hurt his friends went. It could be that he'd be desperate enough to accept Draco's help with it.

Draco relaxed, and smiled up at the clouds spitting rain on him. Yes, it had been worth it to go back into the world and work to redeem the Malfoy name instead of spending all his time hiding in the Manor. His biggest schoolboy rival might yet help him to redeem that name further. And was that a chance he ever would have had if he'd been hiding?

There was, of course, Potter's reaction when he found out Draco's Animagus form really was a white ferret to consider. But Draco considered that a minor enough price to pay, next to keeping his job and the respect of his colleagues in the Department.

"I'm hot," Teddy said fretfully. His hair was changing colors so rapidly it almost made Harry sick to look at; one moment it was Weasley orange, then purple, then pink, then brown, then gray, and then brown again. He reached out a hand and clasped Harry's, staring at him with bloodshot eyes. "Make it not be hot."

Harry used *Aguamenti* to conjure a glass of water for his godson and held it against Teddy's forehead and cheeks for a moment before he held it to his lips. "Sip it slowly," he cautioned Teddy. "We don't know what might react with the potion you swallowed." Maybe it was a little silly to talk to a seven-year-old so seriously about potions, but Harry had hated how no one had ever *explained* things to him when he was a child—not the causes of his illnesses, not why his relatives had hated him, not who his parents had really been. He could at least talk to Teddy about it, even if he didn't understand.

Teddy gulped the water, then lay back on the pillow and found Harry's hand again. "The potion looked just like the other potion," he muttered, closing his eyes and trembling. Harry felt his forehead. It was hot as if he had a fever, but enormous beads of sweat kept forming at the corners of his temples and then rolling down his face. And he couldn't stop the shaking. The beginnings of convulsions, Andromeda had told Harry, or at least she feared they were. "The other potion never hurt me. Why did this one?"

"I don't know," Harry said quietly, and cast a spell that stroked the sweat from Teddy's forehead and cheeks. "But I'll find out."

Teddy opened his eyes and smiled at him. They didn't change color nearly as often as his hair; right now they were the bright, calm brown Harry first remembered seeing eleven years ago in Remus's face.

Harry swallowed hard and kissed Teddy's forehead, then cast a little charm that should make him sleep. And so it did, but not until he had gone through another three minutes of shivering and murmuring. Harry took a deep breath and squeezed Teddy's hand again.

Teddy had, it turned out, been left with some werewolf characteristics after all: a tendency to grow more irritable as the full moon approached, thick hair that appeared on those full-moon

nights and then disappeared again, an appetite for barely-cooked meat, and a truly impressive growl. He took a small dose of Wolfsbane every week to control the more annoying symptoms, and he had taken the latest one just this morning.

And now he was sick and shivering as if he might have a seizure. Harry thought the tremors were worse than they had been a few minutes ago. He gritted his teeth and forced his anger back under control. Three years of training and four years' work as an active Auror had given him plenty of practice; Harry had had to learn that not everyone would obey or be impressed by the Chosen One.

Andromeda came into the room, moving quietly in the full black mourning robes she always wore. Her face was haggard. Harry reached out and gave her the hand that wasn't holding Teddy's. He could only imagine what it must be like to watch her grandson shiver and sigh in the grip of an intense sickness after losing her husband, daughter, and son-in-law. It didn't help that the connections she'd tried to re-establish with the Malfoys after the war had come to nothing through Narcissa Malfoy's haughty refusal to be in the same room with her sister.

"It was definitely the potion," she said softly, and handed him a corked vial that Harry took carefully. It was filled with a brilliant red liquid which collected into crumbling sediment at the bottom of the vial. "I broke down the rest of that sample with Athena's Universal Dissolving Solution. Ordinary Wolfsbane breaks down into violet liquid with no sediment."

Harry hissed between his teeth. "And was there anything unusual about the Wolfsbane when you bought it?" He could not accept the idea that Andromeda would deliberately hurt Teddy, but there was still the possibility of a bad batch of the potion, and in that case, he would make sure the seller was turned over to the Ministry as soon as possible.

Andromeda frowned and said, "I was using a new seller recommended to me by Roberta. Do you remember her?" Harry nodded. Andromeda had mentioned the other witch before as someone who had a young son infected with lycanthropy. "The Wolfsbane was cheaper than normal, and they provided more. Roberta said they would be driven out of the market soon if more people didn't start buying from them, and of course they have an excellent reputation, with satisfied customers, in *other* areas." She sighed and stared down at Teddy. "I was stupid. I should have been more suspicious."

Harry rose and hugged her. "You were only trying to do the best you could by him," he said quietly. "And I'm surprised that someone hasn't tried selling fake Wolfsbane before now." The potion was expensive, and not every family with a werewolf member or a child, like Teddy, who bore the consequences of having a werewolf parent, could afford it. Of course someone could easily exploit the market, and of course the potion they sold would be cheaper.

"I don't think it was fake," Andromeda said grimly, and cast the spell that would banish the sweat from Teddy's face as he began to shiver again. "I smelled it and had Teddy smell it—" Harry nodded; Teddy's nose was also sharper than normal "—and he said it seemed normal. And it certainly *looked* normal."

"Diluted, then," Harry said, thinking of the case he and Ron had handled last year that had involved a Healer from St. Mungo's selling diluted pain-killing potions on the black market. "Which means they knew what they were doing." His hand tightened on his wand, and he had to set the vial of red liquid down hastily on the table beside the bed, so he couldn't crush it. "Which means I am going to *destroy* them."

Andromeda's hand rested on his arm at once. Harry blinked away the haze defining his vision and saw her staring at him seriously. "I would prefer it if you didn't go after them," she said. "Or not alone, anyway. You know Teddy depends on you." She lifted her chin and licked her lips. "And I—I like having you here, too."

Harry hesitantly hugged her. Andromeda was a proud woman, and though she had made it perfectly clear she appreciated his help with and love for Teddy over the last seven years, she didn't often make her own emotions towards him known. Now, she stood stiffly in his embrace for a moment only before she cleared her throat and stepped away.

"I promise," he said. "But this needs to be brought to the Ministry's attention at once, anyway. They've been tracking an illegal potions-brewing ring for some time now, and this is probably connected. Certainly the last laboratory of theirs we discovered had ingredients in it that could have been used to brew Wolfsbane."

Andromeda nodded. "Then go into this with the full force of the Aurors behind you," she said. "No lone heroics."

"I've changed enough not to consider *that*," Harry said, and kissed her cheek. "I like company." He stroked Teddy's hair back from his forehead once, then looked at her. "You'll let me know if something changes?"

"At once," Andromeda promised, and took his place in the chair, casting a spell that soothed Teddy back to sleep as he moaned softly. At least his shivers had calmed and it didn't look as if he'd have convulsions, Harry thought.

He had barely arrived at Andromeda's fireplace when something hammered on the window. Frowning, Harry turned around and saw a post owl hovering there. It drummed on the glass with its beak again and looked at him pointedly.

Rolling his eyes, Harry opened the window. He would take care of the letter for Andromeda, since he doubted she would want to leave Teddy any time soon.

But the owl pushed the letter insistently at him, with a grumbling noise in its throat that reminded Harry painfully of Hedwig for a moment. He still hadn't got an owl of his own, feeling guilty for trying to replace her. He blinked away the memories, opened the letter, and raised his eyebrows.

Potter:

I'm sure a letter from me will surprise you, but I promise this isn't an evil Death Eater plot to try and kill you. I've been tracking a ring of illegal potions-brewers we thought might be brewing Wolfsbane, and heard one of them say that they'd made a child near you sick. That was apparently enough to cause them to destroy their latest hiding place and all evidence of their illegal activities—and nearly me with it.

I'd like to speak with you about this. Solving the mystery of exactly who these wizards are could benefit both of us. I'd be willing to share my memories with you, in the hopes that you'll recognize one of the people I observed. I can tell you that, whatever they were brewing, it wasn't Wolfsbane, even if they thought it was. The Floo at the Manor is open to you.

Draco Malfoy.

Harry stared at the letter for some time. Then he carefully drew his wand and cast several spells that made the paper glow red, blue, and finally white. He leaned back on the fireplace and regarded the parchment once again. There were no hexes on it, no Dark Arts curses, and no Confundus Charms. But it was from *Malfoy.* Surely that meant it had to be a joke or the first step in a trap?

Then Harry closed his eyes. He could feel cool stone beneath his fingertips if he concentrated, the way he always could nowadays. He had spent enough time sitting beside his parents' graves, and Fred's, and Lupin's and Tonks', and even Snape's, to know it very well. How many times had he rested his hand there, and swore that things would be different from now on, that he would do what he could to stand against the prejudice, fear, and hatred Voldemort had drawn on to make himself strong?

The war didn't stop when Voldemort died. He had said those words in the cemetery at Godric's Hollow, his voice strong and sure and quiet. He had thought the words up the night before, but they sounded even better in the light of day. *Maybe the last enemy that shall be conquered is death, but I promise you, I'm going to conquer a lot of them before then.*

If he became sure Malfoy was tricking him and discarded this letter, that would be giving into the same prejudice he had condemned in others. Maybe it was a minor instance of it, but many minor instances could grow into major wounds if left to fester untreated. And it was true he had heard no evil of Malfoy in the years since the war.

And if it turned out Malfoy could have helped him help Teddy, and Harry hadn't listened to him about it, he would never forgive himself.

Harry stood and cast the Floo powder in the flames, but this time, he called out, "Malfoy Manor!"

Draco chose to wait for Potter in his mother's conservatory, the most open and cheerful room in

the house. Perhaps it was wasted effort, considering the size of the grudge Potter had against him, but still, Draco wanted to appeal to the man's Gryffindor sensibilities if he could.

Besides, he liked being in the conservatory. Narcissa had recently taken to breeding bluebells, which Draco enjoyed much more than the thick, sweet, cloying roses that had come before them. He wandered around the room, peering into pots where the flowers twisted without a wind, or rang like actual bells, or stared back at him with small black faces adapted from pansies. The smells, both natural and added, danced around him in a sweet invisible cloud, and by the time a house-elf finally escorted Potter into the large glassed-in room, Draco was as relaxed as he could be when confronting his old rival.

Potter paused in the doorway, as if he had his doubts about the sincerity of Draco's invitation. Draco turned to face him, leaning one hand casually on a shelf full of seedlings behind him.

And nearly choked on his tongue.

The Potter who stood watching him thoughtfully from across the room looked much the same as he ever had—except for the eyes. Those eyes could have been the ones Draco confronted in the mirror every morning, and asked stern questions of, searching them for signs of shadows, greed, envy, pure-blood pride, and the other things that had driven him into the war. Draco had decided the rest of the world could be like that if they wanted, including his parents, but he was not going to be. He hadn't *enjoyed* being that way. So he had done what he could to strip those qualities out of himself, and if he had to bite his tongue hard sometimes, well, that was a small price to pay. He could always keep up a sarcastic running monologue in his head, after all.

Potter looked as if he had done the same thing. Draco recognized that wary gaze, cautious both about judging and being judged.

It's probably coincidental, Draco argued to himself. *He's probably got a bit of dust in his eye and blinked the wrong way, or exactly the right way. Just because you've changed doesn't mean Potter has.* But the delusion made his voice softer than normal when he nodded and said, "Potter. Welcome."

The other man relaxed his taut stance and nodded to him. "Malfoy," he said. There was no emotion in his voice, which made him sound far less unfriendly than Draco had expected.

What's changed him, I wonder? Or is just being polite for the sake of finding out what I know about the false Wolfsbane? Draco managed a smile nevertheless, and was more than astonished when Potter smiled back.

Damn. That—really does something for him. Draco searched his mind for memories of times Potter might have smiled at him in the past, and couldn't come up with anything. It didn't really count when your rival was gloating triumphantly about having bruised half your body.

