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Chapter 1 to 20

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Chapter: 1

Title: An Alchemical Discontent

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

Rating: PG-13, mostly for innuendo and some light sexual content.

Pairings: Harry/Draco preslash turning into slash, Draco/Daphne Greengrass.

Warnings: DH SPOILERS, ignores epilogue. Past character , violence, mentions of sex, WiP.

Summary: Sequel to *A Potion Named Desire*. Draco and Harry start marketing the Desire potion—only to encounter opposition from Draco's debtors, seductive Slytherin women, and politicians running for Minister. Then there are the personal issues between them to make things even more exciting.

Author's Notes: This won't make much sense without your having read the previous story. This is also the *second* story in a trilogy, so the whole story won't be completed here. This is mostly about transitions—among other things, the transition from a private context into a wider political one, and the transition from an uneasy friendship between Harry and Draco into a potential romantic relationship. I expect *An Alchemical Discontent* to run about 18 or 20 chapters. Thanks to Silverariel on LJ for the title.

An Alchemical Discontent

Chapter One—Hello, Draco

"And that's everything?" Harry called. He was panting, leaning heavily against the door of the bedroom; he'd spent hours Levitating Hermione's things from his flat to hers, and then

rearranging them again and again as Hermione fussily decided that she had to have them just *so.*Because she wanted them in configurations that wouldn't remind her too much of the home she'd shared with Ron, Harry was more than wiling to oblige, and it was certainly easier than carrying them about by hand would have been. But that much sustained magic took its toll. His throat ached.

Hermione rapped the door behind him. Harry moved out of the way, and smiled when he saw the glass of water she was carrying. He gulped half of it, ignoring Hermione's disgusted glance.

"That's it." Hermione put her hands on her hips and stared around the bedroom once, then nodded. They'd bought a new bed, one that resembled the one in Harry's flat she'd spent so many months resting in, but which was covered with much finer blankets in a delicate shade of blue. Hermione claimed to have been uncomfortable on Harry's rough sheets. Harry didn't see what difference it made. Beds were for collapsing and *sleeping* in.

"It seems like so little," Harry muttered, taking another drink of water. And it did, even after the hours of effort. Hermione's presence in his flat had gathered a weight and significance he didn't think she was even aware of. She would stay here now, and he'd go home to silent rooms where no one spoke, where no one cried, where Hermione didn't need his help to struggle through the good and bad days of her depression since they'd lost Ron.

It would be *strange.*

Harry gave himself a little shake. He should be happier than this that Hermione had recovered so effectively, that the Desire potion—the potion he and Malfoy had brewed that would take away the thing the drinkers most loathed about themselves—had worked for her. He had suffered losses before, including Ron's death and the loss of five girlfriends to other people, and he'd always got over them. In a few days, when he flung himself back into his business, the silence would probably come to seem the normal state of things, and he'd forget to return Hermione's Floo calls, just like usual.

"It's not so little," Hermione said ruefully. "Believe me, I've counted the total of the Galleons I spent."

"I would have been glad—"

Hermione held up a stern hand, and Harry fell obediently silent. Among the things the Desire potion had returned to Hermione by removing her depression was a commanding presence that served her well in her Ministry job. If one was going to fight for changes in laws, one *needed* the ability to make other people listen.

"I know that you don't have that much left, Harry," Hermione said quietly. "Your parents' fortune was meant to get you through school, and the Black fortune—"

Harry rolled his eyes and snorted. Sirius's ancestors hadn't been the most provident of people.

The Firebolt Sirius had bought in Harry's third year must have made a considerable dent in his savings. Harry could still live comfortably by selling the film he made for wizarding cameras and the various tricks and new spells he built into it, and he had a share in the profits of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes if he wanted it, but the visions of a "Literally Golden Hero" that the *Prophet* conjured up remained that, visions.

"Yes, well." Hermione abruptly gave him a strained smile, and Harry realized she must be feeling the same strangeness between them that he was, now that they wouldn't be constantly under each other's feet. At the same time, she was probably eager to be alone. "I'll see you soon, I'm certain."

"I'm going to Floo every day," Harry said, and looked hard at her.

Hermione didn't even flush in embarrassment, much less stammer in anger the way he'd expected her to. She nodded solemnly. "That might be for the best," she said. "I might have—" And then she cut herself off again, with a little shrug. They both knew she might have died if Harry hadn't come in to find her starving and too depressed to take care of herself last December. It was yet another time one of them had saved the other. The bond was deep enough, and the debts so numerous, that talking about it wasn't necessary.

Harry winced as he remembered that Hermione was the only person he shared that kind of bond with now. Ron was—gone.

Well. All the more reason to take care of her.

"Dinner in Diagon Alley in a few days?" he asked. "There's a new restaurant that's opened. I forget the name—"

"Of course," Hermione said in a stage whisper.

"But I'll look it up and Floo you." Harry kissed her on the forehead and loped towards the door of the flat, waving over his shoulder.

Hermione waved back, and then turned to readjust the blankets on her bed. It seemed Harry hadn't managed to put them perfectly in place after all.

Harry was on the street before the loneliness struck him again. He blinked hard and shook his head, telling himself that this was ridiculous. The only constant in his life since the war was change. He had come to accept that. His breakup with Ginny had been—bad, and she was the first person, other than Ron and Hermione, he had been sure he might spend forever with. Other women he dated he had fun with for a time, and then they fell in love with one of his friends and moved on. Harry found it better to accept everything philosophically, with a touch of humor, and much easier to do so than most people would have, because he was taking the potion they'd based the Desire potion on.

He'd stop feeling lonely for Hermione and Malfoy—

Malfoy?

Harry clucked his tongue at himself and began to walk faster. That was when he *knew* he was nutters: when he started missing the man who was his brewing and business partner, but was also a temperamental artist, a sneaky and underhanded Slytherin, and the person who had forced a confession of why Harry had left Ginny out of him not a week ago.

He'd stop in Diagon Alley and have a look at the name of that restaurant. Now that he had practice in keeping a low profile, he usually had ten or so minutes of freedom before people started to mob him.

He Apparated to the wall by the Leaky Cauldron and was halfway down the main street when a touch of unease prickled the back of his mind and raised the hair on the nape of his neck. He kept his eyes fixed ahead and his stride easy and loose. Someone was watching him, perhaps? A celebrity had to be used to that. Perhaps the mob would arrive earlier than he'd thought.

No, he thought as he cast a spell that sharpened his hearing and made out a set of footsteps timed to echo his. Someone was *following* him.

That was a bit more serious. Harry's mind went back to Charlemagne Diggory, the candidate for Minister in the upcoming election who had thought it worth his while to visit Harry personally.

And he remembered, too, what Malfoy had said of Diggory's connection to Cordelia Nott, one of Malfoy's creditors.

Such careful, skilled tailing in the wake of that was too much to be a coincidence. But the idea that the pursuer knew his destination was unlikely. Harry darted his eyes ahead, and made out the name of the restaurant he'd been aiming for with some satisfaction: the Garden of the Hesperides. He'd planned to ask about a reservation for a few nights hence, but that could wait.

Instead, he turned abruptly and entered the Apothecary. He could hear the footsteps behind him falter for a moment. Either the man hadn't expected that, or he felt some surge of excitement. Perhaps he thought Harry was buying ingredients for the Desire potion.

Harry didn't intend to. He was quite happy to leave all that up to Malfoy, who would carefully procure the highest quality flowers and scales and unicorn hoof shavings and whatever else they needed. He looked about for a moment, then made straight for a barrel of mixed snake skins.

A red-haired witch had already appeared beside him, with such a friendly smile that it reminded Harry of Ginny's. He felt a bit bad about the trick he was going to play on her, but throwing off his pursuer was important.