Draco felt his muscles tense with the pain the memory brought along in its wake, and turned his

mind promptly away from it, envisioning a stone garden wall the memory couldn't cross. He'd had to do that often, too, in the past few years. He knew he had a tendency to react stupidly if he got angry, and he was determined that no one would make him look stupid anymore.

"There's a Pensieve waiting for you with the memories of what I observed," he said, and gestured towards a table on the other side of the room. From the way Potter flicked a glance at it, Draco was sure he had noticed it already, but he nodded as if he hadn't and moved forwards.

For a moment, he stood above the Pensieve, looking down with an expression Draco couldn't read, as if the mere sight of a Pensieve held evil memories on its own. Then he ducked his head down and plunged it beneath the surface of the silvery liquid inside. Draco was left in the uneasy half-state that he always fell into whenever his parents were reading the *Prophet* at the breakfast table: they were still in the room, and would notice him and perhaps snap at him if he moved, but they weren't present and able to be addressed as normal.

He studied Potter's bent body idly for a moment, then frowned when he realized his eyes were focusing more on the set of Potter's shoulders and the tightness of his arse than anything else. He turned away with a little shudder. *What is* wrong *with you? Potter's not going to want to think about things like that even if he's gay at the moment, thanks to this child he likes who's endangered.*

Draco let his eyes go out of focus staring at the bluebells instead, and waited for Potter to be finished in the Pensieve. Things had changed between them, yes, but not enough for him to think physical admiration of Potter would pay off in any way.

Harry blinked slowly when he realized that Malfoy's Animagus form was a white ferret. *I wonder if he was subconsciously influenced by the way Moody transformed him?* he thought, amused for a moment.

Then he winced as he remembered that had been Crouch, not Moody, and that Malfoy couldn't have been happy when he discovered his form. McGonagall had told Harry often enough during the training necessary to pass his NEWTs that the animal chose the wizard, not the wizard the animal. No, Malfoy couldn't have liked it, and Harry didn't think he would have, either, if someone had turned him into that animal and bounced him about the school.

He stared intently at the face of the hook-nosed wizard who sneered at Malfoy before Apparating away, but he didn't look more than vaguely familiar. Nor was his voice, though Harry closed his eyes and listened during the part where the wizard cast the Immortal Flame spell instead of watching Malfoy dash along with his little ferret nose to the ground.

Damn, he thought as he pulled his head out of the Pensieve. *So we have one suspect at least , but not one I know. And the place where we might have stood the best chance of gathering evidence is destroyed. And they know one person is tracking them.*

But even this much information was more than Harry would have had if he had gone straight to the Ministry and tried to raise the investigation there. Incompetent brewers or not, Hook-Nose and his minions were awfully good at hiding. Ron had managed to track them down in their laboratories, but always after the fact.

And after what he had heard the witch say, Harry was in no doubt that they had sold the Wolfsbane that had led to Teddy's illness.

But how did they hear of it so fast? Harry frowned for a moment, then put the mystery away for later. He thought he could be certain, after he had watched the memories, that Malfoy was not part of the group, and there would be no one else with them to serve as informant if they were investigating this together, just the two of them.

Well, that was unfortunate phrasing, Harry thought, as he turned and saw Malfoy pivoting on one heel to face him expectantly. Malfoy looked far different when it didn't seem as if he would turn every line of his mouth to a sneer in an instant. He looked at Harry intently now, as though trying to fathom what he had thought of the memories, and that was another difference. Harry couldn't remember a Malfoy who was interested in what he thought, rather than one who was interested in what his own bigoted mouth would produce next.

"The potion they made was enough like Wolfsbane to be sold as such," he said quietly, "and to fool the nose of a child whose father was a werewolf." That much, he owed to Malfoy after what he had seen. Besides, if they were to help each other, there was no point in lying to him, even by omission.

Malfoy blinked for a moment in what looked like surprise, then said, "My cousin?"

"Yes," said Harry, and couldn't help a frown. "Teddy Lupin. My godson," he added. The Malfoys had never made any attempt to initiate contact before now. He wanted to show that Teddy mattered to him in his own right, not simply as part of the Malfoy family.

Malfoy blinked again, but this time his emotions didn't show so clearly on his face. "Yes, that explains their panic," he murmured. "But how did they learn the news so fast? That happened, what, a few hours ago?"

Harry nodded, relieved by the quickness with which Malfoy's mind moved. At least he wouldn't have to explain things to him the way he did with slow Auror trainees. "But it was announced in the Ministry. Someone could have heard it and passed on the information to Hook-Nose. What?" he added, because Malfoy had abruptly grinned.

"That's what I called him, too," Malfoy said, and shrugged. "It'll do as well as anything until we learn his real name. And if we're out of the Ministry, I suppose we have to spend less time worrying about informants."

"That's what I thought," Harry said, involuntarily. He was in a bit of a daze. Not only hadn't there

been a single disagreement so far, there hadn't been a single hex flung, or a single statement spoken that caused him to want to hit Malfoy.

Some moments passed in silence. Malfoy surveyed him with narrowed eyes, then moved a step nearer. His hair was brilliant in the sunlight through the conservatory windows, and his face was serious, as was his voice.

"Look, Potter. I want to stop this bloke and his ring of followers. If they can brew something that looks enough like Wolfsbane to pass the scent test, that's bad news for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Who knows what effect it'll have on a werewolf? And then they'll probably buy that instead of what we offer, to avoid registration, and there could be incidents with rogue werewolves." Malfoy shook his head firmly. "My Department does *not* need that."

"Neither does anyone else." Harry folded his arms and leaned back against the conservatory wall. "I've hunted enough people who refused to take the Wolfsbane Potion or register with the Ministry, and I've seen the havoc they caused." He spoke as cautiously as he could, as neutrally. No, he didn't want to alienate Malfoy, but neither did Harry know where he was going with this.

"So." Malfoy lifted his upper lip in a gesture that looked like a smile, but Harry could sense the tension behind it and didn't think it was. "You can trust me. I won't step up to your side and tell you what a hero you are, but I won't try to turn on you for having a godson who's my cousin, either. I need to examine the potion he drank, or at least look at him and his symptoms if there's none left. Do you trust me enough to let me do that? Or will you give me your memories in return?" He nodded to the Pensieve.

Harry hesitated, trying to decide what would be the greater intrusion. Then he took a deep breath and reminded himself, *Teddy. This is for Teddy. And you're not the one who has the right to say if Malfoy gets to visit him. Besides, what if you missed something vital? Take Malfoy to the house and see what Andromeda says.*

"Yes, all right," he said. "You can visit him. But one remark about blood traitors or—"

"I don't use that sort of language anymore," Malfoy said. Astonishingly, his voice was dignified and quiet, his face utterly composed, as if he disdained even the thought of the words. "I find it vulgar and unhelpful." Then he smiled, and it was a real smile this time, enough to make Harry stare blankly in astonishment. "And if you know one thing about me, Potter, you ought to know that a Malfoy *never* does anything he thinks vulgar."

Harry nodded hesitantly, wondering what had happened in the past few years to change Malfoy so completely. Well, perhaps it was his own caution and the situation that created the impression of change. If they had simply met over drinks in a pub, Harry doubted Malfoy would have been so accommodating.

He felt cool gravestone under his fingers for a moment. *And I thought you weren't going to be so*

judgmental anymore?

Harry grinned ruefully. It would be easier to keep an eye on Malfoy just in case and a hand on his wand than it would be to keep himself from judging, but he was determined that he would manage the latter somehow.

"Why are you grinning?"

At least Malfoy sounded properly suspicious of that. Harry raised his eyebrows. "Because I've decided to trust you, and God knows what Andromeda will say to that. Come on. We're Apparating, not Flooing."

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Chapter: 2

Draco had to admit Potter was competent at Apparition, and even at Side-Along Apparition, though nothing could make being turned inside out and having your stomach squeezed through your ears pleasant. When he could see again, he found they stood in front of a trim cottage with a flourishing garden, surrounded by sparkling wards that relaxed only when Potter murmured a long series of incantations. Draco frowned.

"Is Mrs. Tonks paranoid?" he asked. She was likely to chase him away from little Lupin's bedside if so, and that would be inconvenient.

Potter turned, walking backwards for a moment, and looked evenly at him. "No," he said. "I am. People have already tried to kidnap Teddy three times just because of his closeness to me." His face was cool, without the self-pity Draco would have imagined necessary for any Gryffindor giving a disclosure like that, but his voice bore a note of warning. If Draco made some cutting remark, Potter stood ready to cut back.

Draco inclined his head and changed the subject slightly. "I think you've done a good job of defending him. Hook-Nose and his associates were certainly discomposed when they found out they'd offended you."

Potter blinked twice, then smiled. And yes, this wasn't the right situation for it, but that smile pulled strings in Draco that he hadn't even known were there. The last two years had been hard; Draco's name was still rubbish in large parts of wizarding society, whilst his parents' friends disdained him for cooperating with the Ministry, and his colleagues looked at his ambition with narrowed eyes. It could be hard to get a simple date, let alone anything more complicated.

Not that any date with Potter could ever be simple, Draco thought, and tried to make his staring

less obvious by examining the gardens. They were largely practical, vegetables and herbs that he recognized as useful in potions-brewing. He wondered for a moment what kind of garden his mother and aunt would create together, and why they hadn't tried.

"Here we are."

Draco looked up again. Potter had knocked on the door of the cottage. It took long moments for anyone to answer. Draco imagined a reluctant grandmother leaving her grandson, and he swallowed, a sick feeling twisting in his stomach for the first time.

Then Andromeda Black Tonks stood there, and Draco found he didn't know his aunt at all.

From his mother's stories, it had been easy to picture some rebellious, pinch-mouthed girl who didn't know what was good for her, because if she knew what was good for her, why in the world had she run off with a Muggleborn? And his father had shuddered whenever he mentioned her, so Draco had gathered the vague idea that she must be very ugly. And there were no Black grandparents to tell him different stories, or anyone who regularly interacted with him and also with Andromeda.

Draco saw a version of his mother who had unfrozen long ago and learned to live in the world. Her face was worn, yes, and marked with lines of tension and worry, but it also didn't have Narcissa's inflexible stiffness. She looked as if she could laugh from the belly, and enjoy a meal that hadn't been prepared by the hands of meticulous house-elves. The full mourning she wore enhanced rather than detracted from the effect.

Her eyes fixed on him, and immediately she drew herself up. Draco winced in spite of himself as her face became blank. Yes, there was the resemblance to his mother: when she was around someone she disliked. He made a small bow, never taking his eyes from hers. She would probably distrust someone who looked at his feet and shuffled about more. She would either take it for false modesty or think he had something to hide.

"Mrs. Tonks," he said. "Potter told me about Teddy. I'd like to look at him, if you don't mind. I have some knowledge of potions, and also of Wolfsbane, since I work for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. I might recognize the symptoms of a diluted potion, or one that's been tampered with."

Andromeda didn't close her eyes to consult with herself, the way his mother would have, and neither did she stare at him. She looked at Potter instead, and Draco fought the temptation to shake his head. How had it come about that Potter was closer to his relatives than he was?

Because he wanted to be, of course. Draco had learned since the war not to hide answers to simple questions from himself, not if he wanted to achieve his goal of stripping out the things that had made him fail so badly during the years of the war. *You could have got into contact with them if you really wanted to. It would have been as simple as an owl, and if she refused to let you visit, at least it wouldn't be your fault.*

But it had always seemed so much simpler to go along with his mother's wishes on the matter…and so seven years, almost eight, had passed, and Draco hadn't attended to the passage of time and how it might have affected Andromeda and Teddy at all.

Of course, the fact that the damaged Wolfsbane had affected Teddy was now a blessing in disguise. *Perhaps she'll let me visit again if I do a good enough job saving my cousin. Maybe she'll even be polite to me next time.*

"I trust him, Andromeda," Potter said softly.