"Yes, can I help you, Mr. Potter?" She might not mean to emphasize his name so much, but it made people turn around and stare anyway. Harry had already accepted that there was apparently

no one else named Potter in the whole of wizarding Britain.

"I want to know where you got these," said Harry, and stuck his hand into the barrel of skins, pulling one, gray and black, out at random. Let his pursuer take notes. Let Nott and Diggory believe that he was interested in the welfare of snakes. It would make them chase shadows, and that was the best tactic Harry could come up with on the spur of the moment. "Were the snakes that provided them humanely treated?"

The witch blinked and flicked her eyes to his forehead for a moment, as if she wanted to make sure this really *was* Harry Potter lecturing her on snakes. "Er," she said. "We pride ourselves on the highest quality—"

"Ingredients, yes, I know," Harry said impatiently, and raised his voice. Let the *Daily Prophet* report the Savior of the Wizarding World having an unusual outburst in a shop. The more attention it received, the less the chance that Diggory and Nott would reckon his purpose *rightly.*"But that doesn't mean you treat the creatures that provide them well. What is your record on the procurement of Demiguise hairs? When you provide bits of ground unicorn horn, did you take them *kindly*?"

There. Most people knew he had a connection to Hermione Granger, and about Hermione's passion for the fair treatment of magical creatures. Yet another shadow for Diggory and Nott to jump at.

Harry was sorry to involve his friend in a political mess like this—she had never approved of the brewing of the Desire potion in the first place—but Diggory had already involved her; she was the excuse he had used to visit Harry. Better to steal a march now than just assume Diggory would leave her out of things.

The witch fell back, flustered. "I'll have to ask the shopkeeper," she said. "I'm sure I never heard of any irregularities, Mr. Potter—"

Harry sneered at her, and another twist in this scheme came to mind. "You haven't *heard*," he said. "And of course that means they haven't happened. I'd much rather shop with a Potions maker I can be sure attends to every aspect of his business *personally*, instead of employing *unknowledgeable* assistants. I buy my potions with Draco Malfoy, I'll have you know." There. That should draw some positive attention to Draco's shop; there would be new customers who came there simply because they wanted to buy Potions ingredients at the same place Harry Potter did, and now they would have a chance to hear about the Desire potion.

The witch found courage from somewhere. Perhaps she had been a Gryffindor in Hogwarts, Harry thought approvingly. "I'm sure that he employs only the best, sir," she said stiffly. "But his shop has been closed for the last several months."

"I happen to know it will be opening on *Friday*," Harry said, which was indeed the day Malfoy had told him about, though they hadn't planned on such a dramatic announcement of the fact.

Malfoy had talked about taking out an ad in the *Daily Prophet.* But this would be cheaper and more effective. "I don't know where *you've* been, not keeping track of the competition—" And then he looked around the Apothecary, and snorted. "I'm answered."

As he spun on his heel and marched towards the door, he caught a glimpse of a young man who looked halfway familiar, with a pale face, dark eyes, and a physique like a string bean. Harry also noted a strange clasp on his cloak, a copper one in the shape of a rearing dragon. He was ducking out of the way, scrambling with too much haste, and his footsteps matched the cadence still playing in Harry's ears.

I'll ask Malfoy about him, Harry decided. *And inform him about Diggory and Nott's probable response to my little diversion here.*

He Disapparated from the front stoop of the Apothecary with great dignity.

Draco answered the door of his shop to Cordelia Nott and Charlemagne Diggory early on Thursday morning. He had known who it was the moment his wards woke him up, buzzing at him.
His last conversation with Cordelia had seemed to go well at the time, but the more Draco thought about it, the more he was convinced that the Desire potion he'd taken just before it had compromised him. He'd moved too fast, spoken too decisively, and doubtless insulted her. The potion still wasn't completely gone on this, her second visit, but he could be more cautious; what seemed to be an added speed and clarity to his thoughts—in reality, simply a lack of his usual hesitation—was no longer a compulsion.