Draco clenched his fists at his sides and deliberately didn't look at Potter. He would let some vulnerability show in his eyes if he did, and that was the last thing he needed.

Andromeda spent a moment looking at Draco's left arm. Then she nodded and raised her gaze to his. "You can come in," she said.

Harry had to fight the temptation to precede Malfoy into the house, and into Teddy's room, and into the chair placed beside the bed. The tainted Wolfsbane had been enough. Malfoy was someone who *could* hurt Teddy, however unlikely it was that he would. He had knowledge of Dark curses, and he had been among the Death Eaters, if not actually one of them.

And he refused to reveal me to those Death Eaters, Harry reminded himself. *That has to count for something.*

He kept a hand on his wand nevertheless as he leaned against the wall near Teddy's eastern window. The whole room was done in posters of winged horses, Teddy's latest obsession. Small animated pictures of various breeds of pegasi soared across the walls between the posters, and grazed on painted patches of grass. If Malfoy said something derogatory about it, Harry promised himself, he would get a Bat-Bogey Hex right up the nose. Ginny had taught Harry how to do a good one before they—parted ways.

But Malfoy only leaned over Teddy and studied his face gravely. Teddy was still asleep. Harry was grateful for that. He didn't know how he would have explained Malfoy's intrusion into the sick-room. Teddy had asked only once why his big cousin didn't come visit him, and Harry's explanations had fallen into an awkward, tangled silence. Teddy had looked away, said, "It was because of Dad and Granddad," and then turned his hair black and kept it like that for the rest of the day.

Now, watching Teddy sweat and pant and tremble—the shaking in his limbs had started up again—Harry felt the anger as a result of that conversation welling up again. He sighed and once again harnessed it. He stood nearby, and Andromeda was hovering in the doorway. If they couldn't protect Teddy like that, then they didn't deserve to have him.

Malfoy made a soft, curious noise, and picked up Teddy's left hand, turning it over. Harry raised his eyebrows, especially when Malfoy cursed and stood up rapidly.

Even then, Harry noticed, he took the time to put Teddy's hand back gently on the coverlet instead of dropping it.

Whirling to face Andromeda, he demanded, "Do you have any of the potion left? I need to examine it *immediately.*"

"I broke down the sample that I had with Athena's Universal Dissolving Solution," said Andromeda, steadily. "You can see that." She pointed to the vial on the bedside table. Malfoy snatched it up and held it to his eye, turning it back and forth as if he would count the chunks of sediment floating against the glass.

When he put the vial down and brought a hand up to his brow, he looked actually ill. Harry swallowed back the temptation to snap at him, and asked, as calmly as he could, "What is it, Malfoy?"

Malfoy turned to face him. His hand was trembling before he closed it into a fist at his side. He was careful not to look at Andromeda and Teddy now, Harry noticed. "Ordinary Wolfsbane uses a plant called foxberry," he said, his voice low but sharp. "This potion has used fox*glove* instead. It's poisonous, and it can affect the heart." He closed his eyes. "I suppose we can thank their need to make the potion pass as Wolfsbane that they couldn't use enough foxglove to invoke the regular array of symptoms. But he could die. And there's absolutely no treatment we can use for him unless things become worse; we'll have to wait and hope he recovers."

Harry heard Andromeda's soft, choked noise, and it was sheer good luck—or stubbornness—that he did not make the same kind of sound. Instead, he said, "And what did your look at his palm determine?"

Malfoy turned Teddy's hand over again, and this time Harry made out a faint blue tinge to the skin in the center of his palm. "That's a sign of blended foxglove," said Malfoy. "From the look of his symptoms, they probably mixed it with hen's teeth. That would explain the convulsions, and it might disguise the scent of the wrong ingredients even from a werewolf's nose." He hissed between his teeth. "By all rights, I should go back to the Ministry and tell Cullingford about this."

Harry looked into his face. He made himself ignore the impulse to sweep Teddy into his arms and hold him there tightly; he made himself ignore the way Andromeda was dashing tears from her eyes whilst trying to avoid being obvious about it. "And what would happen if you did?" he asked quietly.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows but didn't glance away, which was commendable of him. "That's not the question you mean to ask, Potter," he said. "You want to know how long it would take."

Harry nodded.

"Cullingford moves fast when she senses true danger, but even then, it wouldn't be fast enough, because the next full moon is two weeks away, and she wouldn't think one sick child is an emergency," said Malfoy. "So, no, it wouldn't let us catch Hook-Nose. They would have time to find another estate to practice on. And they might have time to launch an attack at me, especially if their informant can pass more details of Ministry investigations on."

"It's decided, then." Harry rose and held out his hand to Malfoy. "We're going after them alone."

"Harry—" Andromeda began.

"Yes, we are," said Malfoy, and clasped Harry's arm instead of his wrist. Harry, faintly amused, thought it was almost as though Malfoy wanted to feel how strong he was, and whether he would be up to the task of battling someone who had tried to take his godson from him. "We have the necessary expertise between the two of us, given my knowledge of potions, my observations of the enemy, and my Animagus form, and your Auror training. That's all we need."

Harry nodded back, and for a moment he and Malfoy engaged in a silent staring contest that shut out the rest of the room as thoroughly as if they had both agreed to ignore them. Then Harry blinked and glanced away, because Andromeda had put her hand on his shoulder, and her face was white.

"Just a moment, Malfoy," he said. He found himself regretting the loss of warmth when Malfoy moved his hand away, but there was the weight of Andromeda's fingers, heavy and growing heavier all the time. He turned away and walked to the far side of the room with her, lowering his voice, since he thought she would prefer that they not be overheard. "What's the matter, Andromeda? I promise I won't play hero. I'll keep as safe as possible. With a potions expert and an Animagus beside me, I'll be far safer than I could otherwise."

"It's not that," Andromeda whispered. "But—how far can you trust him? A few pretty words, and you're ready to follow him into a trap?"

Harry sighed, partially because Andromeda had never been rational on the subject of the Malfoys—she had even argued that Narcissa must have saved Harry's life in the Forbidden Forest simply to claim a life-debt—and partially because he had never imagined he would find himself in the position of defending Draco Malfoy from a woman he loved and trusted. "It's not a trap. I'm sure of that. I promise I'll be careful, but yes, I do trust him, and I'm going to follow him."

"You don't have any proof."

"I didn't have any proof that I would love Teddy the first time I met him, either," Harry retorted, and looked over his shoulder at the bed, where Malfoy still hovered. The sight of Teddy's crimson face and the small, pathetic shivers in his limbs made it impossible to breathe. He had to

shut his eyes before he could regain the thread of the conversation. "But the moment I held him, I knew I would."

Andromeda was silent for so many seconds that Harry thought she would probably firecall the Ministry as soon as he and Malfoy had gone. But then she sighed and said, "I'll give you a few days. If he comes back without you, then I'll demand Ron come and arrest him."

"Ron would do it on his own," Harry said, and smiled at her in relief. "I'm glad you know. I wouldn't go away with Malfoy without leaving some word behind me, but this makes it easier."

Andromeda unexpectedly embraced him. "Be careful," she whispered into his ear. "You're not dear to me only because you're Teddy's godfather."

Harry hugged her back, hearing the black velvet mourning robe crush beneath his hands. The war had brought Andromeda so much suffering, and she wore her sorrow openly. But she had lived past it. Harry was trying to do the same thing with the memory of gravestone beneath his fingers, his resolve to fight against his own anger, and his refusal to brood over the parts of his life that had not worked out the way he expected them to.

Ginny—

He banished the name from his mind and turned to Malfoy. "Let's Apparate to the place you saw them, then."

He thought for a moment that Malfoy looked at him oddly, as though he had thought Harry would demand to go elsewhere first, but he reached out an arm. Harry stepped up beside him and clasped that arm in turn, letting himself be dragged against Malfoy's side. He enjoyed the sensation of the other man's breathing in the moment before the Apparition swallowed them both.

"I see what you mean—about evidence being destroyed," Potter said, his words interrupted by his hacking cough. He waved his wand, and some of the smoke bent away from him as if chased. "Hook-Nose is—quite afraid of me. That's something—at least."

Draco nodded absently. He had already learned as much as he could from observing the charred ground that had been a thriving field and several buildings a few hours ago, and now he was more interested in studying Potter, who was bent over, poking with his wand at a clump of ash as if that would tell him things.

He had, of course, cast a spell that would bring the whispered conversation between Potter and his aunt to his ears. And what he had heard stunned him.

Potter trusts me enough to go somewhere alone with me. He wants at least a few days before Andromeda contacts the Ministry.

It had been seven years since they had last seen each other, but the man in front of him was still Potter, and Draco knew what that meant—had known what that meant. He had anticipated a temporary partnership full of long silences and snide remarks, just on this side of what would make him strike out at Potter. He had thought he would hear sniveling and weeping at night if they were together that long, and Potter would insist on telling him stories about Teddy, just so Draco couldn't mistake his motivation for being here.

But Potter had said he trusted hm. And now he worked over the cinders with a grim, quiet determination, chasing away the ash again and again no matter how many times it got up his nostrils, coughing only when he couldn't avoid it, and pausing when he unearthed a series of crumbling bones that must have been the dogs'. He waited long moments, his hand making petting motions above the bones. When he straightened and turned away, Draco found himself disconcerted by the mixture of rage and sorrow in his eyes. Well, that hadn't changed, at least. Potter was still Gryffindor enough to hate the deaths of innocents.

And he had said he trusted Draco.

"You were right," Potter said, so quietly that Draco couldn't take any offense from the words. "No evidence to be found here. Unless—" He hesitated, and turned back to face the bones again. Draco heard a small, wet sound that might be Potter licking his lips.

He shook his head to banish the thoughts of other contexts that wet sound could occur in—really, he was getting as bad as Theodore, who spent most of his time evaluating people by what kind of sexual partner he thought they would make—and stepped forwards. "What did you have in mind, Potter?" he said. For a moment, he leaned his elbow on the small of Potter's back, just to see what would happen. He neither stirred nor moved away.

Potter said nothing for so long Draco felt impatience well up in him, sick and fierce, and then die away again. Finally, Potter looked at him sideways and then said, "Why did you join the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?"

Draco blinked a few times. He opened his mouth to demand that Potter tell him what that question had to do with anything. Then he hesitated.

Is it really so bad to offer trust in return for trust? You have your wand with you if you need it.

"I wanted to join the Ministry to prove that the Malfoys were more than followers of the Dark Lord and hapless victims," he said. He cleared his throat, though this was no more than the speech he had given Cullingford when she called him into her office and wanted to know the same thing. "I was so tired of being a victim. I knew the Aurors wouldn't have me, and most of the Departments in the Ministry didn't sound interesting. But I've found magical creatures fascinating for most of my life, and I'm an Animagus. If there was any place I could fit into the Ministry, it was here."

"I couldn't tell you found magical creatures fascinating from the way you paid attention in Hagrid's class," Potter muttered.

Draco bristled and took half a step away. *He was the one who brought up Hogwarts first. That means I'm entitled to strike back.* He had made a promise to be more cautious in the last few years, not a coward. "Yes, because you had such loyalty to him that you dropped his NEWT classes in our sixth year," he said. "I was distracted with other things then, but I remember that."

Potter glared at him for a moment. Then he folded his arms and glared at the ground, tapping one foot, as though it were somehow the fault of bones and ash that he was an idiot. Draco regarded him scornfully, glad Potter had said what he did when he did. Draco might have returned trust for trust, and where would that have got him with someone who couldn't forget the past?

Caught up in his own self-congratulatory musings, Draco thought he must be hallucinating at first when Potter said, "I'm sorry."

"I—what?" Draco said. His voice limped out of his mouth. He wished he had sounded prouder. One of his father's haughtier "Pardons?" when meeting a Weasley who dared address him would have been perfect.

"I have no reason to think you're lying, and no reason to bring up Hogwarts," Potter said. He was speaking between clenched teeth now, and the patch of gray ground on which his eyes rested would have caught fire again if he glared at it any harder. "I didn't—I was stupid, and I'm sorry." He looked up and sought Draco's eyes.

"Listen," Draco said, trying to decide how he felt about things. "We have to work together for the moment, but there's no reason we can't just part at the end of this and never see one another again." The loneliness he had felt more than once in the last few years protested that there was a reason, but Draco had long since neglected to listen to his lesser emotions. "Can we make a truce? An agreement that we won't mention certain things?"

Potter had a wan smile on his lips, but he shook his head. "There are things I may need to know about you that depend on your past," he said. "Especially what you've done in the last seven years since I saw you." He hesitated, then added, "I suppose I was looking for an answer you're not going to give me. That serves me right. I can only hope you won't report me after you see this." He pointed his wand at the dog bones.

The incantation that came from his lips then was like nothing Draco had heard in seven years of training at Hogwarts, eleven years before that of childhood instruction, and seven years since of often sudden experience on the ground working for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. The words twisted and slithered sideways, then came back again so Draco's ears almost made sense of them, and then leaped and thumped down in odd places. They either had no syllables or were all one sort of stress. Draco shuddered and felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

A shimmer like a heat haze crept across the bones. The nearest set rose from the ground and balanced on slender paws, wavering back and forth as if it longed to rest. But the skull lifted to face Potter, and there was a spark of dead blackness in its eyesockets deeper than the ash around them could account for.

Draco would have looked at Potter, but he couldn't take his eyes away from the dog. And then Potter repeated that weird incantation again, in all the nonexistent directions words could take, and Draco was glad he wasn't looking at him.

The dog's jaws parted, and it wheezed out a huffing breath that smelled like a slaughterhouse. The words made no sense to Draco, rather like Potter's incantation. But Potter seemed to understand them, because this time he made only a few sounds, instead of repeating himself again. Draco shivered helplessly and closed his hands on his elbows, wrapping his arms violently around himself. It didn't help. He had never been so cold, never wanted so much to scream and run away. He locked his feet into the ground to keep himself still, and then watched the skeleton out of sheer stubbornness.

The dog swung its head forwards, coughed heavily, and again said a few menacing, rough words. Potter nodded, or at least Draco thought the silence to his right lasted long enough for a nod, and asked one more question, or his voice lilted enough for it to be a question. This time, the dog was silent.

Potter spoke the incantation again. Draco was shivering, tears in his eyes, by the time the words stopped. And then the heat haze passed, and so did the cloud of dust in his head, and the skeleton slumped to the ground and was charred bones once again. If it had ever stood up at all, Draco thought, numb with horror. If it had ever spoken at all.

But he knew it had. The idea that it hadn't was just a childish refusal to remember a nightmare. He took a deep breath and turned to face Potter again.

Potter was nearly as gray as the ash, and wavering on his feet. He shut his eyes and looked dead himself for a moment. When he wavered again, Draco reached out and caught him under the shoulder, not at all sure he ought to. Potter smiled without showing his teeth and leaned heavily on Draco's side.

"I got the information we needed," he whispered. "The others called him Ferris Dobs. And he's gone to a place in Cornwall marked by three standing stones and rumors of Dark magic. Let's get out of here. It's not good to stay too long near a place where you've used that spell."

Draco bit his tongue to control the questions, and Apparated. But his trust went only so far. That was Dark magic, or he had never felt it. And Harry Perfect Potter using Dark magic was—not within the compass of the world as Draco knew it.

Harry woke slowly. He had been awake all the time he cast the spell, of course; casting it wasn't

a decision that could be made in his sleep. But he only felt as if he weren't walking through a dream when he had a cuppa of tea clenched in his hands, and the warmth had seeped into the bones of his fingers, and his shivers had ceased, and his throat had stopped tasting like rotten meat.

Malfoy sat on a chair across from him in this great dim room, wherever it was, sipping from what Harry privately suspected was a cup of something much stronger than tea. He blinked and looked at the fire. The wavering shapes of the flames helped chase away the memory of the way the dog had looked, moved, spoken. Harry closed his eyes, shuddered once, and made himself be all right again.

He looked at Malfoy. "I suppose you have questions," he said.

"Like Runespoors have scales," Malfoy said, and set his cup down on the table beside him with a clink. The flat, hard suspicion in his eyes made Harry fight back the impulse to defend himself. He bit his lip and held his peace. It showed a great trust for Malfoy to have brought him here instead of turning him over to the Ministry, and that was all he could ask for.

Until he explained, at least.

"Where did you learn that spell?" Malfoy asked quietly.

Harry sighed shakily and flexed his left hand open on his knee, looking at it instead of Malfoy. "What do you know about the means by which Voldemort became immortal?" he asked.

Malfoy's shadow swung to the right as if in startlement, and Malfoy said slowly, "I—I only knew that he was, and that you killed him. Somehow. With your mother's love, and my wand." His voice roughened with amusement for a moment, or maybe anger, but he banished it. "What did he use?"

"That, I still can't tell you," Harry said, and raised his hand to forestall the protest he knew was coming. "It has nothing to do with whether I think you'd betray the secret. Ron, Hermione, and I had an interview with the Minister after the war was over and we took an Unbreakable Vow never to reveal the secret of Voldemort's immortality."

"That bad, then," Malfoy said.

Harry nodded. "But there were a number of places important to his immortality. I—visited one of them, a year after the war. Curiosity, I suppose, or a desire to pay my respects—"

"To *the Dark Lord?"*

Harry welcomed the surge of irritation that traveled through his body, and squinted up at Malfoy. "No," he snapped. "If you would let me finish my sentences, you'd see that. That place was instrumental in killing Dumbledore. I went to pay my respects to him."

"And here I thought Professor Snape killed Dumbledore," Malfoy muttered, and shook his head. "Clearly, I have a lot to learn about the Hero of the Wizarding World and his affairs."

"Most people do," said Harry, and he must have said it in the right way, because Malfoy relaxed against the back of his chair. "Anyway." He closed his eyes, trying to block the sight of the cave from his memory. But the darkness made his immediate environment *more* like the cave, so he opened them again and did his best to stare at nothing. "I found a book there. Voldemort must have stolen it from somewhere. Maybe the Chamber of Secrets, or some private library that had several books about Slytherin. It talked about necromancy—"

"I know what you did, Potter," Malfoy said, and his voice was tight and harsh. "Tell me why you did it. Tell me why you *learned* it."

Harry shut his eyes again, more tightly, because this time he thought it right to concentrate on what he saw when he did. "I visit the graves of the people who died in the war often," he said. "And my parents, too. I talk to their gravestones. Would you believe that once I wanted to talk to them more personally? I had something that would let me do that, but I—lost it."

"Only you could speak about the Resurrection Stone that casually," Malfoy muttered.

Harry ignored him. He was lost in memories of the first time he had seen the earth above the graves stirring, and realized just what necromancy was: speaking with the bodies of the dead, not their spirits. "I cured myself of that longing fairly quickly. But one reason I kept the book, and one reason I learned the spells in it easily, was that it would have been useless to anyone else anyway. You need to be able to speak Parseltongue to cast them."

Malfoy said nothing for so long Harry thought he might have stood and left the room to firecall the Ministry. But when he opened his eyes, he realized Malfoy was holding his cup of liquor very tightly and staring into the fire.

It was up to Harry to break the silence. He did after a few moments. "So that's what you heard me use today. It doesn't have a use that often, but sometimes it does." He sipped the tea. His throat felt far dryer than it should. "The dead can't lie, though there are questions they might refuse to answer. I'm sure the information the dog gave me is accurate."

Draco didn't reply, because he didn't think he could yet. He was trying to contemplate the longing to talk with the dead Potter must have experienced to make him learn magic that felt like *that*, the feelings that had led him back to the place—whatever it was—and the fact that he was actually willing to exploit one of the connections between him and the Dark Lord.

And the trust, once again, that had led him to show off that magic in front of Draco. Necromancy was still punishable by three years in Azkaban, and more than that depending on what kind of sacrifice was used to power the spell and the motive for seeking the information. Speaking with a

dead animal in order to find its murderer and without a sacrifice might not be called a crime, but Draco knew the Wizengamot wouldn't see it that way.

He held the future of the Chosen One in his hands. Potter had given it to him as if it meant nothing at all.

Draco didn't like gifts that meant nothing at all.

He sat up and turned around to face Potter. "Why tell me this?" he demanded. "Why did you use that spell in front of me, instead of sending me off to scout the remains of the buildings and then casting it? Do you take risks like this all the time? How many of your friends know you're a necromancer?"

Potter opened his eyes. They looked glazed and exhausted. Draco wondered what kind of toll necromancy took on the wizard using it, and whether it was anything like the Unforgivable Curses' toll. Then he frowned. *Should I really be concerned about someone who would use that kind of spell in the first place?*

"My friends know," Potter said, his voice thin. "And I didn't send you away because you would have wondered why I wanted you to leave so suddenly, and crept back and watched me perform the spell anyway. Then you would probably have thought it was your duty to report me to the Ministry, and done so. This way, there was at least a chance that you would be on my side, or want to ask questions."

Draco resisted the urge to hit his head into the back of the chair. It was the same kind of non-logic Potter applied to everything—to trusting him, to his desire to act on his own instead of waiting for Auror backup, to deciding that he should take Draco to the Tonks house instead of just describing Teddy's symptoms to him.

On the other hand, it had worked, hadn't it? Draco still felt wary of Potter, but he felt a measure of sympathy for him as well, and a sneaking admiration he couldn't help. To find and exploit the secret of that book, and then keep it from possessing him in return, was something Draco might have done. Or tried and failed to do, before his sixth year.

"All right," he said finally. "So say that I won't report you to the Ministry for now."

Potter lifted his head and gave him a brilliant smile. Draco's stomach tugged again. But this was more than physical attraction, or the wonder of seeing how much Potter had changed, because now he knew the source of that change. Of course being close to that kind of darkness, and daring to master it anyway, would alter a person.

"Thank you," Potter whispered. "Do you have maps that might show the location of three standing stones in Cornwall?"

"Yes," Draco said. "But you need to sleep."

"It's not that late—"

"It's nine-o'clock," said Draco, and Potter frowned, looking around as though he thought there were windows in the room that might show him otherwise. "And I'm your host. You sleep, and I'll look over some of the maps."

"Every hour we delay—"

"Is an hour that Ferris Dobs convinces himself we don't have enough proof to come after him," Draco said smoothly. "I would rather take our time and make sure we can catch him when we face him than charge at him too soon and lose because of that."

Potter spent some time considering that, his eyelids flickering up and down like those of a person deprived of tea for three days. Draco's private resolve increased. He would chain Potter to the bed and take away his wand if he refused to sleep. He was not going to battle beside anyone who looked like *that.*

Perhaps I should chain him to the bed anyway.

Draco calmed his immediate irritation with himself by admitting that at least he had a reason to want Potter now, after seeing his necromancy. It brought Potter closer to him, as someone who had used Dark magic but refused to spend his entire life in guilt over his actions. Perhaps Draco had sensed that inherent likeness and was interested because of it.

And perhaps he's just fit, and I'm just lonely.

Finally, Potter nodded and put down his cup carefully on the arm of the chair. "Thank you," he said. "Could you have one of the house-elves escort me to a room? I think I'd trip over my own feet if I tried to stand up now."

Draco smiled in spite of himself. He could learn to like this honest Potter. "I'll take you myself," he said, standing. "It's not too far, and the elves are excitable. You could fall down the stairs and break your neck because one of them saw a patch of dust that hadn't been cleaned on the banister."