He had a vial of the Desire potion with him, but he held it back; if Cordelia had come about that, let her speak the words first. He bowed as he opened the door, to Cordelia, and then gave a slight nod to Charlemagne Diggory.

He hadn't seen Diggory close up yet, only seen him in the newspaper photos and heard of him secondhand from Harry. As he stepped into the shop, Draco gathered his own impressions of the man, the confidence in his poise, the way he smiled and shook Draco's hand as if it were the most natural gesture in the world, and privately agreed with Harry's assessment—this was a very dangerous man.

"Hello, Draco." Cordelia gave him a restrained smile he distrusted at once. She was usually bold and strong. Why not? She could *afford* to be, in all senses of the word. Deference was a trap. "I know I gave you an original deadline of the summer solstice for the new potion you were developing, but I really would like to see it now."

So she wanted to pretend their last conversation, in which Draco had offered her a vial of Desire, hadn't happened? That was fine with Draco. "Yes, of course, my lady," he said. He Summoned another vial down the stairs, just so that he wouldn't seem too prepared. He wanted to flatter Cordelia now, and make it seem as if her request had taken him a bit off-guard—whilst not seeming so weak as to look like easy prey, of course.

Cordelia held the vial of blue-green liquid up to the light of the shop and murmured a few complimentary words. Diggory took it from her then and rolled it over in his fingers, peering at the glass as if that would tell him all he needed to know about its contents.

"This Desire potion really works?" Diggory asked.

Draco looked into his face, and saw all sorts of traps lurking in the question. On the other hand, he planned to go public with Desire tomorrow. And he would not lie when he had so much pride in his work.

"It does," Draco said. "I've confirmed it with tests on both myself and Hermione Granger. And of course it was developed from a base that was confirmed to work in other circumstances." He wouldn't betray that Harry was taking a variant of the potion unless his partner gave him *permission* to do so, even though he thought the reason Harry was taking it was absolutely ridiculous. That was the major difference between them, Draco thought. Harry pulled insane stunts in rival apothecaries and owled him about the results afterwards. Draco was thoughtful enough to gauge the consequences of such actions in advance.

Diggory sighed. "Truly a remarkable piece of work. It would change the future of the wizarding world." He laid the vial down on a table beside him. "If it were allowed to enter the wizarding world, of course."

Time for the threats, Draco thought. He widened his eyes innocently. "What do you mean, if? I think the changes will be enormous. And they start tomorrow, the day of the potion's release."

Diggory and Cordelia exchanged sympathetic glances. They were very good, Draco thought critically. If he hadn't had a lifetime's experience of false innocence himself, he might have been taken in.

He felt the first touch, then, of real fear. He could handle Cordelia; he'd been doing it for years. And Diggory couldn't move too openly without wrecking his political reputation. Even the association with a former Death Eater's daughter was risky for him. But *together*...

The perception of the challenge he and Harry were facing shifted in Draco's mind then. He had imagined them an indestructible pair against scattered opponents. But this was a contest of two against two. And the pair against them understood each other, played off one another, and had the same goals. So said that shared glance.

When Diggory turned to look at him again, Draco could only hope his expression wasn't too defensive.

"I'm running for Minister, as you may know," Diggory murmured.

"It's sort of impossible to escape it," Draco said, with a helpless gesture at the latest edition of the

Daily Prophet to mitigate what could have been seen as an insult.

"Indeed." Diggory raised his eyebrows. His eyes were warm. His smile was inviting. Draco hated him violently and was grudgingly impressed. "And because I'm trying to become the protector of the wizarding world—"

Is that what the Minister does? Draco thought, but it would have been beyond the pale for him to voice the words aloud. He simply nodded.

"—I have to think about what affects its future. I have to weigh the possible benefits of any change like the Desire potion against our traditions and the harm it might cause." Diggory coughed apologetically. "And in this case, I think it's just too *soon* for something this wondrous. If it was made for a few people only, people in dire need, as Hermione Granger was said to be? I could understand that. But you plan to market it to the general public?"

"I do," Draco answered, more and more impressed with Diggory's phrasing. He had been trained well by Cordelia, or perhaps had simply realized on his own that open threats wouldn't look good in a Pensieve memory. So he got around the problem by choosing words that sounded, or *could* sound, eminently reasonable. "Well, I should say *we*. I'm in charge of the general marketing, but Harry Potter has contributed to the brewing of the potion and offered some remarkably efficacious ideas of his own."

It was just a flash in Diggory's eyes. But Draco was used to reading his father, who was the most inscrutable man on the planet when he wanted to be.

That's the reason they're pressing this so hard, he thought. *Not because they're afraid of the potion. Much less because they're afraid of me; God forbid they should be. But because they're afraid of Harry, and the political power he could swing behind this if he wanted to.*

It made sense. And it let Draco know what footing he stood on with his enemies, which relaxed him.

"I can't allow that," Diggory said sadly. "I truly wish I *could*, because it's a feat of artistry I can only marvel at. But with the danger it might cause?" He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Malfoy. I must ask you to give up your plans, for the good of the wizarding world and the good of the many."

That's always the excuse cowards hide behind. Draco allowed a touch of defiance into his voice. "I'm afraid that I can't do that," he said. "I've developed this potion—Harry and I have developed this potion—and though I respect your desire to protect the wizarding world, you don't actually have the power to make laws yet. And there are certainly no laws against the Desire potion. It's too new."

"There*is*, however," Diggory said, "a law saying a debtor may call in debts. Particularly debts organized through a verbal contract, and not a written one."

Draco shot his eyes to Cordelia, and surprised a faint smile on her face. Yes, he had underestimated her badly during their last conversation, and now she had outflanked him.

"You would now be my sole debtor, I assume," Draco said. "Since you would have bought up my other debts."

Cordelia looked genuinely delighted. "Yes!" she said. "And I'm afraid that I'll have to collect all the debts you owe me, Draco. All forty thousand Galleons of them." She coughed delicately. "You have until the end of next week to pay."

"And you're only doing this because you're concerned about the future of the wizarding world, too?" Draco murmured.

"Of course!"

From there, the conversation turned into meaningless pleasantries, with Cordelia and Diggory not staying too long to gloat in their victory. Draco shut the door of his shop behind him and leaned against it for a moment, breathing hard.

He had owed debts to other people for years, and he'd grown used to it. But he been careful *never* to owe too much money to any one person, which was why he hadn't borrowed all the Galleons Cordelia had assured him he could have from her.

And now, here he was. Trapped.

But not. Because if he had underestimated Cordelia and was now paying the price for it, she had also badly underestimated him.

He couldn't approach this through endless misdirection and ploys the way he would have liked to; he only had a week. It was time for direct action, charging ahead, like a Gryffindor. Harry had provided him with an example after all.

It was time to do what Draco had once sworn he would never do again, and contact Daphne Greengrass.

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Chapter: 2

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Two—Daphne

"The mistress will see you now."

Draco rose and followed the house-elf from the luxuriously appointed anteroom where he'd waited for an hour into an even more luxuriously appointed drawing room. Or perhaps it was part drawing room and part library, he thought, staring around at the bookshelves that crowded every wall, save where the hearth stood. A brilliant fire blazed there, despite the time of year. Draco couldn't feel any heat from it, though.

He grimaced. Daphne always had said that she preferred the glow of fire to the glow of lamps or sunlight. It was reassuring—somewhat—to see that she hadn't departed from that one of her habits.

"Hello, Draco."

She had come up behind him, as always. And she had startled him, as always. It wasn't *natural* for someone to walk that quietly. But Draco controlled his reaction, as always, and turned to bow to her. "Daphne."