Potter blinked at him, then snorted. "Your parents don't know I'm here, do they?"

Smart, too.

"Not as such," Draco said. "But I'm less afraid of what they might do than of what they might tell the papers." He extended his arm so Potter could lean on it, and the other man did so, yawning widely enough that Draco heard his jaw crack.

They shuffled carefully up the back stairs, the ones that had been used by human servants in the

days when the Malfoys had lost enough prestige and money to need them instead of house-elves. Now and then Potter paused to tilt his head back and study the pattern of climbing dragons on the banister, or the walls, which were cream here. When Draco asked him what he was looking for, Potter said, "You have a warmer home than I expected."

Draco played with the comment in his mind all the way up the staircase, but couldn't find anything to do with it. In the end, he laid Potter down gently on the bed he'd chosen and wrestled his boots off in silence. Potter flung out a hand when Draco started to attend to his socks.

"I'm—all right," he said, pausing to let another yawn through. "Thanks for the hospitality. Don't stay up too late looking at maps yourself. And you might firecall Andromeda, if you think of it." He rolled onto his side and let his eyes fall shut.

"She'd be suspicious of me," Draco said, though he hated to keep Potter from rest a moment longer. His breathing was already sliding deep and evening out.

"Likely," Potter muttered. "So. Tell her—tell her I told you the story about the blue ribbon and the summer day when Teddy changed his hair green and his skin brown and hid in a tree for hours."

"What?" Draco demanded, but Potter was asleep, and only an open-mouthed snore answered him. Draco rolled his eyes and lightly tilted Potter's face so his mouth shut. It was only so drool wouldn't spill over the pillows, of course.

And it was only because of his loneliness that Draco lingered with his fingers on Potter's cheek, cataloguing the changes seven years had made in the shape of his forehead and jaw.

At last he shook himself away from the bed and went down to the section of his father's library that held the maps of Cornwall.

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Chapter: 3

Harry woke slowly, to the inevitable rumpled feeling that always assaulted him when he slept in clothes. It took him some time to remember why he still felt tired, grains of gritty dark exhaustion rubbing back and forth in his bones and behind his eyes, and his jaw popped open in another yawn as he examined the sleek blue sheets he lay among.

Oh, yeah. Malfoy—the dog—Dobs—Teddy.

Harry hastened to rise then. He wanted to be at his most alert when they confronted Dobs, and he

knew from long experience that only a shower would ease him when he was feeling like this.

There was a loo located off the bedroom which Harry found after a few minutes of opening closet doors, to his relief, so he didn't need to call the house-elves and ask embarrassing questions. And the shower itself was as big as some of the closets, with the hot water steady enough to drum against his muscles and push the weariness by force out of his body. Harry leaned his cheek on the wall and moaned in appreciation, then straightened and turned so the water could pound his back in return.

A number of fluffy dark red towels awaited him when he stepped out of the shower. Harry wrapped one around his waist and one around his shoulders so his hair wouldn't drip all over the towel around his waist, and wandered out into the bedroom again, using a third towel to dry his arms and head off.

Because he had his face tilted forwards, scrubbing at his stubborn, dripping fringe, he didn't immediately realize he wasn't alone. Then he heard a caught breath, and looked up, blinking, to see Malfoy standing by the bed.

And he was staring. Definitely.

Harry stared back at him, trying to decide what to do next. He could feel a blush coming on, but Malfoy would have heard the shower going when he came into the bedroom, and he could have left again. Or detailed an elf to bring the breakfast steaming on a tray next to him, for that matter. Harry decided to stare back boldly.

Malfoy swallowed, then let his gaze travel from Harry's face to the towel wrapped around his hips, and back up again. He still looked faintly uncomfortable, but he was showing his interest openly.

Harry felt happiness burst in his chest like a supernova. No, his trust in Malfoy had not been misplaced.

"Good morning," he said calmly, and returned to drying his hair with the towel. When he made a movement as if to drop it on the bed, Malfoy *tsked* and floated the towel into the air, then banished it, presumably to where it would drip safely. Harry grinned at him, and then bit his lip to stop himself from grinning like Teddy presented with ice cream.

"Have you firecalled Andromeda yet?" he asked, as if he couldn't feel the tension hovering between them.

Malfoy moved forwards a step, then paused, studying him with half-lowered lids."Yes," he said. "She believed me when I gave her the story of the blue ribbon and Teddy. Teddy himself is recovering, sleeping without convulsions, and not sweating as much now. And I located the area in Cornwall where our Dobs presumably is." He flicked one hand. "For now, to something more important. I rather expected you to charge in the opposite direction when you realized the way I

was looking at you."

Harry hummed under his breath and bent forwards, far more than he needed to, in order to retrieve his robes; they looked suspiciously free of wrinkles. *House-elves, popping in whilst I was in the loo,* he decided, and slid his shirt over his head. *No, Malfoy didn't need to come into the bedroom if he didn't want to.*

"Why would I do that?" he asked, and removed the towel from his shoulders as the shirt got tangled with it. Malfoy vanished it as he had the other, but Harry didn't think it was his imagination that the movement was a trifle slower this time. Malfoy was staring at his arse, or at least at the bulge it made beneath the towel. Well, it was a nice arse, Harry thought contentedly. "It's rare enough that I find someone who looks at my body."

"What else would they be looking at?" Malfoy's voice conveyed genuine bewilderment.

Taking pity on him, Harry turned around and tapped his fingers on his forehead. "When I'm more to someone than just a scar, it's a rare and momentous occasion," he said.

Malfoy blinked, his eyelids rising and falling so slowly Harry half-thought he was falling asleep. Then he shook his head. "How ridiculous," he muttered. "That scar is old, ugly, and not anything special. I knew that years ago." He moved a few steps closer to Harry, his expression curiously intent, as if he were stalking a wild Fwooper he thought would fly at any second.

I'm not timid, Harry thought, and stepped forwards to meet him. "Yes, but not everyone has the benefit of your years of acquaintance with me, or your habit of thinking that I'm not anything special," he murmured.

Malfoy stood in front of him, looking thoughtfully at his chest. "You may have misunderstood me," he said.

"Oh?" Harry's voice was higher than he would have liked, his breath faster, but Malfoy didn't look much less flustered.

Malfoy met his eyes at last. He wasn't smiling, but his voice sounded as if he was. "I said there wasn't anything special about your scar," he said. "But your scar isn't you."

Harry growled—anyone who could have expected him to hold back now just wasn't *human*—and leaned in to see what Malfoy's mouth tasted like.

Draco had worried at first when he saw the confidence with which Potter spoke, thought, stared at him, moved. That confidence spoke of someone who'd had many lovers, and either Draco wouldn't measure up to them or Potter was the sort who would grow bored easily and leave him. They weren't that old, after all, so Potter's confidence couldn't be simply the result of age.

But the way Potter kissed him was too eager and forthright to serve someone who was bored of lovemaking. Draco found his chin taken and turned, his mouth opened by a forceful tongue, and his hips pressed suddenly against Potter's still-sodden ones. He might have protested the indignity of it, the wetness, or any number of things, but he was too busy kissing, and being kissed by, Harry Potter.

Draco found himself gasping early into the kiss; Potter seemed to have decided the words "dignified" and "chaste" never applied to snogging. He leaned closer and closer, pressing his tongue in when Draco would have liked a breath, nipping Draco's lips as if that were the purpose of lips, and grumbling in his throat when Draco made some attempt to preserve an inch of space between their bodies.

Water drops crept into Draco's robes. He gave up standing on his dignity and pulled Potter closer with a muffled little moan.

Though black spots burst in front of his vision by the time the kiss finished, it was still worth it.

"I—hadn't expected that," he said, when he pulled away and stared at Potter. Potter smirked at him with swollen lips that made Draco clench his fists so he didn't dive right back into the kiss.

"Neither did I." Potter shrugged and shook his head. The towel had come mostly undone from his hips, and Draco caught a satisfying glimpse of a pink erection rapidly turning red. His hair hung gleaming and dripping and unrepentant just above his shoulders, and he had more muscles, and more scars, than Draco would have imagined. *Being an Auror is dangerous business,* he thought, and reached out, idly tracing a finger down the broadest scar, a white line above Potter's right hip that looked oddly like a sword-cut. Potter's breath whistled in and out for a moment before he controlled himself. "And no doubt Andromeda would talk on and out about an enchantment."

"But not Weasley?" Draco looked up to meet Potter's eyes again, and wondered idly if he ought to start calling him Harry.

"No." Potter's smile flashed. "He's forgotten his grievances against the Malfoys in the last few years. Too busy living. They're more present for Andromeda."

"That seems to have happened to all of us," said Draco, and cupped a hand around Potter's hip.

"Grievances against your family?" Harry asked. "Not unless your parents have been behind several crimes I couldn't solve."

Draco laughed before he recognized the words as teasing. It felt odd, and very right, to have Harry Potter smiling at and joking with him, instead of making him the butt of the joke. "No. We've lived. Maybe that's one reason this can happen. Because we're not what we were."

"Isn't that too simple for you?" Harry asked, a line appearing between his brows. "I thought you

would want to apply some complicated Slytherin analysis to it."

"Living is the most complicated thing of all," said Draco, and sucked a soft line along Harry's neck. Harry gasped and tilted his head back.

Draco knew they would have to stop soon; among other things, they had to go after Ferris Dobs before anything further could happen between them. But for the moment, he was sucking on Harry Potter's neck, and Harry Potter was letting him, and there was a small, solid knot of happiness in Draco's stomach that was not melting.

Harry grimaced and straightened, fighting the temptation to run a hand through his hair. It couldn't have been further disordered by the Side-Along Apparition than it already had been, and Draco's sideways glance told him as much. But he kept his hands at his sides, and instead regarded the area before them cautiously.

The ground was boggy, a sullen green, with open pools of water dotted here and there. The sky above them was gray, steady lines of drizzle traveling downwards from it the way a line of drool might have dropped from a living dog's muzzle. Draco had already cast an Impervious Charm; Harry hastened to cast the same one, and did what he could to ignore Draco's chuckle.

The standing stones weren't far from them, one slender pillar on either side of an enormous boulder starred with green and white patches of moss and lichen. Harry shivered as he stared at it. He had grown more sensitive to Dark magic than he would have liked since he started studying necromancy, and whilst it had proven an asset when tracking down Death Eaters, now it only added an edge to the way he regarded the stones without telling him anything useful.

Draco had been quietly casting tracking charms and murmuring beneath his breath. They had arrived under Disillusionment, but Draco had warned Harry that Dobs' group were competent ward-casters even if they were *in*competent brewers, and they couldn't be sure they had arrived unnoticed. Draco relaxed a moment later, though, and tossed his hair over his shoulder in a flurry of blond.

"Where are they?" Harry whispered.

Draco aimed his wand past the great boulder and at what looked like an ordinary, small hillock of green to Harry. "There," he whispered back. "They're using charms to repel Muggles, but also a complicated glamour that makes the place uninteresting to anyone who doesn't already know it's there. We'll be best off walking towards it with our eyes squinted so our sight can't trick us, the way you approach the platform for the Hogwarts Express."

"Funny," Harry said as they began to walk. "I always rushed it with my eyes shut."

Draco laughed at him, though he kept the sound low. Harry didn't have to listen hard to find it friendly. "That would be a Weasley trick, yes," he said, and then concentrated on the uneven

footing ahead of him.

Harry found it sickening to walk that ground. It jigged up and down constantly, and sometimes assumed colors he knew it couldn't be, such as black and gray and purple. He hadn't seen charms like this before, and vowed to convince the Aurors to interview Dobs and the others when he brought them in, so they could learn the trick of it.

The colors suddenly flattened and swam, and Harry flung a hand up in front of his face. But Draco seized his wrist and drew him forwards, and then Harry found himself past the glamour, or wards, and in a different landscape altogether.