She stood watching him with her head tilted curiously; she resembled nothing so much as a Kneazle examining a mouse that its owner had just dropped in front of it. She had pale gold hair, a few shades darker than his own, which she wore pinned and coiled about her throat like a snake. Her eyes were deep green, cat-colored. She stood as tall as he did, with a stare as direct, and when she held out her hand for him to shake, her grip was as firm. Done with the greeting, she walked towards the fire and took a seat in a chair there. Draco had to follow and sit opposite, aware as he never was with anyone else of her eyes watching, judging,*seeing* him.

He was used to getting hooks into his partners, to being able to understand their needs and twist them. With some people, he had been the aggressive one, offering what they desired and exploiting them that way. But he could also enjoy being chased until he caught the person hunting him, being flirted with and seduced and seemingly used—whilst he was the user, of course. It was all a matter of learning the tiny cracks in a person's soul and widening them. Only his few friends were exempt from that, and them only because Draco had realized he could trust them soon after he began to use them.

Daphne had no cracks for his hooks. She didn't *need* people, or need to be needed, the way most people Draco had been romantically involved with. She was self-sufficient, complete in herself, an integer instead of half an equation.

And she was the only self-sufficient, complete person Draco had ever met who was not a man. It disconcerted him and made him feel female around her, if anything could. He always pretended nothing could and chose some other description for the feeling, but *that* term always sneaked back into his consciousness.

"This is a surprise, Draco," Daphne said. "You left last time swearing never to contact me again." She gave him an expectant glance and leaned back, tapping her fingers together. Her nails were transparent and polished. Knowing Daphne, that could be some clear makeup or a spell that actually turned her nails to glass.

"I changed my mind," Draco said stiffly, with the taste of humiliation in his mouth. "I do need your help."

"Does this have something to do with the new potion I've heard rumors about?"

Draco nodded, already resigned to the fact that Daphne would know most of his secrets. Daphne's mother had labored tirelessly, quietly, to make a fortune among the Muggles whilst everyone else was turned inwards and focusing on the wars with the Dark Lord. She'd got hold of a source of oil, which Draco understood Muggles were mad for, and she'd passed on her gifts and her wealth to her elder daughter before she died of exhaustion. Daphne, in turn, used her wealth to run a spy network that brought her rumors of interest in both worlds.

"What, then?" Daphne folded her hands in her lap and gave him a long, leisurely, appraising glance that made Draco's cheeks burn. Daphne could still *want* people; that, he knew very well. But there was no yearning behind that glance. She could take him or leave him, and he would cause her no devastation if he got up and walked out of the room right this minute.

Whereas his shop would fall around his ears if he didn't have her help. There was no way he could sell enough Desire potion to make forty thousand Galleons—the ten thousand he still owed Cordelia plus the owed thirty thousand she had bought from his other debtors—in a week. People would be wary and suspicious at first. The potion would take time to accumulate a reputation. He and Harry would need some of the money for ingredients to brew more. And if he set the price too high, not enough people would buy it anyway.

He shook with rage a moment, and then swallowed. He had known what the consequences of coming here would be.

"I'm facing Cordelia Nott over a problem of debts," he said. He would not ordinarily be so blunt, but Daphne demanded, and got, perfect honesty from the people she helped, or she simply turned them away. "She's bought them, and means to use their accumulated weight to keep me from selling the potion—"

"Why would that matter to her?"

"She thinks it could threaten, or at least upset, the career of Charlemagne Diggory, whom she's supporting in his run for Minister."

Daphne nodded. "Ah. Because you have Harry Potter with you."

Draco nodded back and stamped down the desire to fidget. "I need a lot of money, and I need it

within a week. Forty thousand Galleons would be ideal, as I could pay her back and simply be done with her, giving her no excuse to continue her hold on me."

Daphne laughed. "Forty thousand Galleons would be ideal for many people!"

God, he hated her. So above it all, and so *effortless.* He couldn't have remained like that—in his parents' home, acting the good little son—unless he wanted to pay the price of *himself* for it.

"Will you help me?" he asked.