A granite path spread out before them, encircled by further rings of standing stones. The whole area hummed with enough magic to make Harry's teeth hurt. He heard the barking of dogs, though he couldn't see them; in the center of the granite path was a series of what looked like wagons, or perhaps simply collapsible wooden buildings on wheels. They were painted a somber green and gray, to blend in with the ground and the rain from a distance. Harry could hear a wizard's voice shout, and another, lower voice answer. Then someone cursed. Harry hoped one of the dogs had got a bite in.

He turned to Draco. "What should we do first?" he whispered. He wanted to charge, but he suspected Draco wouldn't like that plan, bloody cautious prat that he was.

"Scout," Draco said, and he blurred like the colors in the landscape had, so Harry was almost tempted to shield his eyes again. But the colors cleared quickly, and a white ferret stood there on its hind legs, wriggling a set of enormous whiskers at him. Harry swallowed a snicker and adopted a grave face instead.

"You could grow quite a beard, if that's any indication," he said.

The ferret bared its teeth at him, which Harry supposed was probably weasel for "Get stuffed," and then slid away towards the wagons, moving with a lithe grace that reassured Harry, who had suspected he would be immediately visible to Dobs' people, white as he was. Harry crouched down and cast another charm to cushion his arse from the wet ground under him. His eyes followed every trace of the ferret's motion until it vanished.

Then he squeezed his knees and told himself he was *waiting*, not following Draco into the camp, however dearly he wanted to.

Draco sniffed carefully as he crouched under one of the wagons, but smelled nothing unusual. Smoke from the fires in the center of the camp, charmed to burn against the rain, and the wet fur of dogs, and dragonhide from the boots the wizards wore, and the thickly embroidered cloth of their robes, and—

Suddenly his tail stuck out straight behind him and his fur bristled. He could smell something

different after all, though the crushing, pounding scent of the rain had almost washed it away. There were herbs in the wagon above him, and among them was foxglove. And when Draco stood up on his hind legs, forepaws braced against a wheel, and stuck his nose close to a crack in the wooden floor, he could smell hens' teeth as well.

Satisfaction surged through him like wildfire, though the scents told him nothing more about what in the world the wizards thought they were doing. They couldn't actually mean to make a substitute for Wolfsbane.

But he remembered the gray dogs who might have been part wolf, and how they had reacted differently than the rest of the dogs to the first potion, and he wondered.

The barking grew louder. Draco peered around the wheel, and saw Hook-Nose—Dobs—standing on the steps of the wagon across from him, waving his wand to cast a wide circle of Morganna's Debris around a loose ring of dogs gathered near the central fire. Once again, there were a great variety of them, but once again there were some gray ones, lean and rangy and possessed of amber eyes, that could have been part wolf. Those stood with their ears pricked forwards and their attention on the wizards, whilst the other dogs snapped and snarled and growled. Draco rubbed his nose with a paw for a moment. He had always thought that dogs with wolf blood in them were wilder, and thus less likely to be quiet.

"On my signal!" Dobs shouted, and his five people, three wizards and two witches, gathered around the outer circle of the Debris raised their wands. They cast the spell nonverbally, but Draco recognized the wand motion used by Healers to send a nutrient or sleeping potion directly into the stomach when a patient would vomit everything taken by mouth. They were spelling the potion they'd come up with into the dogs' stomachs, Draco was certain.

He edged a little sideways, putting him into a position that would allow him both to hide better from the firelight and to have a wider field of vision, and watched.

The first few dogs froze and stiffened and fell over then. The ones left in the circle with them began to back up, barking and whining, and then several of them turned and began to chase their tails madly. Effects of a plant called fire-binding weed, Draco thought, and opened his nostrils wider to be sure he could smell it.

As other dogs fell to the ground and began to paddle their legs in convulsions, Draco returned his gaze to the wolf-like dogs. They were nosing calmly at each other, or regarding the humans with curious eyes.

Dobs and his people broke into hoarse cheering. Draco dug his paws into the earth and sneezed in scorn. Yes, they really were trying to brew Wolfsbane and thought it was enough that the dogs who had some wolf heritage weren't reacting violently. But the idiots were disregarding the unique magical effect that the full moon had on werewolves—Draco might have been slightly more convinced by their trial if he'd seen it happen on a full moon night—and the way that the disease influenced the immune systems of humans. If they were sending this potion out into the

world as Wolfsbane, or some even more inferior version of it, Draco would not be surprised if a majority of their human patients fell ill.

The wizards and witches were watching the wolf-like dogs and beginning to argue about the likely cause of their calmness. Draco twitched his ears. He could listen to the words and gain some additional proof that they'd been trying to modify Wolfsbane, but he doubted he would learn anything truly useful. It would be far better to gain some direct observations of one of their brewing labs.

He crept around the corner of the wheel, grateful the rain would affect the dogs' noses as much as it would his, and then streaked up onto the lowest step of the wagon he'd been hiding beneath. Once again, no one seemed to notice him, and Draco relaxed. He had had reason before to curse the white color of his fur, but that couldn't help his enemies if they persisted in not looking in his direction.

And then the air around him grew iron bars, and a cage formed, encompassing Draco. Someone laughed. Draco knew, even as he twisted his body madly in circles to try and force an escape between the bars, that it would be Dobs.

"And *that*, my friends," he told the wizards and witches around him, even as the cage containing Draco rattled down the steps of the wagon and collapsed at his feet, "is why I put ferret-detection wards on the wagons."

Harry raised his head when he heard a strange sound coming from the camp. His body tensed. Rationally, he told himself that it was no stranger than the sounds he had heard before—laughter, hoarse cheering, the barking of maddened dogs—but it was different, that was for certain. It was a high, shrill squeaking. Harry listened intently, wondering if they were getting ready to move the wagons and one of them had wheels that hadn't been oiled recently.

But it was louder than that. A squeaking like a ferret in trouble, perhaps.

Harry muttered, "Bloody Malfoy," under his breath and rose to his feet. His steps forwards were cautious, and he kept his wand loose and ready in his hand. He had seen most of the wards that sparkled about the camp, or so he thought, and there were some that would miss him automatically because of his Disillusionment Charm. But the last thing he wanted was for their enemies to capture them both.

If that was even what had happened to Draco.

He ducked around the corner of one of the wagons, and froze when he saw a spell stretched like a tripwire across his path, gleaming white and then black in lazy patterns. Harry hissed under his breath. He had no idea what the spell did, and no desire to find out.

He cast a spell on his ears instead, so they would seek out every single suspicious noise in the

camp and bring it straight to him. He winced when a wave of sound crashed in on him, but he'd used this spell before, to pick up the whispers of dastardly criminals at a hundred paces, and was used to the effects. He listened, concentrating on any sound that was definitely animal and not human, and sorting the words that came to him for certain specific ones.

In a moment, he heard the word "ferret."

Harry leaned forwards, extending his body cautiously above the black-and-white spell, so he could see around the corner of the nearest wagon and, hopefully, catch a glimpse of Draco. He saw Dobs instead, the man's back turned to him. He was holding something above his head and laughing. Harry squinted, unable to be sure from this distance—*bloody glasses*—but thinking he made out a small white form moving inside an iron cage.

Harry smiled, or rather he peeled his lips back from his teeth. Then he aimed his wand into the camp and whispered under his breath, "*Abi, ferrum*."

Startled cries were his first indication that the spell, one to banish all the iron in the camp, had worked. The wizards and witches of Dobs' group were turning around to stare at the wagon wheels suddenly rolling around them, missing their axle pins, and some of them were feeling frantically at their clothes, which apparently had had iron buttons tying them together.

But Harry's concentration was on Dobs himself, and the suddenly nonexistent iron cage he'd held—

And the lithe white shape that surged up Dobs' arm to bite him right on his hooked nose.

Draco usually tried to avoid biting things in his Animagus form; it called forth the ferret instincts too strongly, and then he would be left with the urge to hunt down rodents and eat them, and that was not on. But he had no intention of resisting the urge to bite Dobs, and few things had ever given him as much satisfaction as hearing how the flesh crunched and tore between his sharp teeth.

Dobs screamed in agony and flung his head back, an unwise move. Draco went along for only part of the ride, and then flew away, clutching most of Dobs' nose in his teeth. Only a strip of dangling flesh would be left on his face.

Draco didn't have much time to feel smug about this. He slammed into the side of a wagon and felt the impact all along his ribs. He screamed in pain, a high, shrill sound, as he dropped, and for a long moment he couldn't summon the concentration to change back into his human form again.

Then he wondered why he'd had that moment at all, considering how angry Dobs must be about the attack. He looked up, blinking, and found Ferris Dobs dueling Harry Potter.

Harry's teeth were locked in a merciless grin, and his body crouched and leaned forwards, as if

he were facing into a strong wind. He flung hex after hex at Dobs, who countered them with frantic dodging more than sophisticated defensive charms. The air around them was filled with the smell of lightning and the crackle of weird lights. Draco didn't think he dared approach.

On the other hand, he didn't need to. Dobs' group had started to recover and were aiming their wands at Harry's back. Draco smiled, stuck his wand at their feet along the ground, and cast the strongest sleeping charm he knew. The Ministry approved of things like that. They collapsed, their wands raining from their hands like so many useless sticks of wood. Draco chuckled, and stood up, studying Dobs and Harry thoughtfully. Harry seemed to be handling the duel well enough, and Draco really should get a look inside one of those wagons. He would understand the ingredients and instructions used in the potions better now that he knew what he was supposed to be looking for—

And then he saw Dobs backing away from Harry, his face distorted with rage and hate, and his wand rising, and he remembered the Immortal Flame spell that had destroyed the previous estate. He wondered what Dobs would do this time, now that he was faced with an enemy he feared enough to destroy his precious work on the mere chance of avoiding.

Draco lurched into a run.

But Dobs was already screaming the words to an incantation that Draco had heard Bellatrix use once, and he feared he was too late.

Harry recognized the expression Dobs wore. He had seen it on Voldemort's face when he began to realize that he was not going to win their final duel. He had seen it on the face of Molly Weasley, battling Bellatrix.

He had seen it in the mirror, when he had begun to realize what studying necromancy from Voldemort's secret book was doing to him.

And Dobs had begun his spell. Harry didn't know what it was, though he knew it contained the Latin word for conflagration. He didn't know how to stop it. He didn't know how to block Draco from its effects, or Dobs' people, or the living dogs, or the evidence he desperately needed to convict the man.

Aurors take their prisoners alive when they can, said the voice of his training in his head. *We kill only when necessary.*

And in desperation, Harry reached for the magic of death in order to preserve life.

His first hissed words darkened the air around him. A dust haze rose and crowded in on him. His vision blurred, and then became the inside of the cave, the dark crevice where he had found the book. This always happened at first, and Harry ignored the panic it gave him now, when he couldn't see Dobs, couldn't tell if perhaps a wall of fire was already heading for Draco.

The darkness dissolved as Harry went on speaking, but that was because it had spread outwards to the spell's target. The air closed hungry jaws on Dobs, and Harry could see his wand flicking through the last movements of his own spell. Fire began to splutter from it, but moving slowly, so slowly; it trickled like water along the ground and through the air.

Harry had time to complete his spell; he had stepped through time and into the world of death that lurked behind the world of the living. He made a final gesture, with both his wand and his left hand.

White light flashed, or perhaps Dobs became the only non-dark thing against a deeper darkness. Harry could see into his body. He could see the transparent conduits of his veins, the brilliant blood sparkling and twined through his heart, the frantically contracting muscles, the leaping of impulses in his brain that signified he was giving in to fear.

And he could see his death, coiled around Dobs and gnawing slowly on him like the dragon that gnawed on the root of the tree of life in a legend Hermione had once told him.

The spell quickened that death, brought its head up and turned it around. The dragon's jaws began to move faster. Dobs hurtled towards his predestined end. The spell did not manipulate time; not age but pure death was eating him from the inside out. The book had said there was no necromantic spell that could be used upon the living that was more painful, and the pain usually prevented the victims from generating an effective defense.

Dobs screamed, and went on screaming. His voice had risen to a sobbing wail, the sound Harry thought dimly that George must have made when Fred died. His wand fell from his hand. His fire died away to nothingness.

Harry reached out and slowly, because speaking the language of life was hard after he had hissed so many twisting syllables to death, said, "Enough."

The climb up from the magic was sore and painful. Harry could feel his own magic shuddering, disliking to be used for such purposes and fighting him intensely. If he had to use it that way, at least let it stay and bathe in the power. But Harry shook his head and pulled, backwards and further back, concentrating on leaving Dobs alive.

Someone touched his shoulder. Harry turned his head and stared at Draco. Draco stood behind him with eyes full of trust and a gaze so bright that Harry felt some of the shadows surrounding him part, cleaved away to nothingness by it. His breathing steadied. His hand rose to clasp Draco's.

It was the first time he had ever had help on this road.

And then he was back in the real world, blinking in the light of the campfire. Dobs lay on the ground before him, face twisted.

Draco's arm was around his waist, and Draco did not, would not, stop nuzzling into his neck.

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Chapter: 4

Draco Malfoy.

By the time he had put his signature on the last report that demanded it, Draco's fingers were aching and his vision was blurring with fatigue. He had had three cups of tea, and seemed to have reached the saturation point; he had ceased to awaken fully a few hours ago, though he had made numerous trips of the loo. He leaned his head on the back of his chair and blinked hard.

"Malfoy?"

And of course Cullingford would choose this moment to come up behind him. Draco sat up and tried his best to look alert. "Madam?"

Cullingford, her blonde hair frizzing around her head as it always did when she'd been up all night, looked at him for a long moment with her lips pursed. Draco gazed back as evenly as he could. He didn't think she bore him any particular malice—he wouldn't have stayed active in this Department for years if she did—but she had to have mixed feelings that he'd been the one who brought Dobs' ring down, after so many other agents had tried various strategies that should have succeeded. And he had pursued the case against her wishes at first; she hadn't thought the Wolfsbane connection enough to give the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures authority over it.

But Draco and Harry had found enough evidence in the wagons to make him gaze back at her steadily. The wagons had had built-in shelves and tables covered with hens' teeth, foxglove, and pieces of dragon eggshell—enough to convict Dobs and the rest all by themselves—as well as foxberry and the other more usual ingredients of legitimate Wolfsbane potions. Glass vials, lists of contacts who worked at apothecaries, and shipping crates warded against breakage of the contents declared their intention to sell the potion far and wide. And best of all, Harry had sensed powerful wards in the floor of one wagon and uncovered a locked chest containing the shops that the first version of the potion had already been sold to. One of them was the seller that Andromeda had bought the potion for Teddy from.

From what Draco could read of Dobs' nearly illegible notes, he had so many misconceptions about Wolfsbane it was a wonder he hadn't destroyed himself in the brewing. He thought it was solely a potion to make the werewolf in the mind of an infected human calmer, and that meant he should be able to duplicate it with cheaper ingredients and tests on dogs with wolf blood. When

the first version had failed, he had not taken it as a sign that he should stop selling his inferior recipe, but simply a sign that the potion should be improved.

Draco was glad he and Harry had stopped the idiots. They weren't just dangerous to werewolves and other people like Teddy Lupin who needed the Wolfsbane, they affronted his sensibilities as a potions-maker.

But that didn't change the opinion his superior might have of the matter.

Cullingford glanced away as if she were appealing to an invisible audience for help. Then she looked sternly at Draco. "As long as you *don't* do it again," she said, weighting her words as if she thought he would cease to do it again in simple dread of her wrath, "then I think you deserve a commendation this time."

Draco relaxed slightly. He had, technically, broken the rules in going after Dobs without back-up, and with an agent of another Department at his side. But his work for the last four years hadn't been in vain. He had been too polite, too consistent in his paperwork, too willing to take the mean little cases that would bring no glory. Cullingford didn't think he'd done this to simply boost his own reputation, which had been the danger Draco was most worried about.

"Thank you," he said. "And believe me, I don't plan to make a habit of this."

"Dashing off like a schoolboy on a mad lark?" Cullingford asked, raising her eyebrows. "Or doing so in the company of Harry Potter?"

Draco smiled. "The former." He waited, curious to see what her reaction would be. There were people who wouldn't react well to his being in company with Harry, and it was best to know now if his boss was one of them.

But she only raised her eyebrows higher, and then turned and stalked away in the high boots she favored that always made her waver as if she were about to collapse.

Draco sighed and turned to filing his paperwork.

"He's sleeping better than he was and not sweating any more, but I don't know what that means," Andromeda said, hovering next to the bed as Harry bent over and carefully examined Teddy's fingernails and hands. "Is it another bad sign?"

Harry murmured wordless reassurances for the moment, since he was rather occupied in studying Teddy's palms. Draco had told him that the blue stain should fade from Teddy's skin if he was recovering completely from the botched potion. Should it do so, then he would need no cure but rest. If it didn't, then Harry was to let Draco know at once by Flooing the Ministry, and he would come through with a potion to counter the effects of the foxglove as soon as he could.

Teddy's skin was smooth, and soft, and warm, and pink. Entirely.

Harry sat back, shutting his eyes, his bones suddenly lighter. His hand trembled as he stroked Teddy's fringe away from his forehead, and let his fingers linger around his eyes. Teddy made a sleepy mumble, and then Harry felt eyelashes flicker against his fingers. He opened his own eyes hastily.

Teddy was looking at him with some curiosity. His eyes were bright and sane for the first time in two days. "Uncle Harry?" he said. "What are you doing here? I thought you weren't going to visit for a few days."

Andromeda said something that might have been half a prayer. Harry smiled and bent down so he could kiss the middle of Teddy's forehead, where his hand had rested. Teddy tried to squirm away; he was just at the age to find kisses embarrassing instead of comforting.

"You've been very sick," Harry said. "The potion you drank was the wrong kind of Wolfsbane. But you're going to get better now. Do you want something to eat?"

Teddy nodded, and his hair turned the bright orange color that it usually went he was hungry. "Fish," he said. "Lots and lots of fish."

Harry grinned. "I'll talk to Kreacher." He rarely called on the house-elf anymore because he didn't live in Grimmauld Place, but Kreacher was more than happy to cook food on a moment's notice. He would, of course, grumble because he could have done even better with more time, but Harry had long since ceased to find Kreacher's grumbles threatening.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, at least if you discounted the noise of Teddy's chewing and mumbling his way happily through mouthfuls of trout. Andromeda sat by his bed in silence, eating some toast that Harry had pressed on her by claiming he couldn't possibly eat the rest of the enormous tray of food Kreacher had brought. She still had guilt and fear swirling through her eyes, but they were disappearing at last. Harry nevertheless sat with his hand clasping hers for some time, so he could make sure she understood that he didn't hold her to blame for buying tainted Wolfsbane. How was she to know the truth, when Dobs and his group had avoided the notice of the best in the Ministry for months?

He would have liked to stay longer, but he had business at the Ministry—something quite apart from the endless paperwork he knew would be waiting for him. He had finally made a connection he should have made some time ago, and needed to follow up on it.

He kissed Andromeda on the cheek when he stood, and held out his hand to Teddy, who shook it gravely. "I should be back this afternoon," he said, "if the paperwork mountains don't destroy me."

"Why paperwork?" Teddy asked, as he dug into his third helping of trout.

"Because the wizards who sold that potion that made you sick were evil," said Harry, "and I had to arrest them, with Draco Malfoy's help. There's always a lot of paperwork when you arrest someone." *Most of the time. And when there's not, there should be.*

"I want a story about the evil wizards!" Teddy said, sitting up with wide eyes, the rest of his breakfast forgotten.

"In a little while," Harry said, and smiled at Andromeda and left the room before Teddy could get shrill in his demands for a story. He was as enthusiastic as Tonks had been when he wanted something.

Harry felt the usual pang that came with thinking about Teddy's parents, but succeeding it was a new thought: *He's rather like Draco, too.*

He wore a smile that made some of the people passing in the corridors look at him wonderingly, when they didn't want to stop him, slap him on the back, and congratulate him on the capture of Dobs and his minions. Ron met him in the corridor outside their office and tried to harangue him about taking off with *Malfoy* of all people, but Harry cut him off. "I promise I'll tell you all about it later, Ron, as we fill out the paperwork. Right now, I need to know where Máire is."

Ron blinked as if it were taking him a moment to remember whom Harry meant; Harry was used to the effect when Ron was tightly focused on one case, and waited patiently. Then Ron frowned and said, "Still in the holding cells, I suppose. They held her a little longer this time on the Obliviators' insistence, but as usual, there's no evidence on her." He sounded guiltily proud. His own brothers' ability to get away with immense trouble had made him admire people like that, Harry thought.

"This time," Harry said quietly, "I have some."

With Ron trailing behind him, Harry crossed three corridors and came to the temporary holding cells for those criminals whom the Aurors expected to release fairly soon, either because of a lack of evidence or because of minor offenses. The polished wooden doors looked no different from the doors of the Aurors' offices, if one ignored the wards crawling all over them. Harry examined the plaques above the knobs—enchanted to change depending on the name of the wizard or witch confined in the cell at the moment—and grunted in satisfaction when he found the one that said *Máire Dobson.*

Dobson. Dobs. And Máire had been in Stone's office when Ron brought in word of Teddy's sickness, and most prisoners were allowed a few firecalls to relatives or friends to explain what had happened when they were arrested. Máire could easily have conveyed the information about Teddy's illness to one of Dobs' people. It might not even have taken a code or lies, Harry thought; the Aurors were accustomed to thinking that Máire was no threat and rarely paid attention to her Floo calls.

With a sense of an era ending, Harry unlocked the wards and entered the cell with his wand

drawn.

Máire was sitting on the chair in the center of the room, staring at the wall. The walls themselves were bare stone with no decorations, though they were spelled to be warm enough for anyone not under a Freezing Charm. Other than the chair, the only furniture in the room was a bed and a crude loo. Harry had long ago decided that the purpose of the holding cells wasn't to make criminals think about what they'd done so much as bore them to death.

Máire looked up when they came in, and her face brightened. Then she noticed the wand, and lifted her hands in mock fear. "Watch where you're pointing that thing," she said. "I'm not armed."

Harry looked at her in silence, remembering all the instances over the last few months when Máire had been captured and then released within a few days, each time for crimes they could find no trace of. No one had tracked the correspondence of her periods of imprisonment and those times when Dobs' group had apparently gained information that would enable them to vanish from under the noses of the authorities. Why should they? Máire was as harmless as she was short. Even now, she looked at them with a mask of practiced innocence.

Our decision not to come to the Ministry for back-up was a better one than we could have known at the time.

"Not with a wand, perhaps," Harry said at last, quietly. "But you've proven yourself armed with the right information at times that are—troublesome for the Ministry." He'd chosen that word over several others he could have. He wanted to avoid being too dramatic right now. Máire thrived on drama; she would simply turn the situation to her advantage if Harry let her. "What is your relationship to Ferris Dobs?"

Máire came up out of the chair at him. She never changed a line of her face or a muscle in her body before she did so; she simply sprang, and if Harry had been alone there was a good chance she would have overwhelmed him. She was too close in an instant, and her elbow slammed his wand away as he tried to bring it to bear.

But Ron was there, and he shouted "*Petrificus Totalus!*" in time. Máire froze and then leaned on Harry as heavily as a slab of stone. Harry grimaced, retrieved his wand, and floated her back into her chair.

"Unfreeze her jaw, Ron," he said, not taking his eyes from Máire's. They had gone deliberately blank, now, and she was staring over his shoulder as if the entire affair rather bored her.

Ron did, but Máire didn't speak. She shifted her eyes sideways to glance at Harry's face, though, and Harry considered that progress.

"I would hazard a guess he's a relative," Harry said, and leaned his elbow on the wall, keeping a faint smile on his lips. The more he seemed to know, the more he could unnerve a criminal who

might try to deceive him. "A half-brother, perhaps, or a cousin. You don't look like each other at first glance, but a lot of that's his nose. And he's already telling us some important things about his brewing." That last was only true in the widest sense; Dobs was still unconscious from the necromantic magic Harry had used on him. But it had worked in the past to convince some criminals they might as well talk, since everyone else was doing so, and Harry saw Máire close her eyes and swallow.

"He's my half-brother," she said at last. "And yes, I sent information to him. No, you won't get me to confess more than that."

"If you talk more freely, it could be easier for you," Harry suggested. "I'm not pretending that you won't go to Azkaban, but it could be for a shorter term. There are questions about the brewing process and what his group thought they were doing—how they formed and where they found that hidden pure-blood estate they were camped on—that he hasn't answered yet."

Máire sighed. Then she said, "I don't owe him that much loyalty. He would probably do the same thing, if he were in my position."

"I'm sure he would," Harry said encouragingly. Dobs hadn't impressed him as someone who had the greatest common sense about such things, but he did have an addiction to dramatic gestures that rivaled Máire's. A confession might be dramatic enough for him. "And, well, the information will come out sooner or later. There are others in his group who might be willing to talk, after all."

Máire sighed again. Then she looked at Harry and began to speak. Harry gestured for Ron to fetch some Confessional Parchment so they could take down Máire's speech exactly as she made it, but Ron was already scrambling for it.

Harry settled back and listened to the story, which unfolded more or less as he had expected it. Dobs had seen a way to "take advantage of the market" for Wolfsbane without considering that Wolfsbane was an immensely complicated potion for a reason; it had taken years to perfect it so that Remus could teach at Hogwarts. Dobs had learned enough of the brewing process to become a danger, but no more than that. And the "improvements" he had made to his diluted version were almost all aimed at concealing the negative effects for a greater period of time, rather than eliminating them. He didn't possess the knowledge or the compassion for that.

Just as Harry heard Ron's footsteps in the corridor coming back, Máire paused in her confession to ask, "Can I have something brightly colored in my cell at Azkaban at least? A quilt, or a Quidditch poster? Say that I can."

Harry said, "If the story suits."

"You're a hard man, Harry Potter," Máire muttered without rancor, and went on with the story. Harry doubted he would ever understand her.

Well, I don't need to. There are better people that my understanding can be spent on. And Harry began smiling as he thought of Draco, to the point that Ron glanced at him curiously as he set the Confessional Parchment to record.

"Draco. Hello."

"Harry." Draco was unable to think of an appropriate greeting, so he put out his hand and hoped that would be enough. Harry clasped it and shook it with every appearance of contentment, so Draco thought it worked. Then Harry leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, and that was even better—

Except that it should be the lips. Draco caught his head and realigned their mouths. Harry chuckled and wrapped an arm around his waist, pulling him closer. Draco lost track of time in a most pleasant fashion as he let his tongue travel leisurely around Harry's mouth. With no sick children or Dark wizards to worry about this time, he sank his fingers into Harry's hair and let them explore there as well, learning all the sensitive spots on his scalp. Harry sighed into his mouth and let him.

When they had parted and were once more seated in front of the fireplace with glasses of Firewhiskey, Harry leaned forwards with eyes gleaming. Draco braced himself. It had been two weeks since they'd seen each other. The paperwork had taken more time than either of them had foreseen, and then there'd been the official commendations from the Ministry, and their superiors had had to give them stern lectures, and Draco had to fight with his parents about his being seen in public with Potter, and Harry had to convince his friends that he was not, actually, dating a mass murderer. Arranging a cautious visit with Andromeda and Teddy was the only thing Draco had been able to do for himself in that time.

Draco had not been sure the connection between them would endure two weeks. It had been so passionate and immediate, after all, they probably should have consummated it the moment they captured Dobs and his group. The Ministry could sod off. Apart from anything else, Harry would have had time to chew over uncomfortable memories and think of awkward questions.

But Harry only said, "You know some of the reasons I'm so different from the person I was before the war. But why are you so different?"

"Maybe I'm not," said Draco, greatly daring. But he wanted to know if he would be able to tease Harry. If he couldn't, then he doubted this could last, even if they had saved each other's lives and managed to have some pleasant times in bed. "Maybe I have a collection of Death Eater paraphernalia in the kitchen."

Harry laughed, a sound that made Draco's stomach roil with excitement. Yes, he could get used to hearing that. "Yes, you have," he said. "At one time you would either have flown into a rage or taken on dreadfully if I asked you that question."

"I see *you* have learned no manners," Draco muttered, and downed some of the Firewhiskey.

"That's me," Harry agreed cheerfully. "Necromancy books are woefully short of manners courses." He spun the stem of his glass between his hands. Draco bit his lip as Firewhiskey settled on the carpet, since he knew perfectly well the house-elves would clean it up later. "But what about you? Was it a life-changing experience? Did something happen that forced you to reconsider your former beliefs?"

"Why, yes," Draco said, unable to keep dryness out of his voice. "It was called the war."

Harry's face softened. "I'm sorry," he said. "It *was* stupid of me to forget that. What I meant, I suppose, was whether you changed all at once, or if it was long, or if it was unconscious, or if it was conscious…" His voice trailed off as if he found the subject embarrassing, or as if he were only now realizing that Draco might not want to talk about it. "It's interesting," he said. "Everything about you is interesting."

Draco relaxed. He'd kept Harry almost continually on edge since he'd stepped out of the fireplace, and still Harry hadn't run away. That was a good sign. "It was a conscious process, and it took a long time," he said. "It's still not completely done. Basically, I decided I was unlikely to advance in the world being the kind of person I'd always been.

"So I started…watching. Spying, maybe. I wanted to know how other people got along. And I learned the value of politeness, which I used to think was reserved for dealing with people like the Dark Lord. And I learned that being a bit more courteous and not blurting out everything I thought at the drop of a wand didn't have to restrict my freedom of expression. Besides, when I spoke more slowly and with more thought, people respected me more." Draco smiled into his Firewhiskey.

"I've made compromises. I want peace, I want respect, I want friendship, and I can't get it if people think I'm a child." He had almost included love on the list of things he wanted, but he was a bit too shy to do that with Harry in the room. "The most important step is waking up and looking at myself in the mirror every morning, recounting the changes I'd like to make, and trying to make myself actually put them into practice. I still scold myself. I still have moments when I slip up, or know that I'm taking a risk to say something to a particular person. It's uncomfortable. But I'd rather do that than go back to the person I was, the kind of person my father still is."

"What's your relationship with your parents like?" Harry asked softly.

"Uncomfortable, also," Draco said wryly. "They don't really understand why I changed, and my father mocks me when I explain. My mother comes closer, but even she doesn't grasp why I felt change was necessary. She thinks I should take what I want and only worry about the consequences if I offend someone powerful. Besides, my career as a Ministry flunkey doesn't please them."

He heard the thump of a glass being set down, and looked up in surprise. Harry was kneeling on the floor next to his chair, looking at Draco with an expression that made him want to glance away again at once. Holding Harry's gaze was at least as painful as looking at himself in the mirror.

"I think that's admirable," Harry whispered. "It isn't change forced on you from the outside. It isn't someone telling you you'll suffer unless you do things his way." Draco grimaced, remembering the Dark Lord and his disastrous sixth year. Harry grimaced in sympathy with him. "And it isn't an experience like mine, which changed me for the better but was still something I wouldn't have chosen to go through. Your path is the harder one. Maybe that's why I like you so much, because you've proven you can do difficult things even if you struggle with them."

And he leaned forwards and kissed Draco again.

It was right, what they did then.

Harry never remembered making love in such a daze. Too many thoughts for articulation raced through his head. He could touch Draco's hip in a reverent manner or murmur the words he wanted to say about how Draco's courage was inspiring—but not both at once. He felt vaguely ashamed of that, as if he needed to get everything perfect the first time.

But if there was one thing the years since the war had taught him, it was that that impression was false, and damaging. So instead he touched Draco's hip, and kissed his way very gently down his body towards his groin, and trusted that the words could come later.

Draco lay with his eyes shut most of the time, as if he couldn't bear to watch Harry touch him. But his hands flailed about restlessly, brushing Harry's hair and then jerking away again, cupping his shoulders, trailing over his chest and locating his nipples. Harry trusted his hands more than his face, at the moment.

Harry sucked Draco as gently as he could at first, then more powerfully, varying the rhythm and speed of his tongue, trying to learn what would make Draco sigh or moan in pleasure and would make him stiffen all the muscles in his thighs with it. Draco did an awful lot of moaning, and then settled into a series of grunts that made Harry warm and amused at the same time. He kept his nose buried in Draco's skin just above his navel as he sucked—he'd taught himself a charm that relaxed his throat and got rid of his gag reflex rather effectively—and watched the ripples of emotion run over Draco's face.

When Draco came, it was no sudden revelation, but a burst of musky scent and bitter taste and soft panting sobs that Harry treasured as much as the knowledge that he had been the one to make Draco react like this. When he'd swallowed as much as he could, he pulled away from Draco and dropped his head against his hip, cupping his arse with one hand this time, and letting his fingers trail gently across the cheeks.

Draco caught his breath and rolled onto his stomach.

Harry never knew how long he took to prepare Draco. The daze in his head interfered. Was he using the lubrication, or thinking about the other times he wished to be able to use it, and hoping this wasn't a one-off? Was he easing a few fingers into Draco, or daydreaming about doing so when he had enough oil on them?

"Easy," Draco panted, lifting his head and twisting when Harry hooked one finger into his arse. The daze parted, Harry pausing guiltily, his mind concentrated on the one thought of whether he had prepared Draco enough.

"I'm all right now," Draco said, and curved his head back to seize a kiss. Harry bent down and spent long moments reassuring himself with the taste of Draco's lips and tongue, until Draco wriggled impatiently and eased himself further down Harry's fingers.

Draco's skin shone like gilded alabaster in the firelight.

The pleasure when Harry slid into him was almost too great.

Draco had a way of shifting back to meet Harry's thrusts, but in an irregular pattern, which drove Harry absolutely mad.

His thoughts raced and blurred. The air around him was gilded alabaster, too, now, as though his eyes could only deal with so many colors at once. Draco grunted softly, rhythmically, under him as Harry drove him into the mattress, and at least *that* was regular. And then he tilted his head back and came with a great shudder, and Harry followed, utterly surprised, pleased, and half-mortified that he hadn't even remembered to touch Draco's erection, but half-proud, too, because Draco hadn't needed that to climax.

Draco swore quietly as he collapsed. Harry stroked his back from the shoulders down with several long motions, then pulled out and cast a few cleaning spells.

Draco rolled over and smiled at him, his face softened and blurred itself, as though he shared some of the same daze that had overpowered Harry. "Who says that you have no manners?" he murmured, indicating Harry's wand.

"You," said Harry. "And I hope you'll say it a lot more often." He dropped his wand to the floor and put his arms around Draco before he could think better of it.

"Hm," Draco said. "Yes, please. But you might have to change a lot more to suit me."

It was said in such a matter-of-fact tone that it really did sound like a plain statement of fact, instead of an insult or a warning. And Harry thought he could take it that way.

"We'll see," he said, and for the first time in a long time, the thought of a promise didn't give him

the feeling of cold gravestone under his fingers. Draco's skin was too warm for that, and at the moment, it was all Harry could feel.

I'm learning.

End.