Daphne closed her eyes as if she were looking at an internal calendar. Draco had to wait, and he didn't quite dare to look away from her and at the fire, just in case she should open her eyes, see him not paying attention, and decide against him on the instant.

She gave him a faint smile, eyes still shut. "The same deal we had last time?"

"The exact same."

"No, not the exact same," Daphne said decisively. "I want you to do what you wouldn't do last time."

Draco's hands clenched in his lap. Daphne was delighted with his skill in bed, and so she had tried to introduce him to her favorite games. She was skilled in the mental arts, especially Legilimency and Memory Charms, and she liked to use them on her lovers.

Draco didn't fancy waking up naked in the bed with blood on his skin and no idea of what had happened to get him there. He'd refused, and she'd smiled at him, and that had ended their last bargain.

Now, though…

He couldn't afford to be choosy. He needed the help too badly, and too immediately. If Cordelia had left him a month—but she was too wise to do that, and he had to live with the world as he found it.

Daphne continued to smile at him, and watch him with calm, cat-like interest. Draco determined that he wouldn't struggle too long and resemble a dying mouse. It was the only way he could keep his dignity.

"Yes," he said. "I'll do what I wouldn't do last time."

Daphne rose and extended her hand. "Then," she said, "I think the first installment of your payment should be made right now."

Draco steadied himself. He would *not* be ill. He would *not* think of this as a sacrifice of his pride.

It was, instead, a sacrifice to preserve his pride. And when he had what he needed, there were all sorts of ways to bore Daphne badly enough that she'd end it.

He took her hand.

Daphne's smile widened.

Harry stepped uncertainly into the shop and looked around, trying valiantly to stifle a yawn. He had received an owl from Malfoy yesterday evening that demanded he come to the apothecary at five-o'clock in the morning. *Why* he had to be there that early, Harry had no idea. Malfoy had said he had some idea who Harry's follower had been, but wanted to wait to use the knowledge. And it wasn't as though Harry had to do anything more this first day than smile and look enthusiastic, and he couldn't do that when there were no patrons in the shop.
"Harry. Good."

He jumped and turned around. Perhaps Malfoy had been on the ground floor already, but Harry didn't think so; he'd probably stepped out of some concealed door. As he glided towards Harry, Harry's startlement tuned to alarm. There was—a *fire* behind Malfoy's eyes that shouldn't be there. His movements were jerky as he dragged a scoop through a barrel of dried beetle shells and then let them fall again.

"What's the matter?" Harry asked. "Are you sick?"

Malfoy laughed, harsh as a seal barking. "If that were all, then I would consider myself fortunate." He stared over Harry's shoulder, until Harry nearly turned to look out the window, and then jerked his head towards the far side of the shop. Harry followed and, unsurprised, discovered the hidden door he'd come out through.

Behind that, and this was surprising, were stairs that turned out to lead to Malfoy's private quarters. Harry looked around uncertainly, taking in the defensive wards, the lack of real windows, the carefully arranged furniture.

"You don't take any chances with your life," he tried to joke, but his throat was dry. He didn't understand why he'd been invited here. It wasn't as though he had demanded to be shown this private space the way that Malfoy had demanded to come to his flat, and they didn't have a bond of trust between them deep enough that Malfoy would think to offer it.

"Harry."

Yes, it was his name as much as the suddenness of the words that was startling him. Harry jammed his hands into his robe pockets and did his best to meet Malfoy's gaze evenly.

"Cordelia and Charlemagne were here yesterday," Malfoy said, folding his arms in front of his chest as if he were cold. "Cordelia's bought out all my debts. I have to have them paid by next Friday, or she'll claim the shop and the stocks of Desire potion as recompense."

Harry cursed sharply. "I don't have the money to lend you—"

Malfoy gave him a sideways look of deep contempt, then caught himself and shook his head. "I've found a means to pay the debt," he said. "I don't like it, particularly, but beggars can't be choosers. I thought you had to know, however." He paused, chewing his lip. "And something else concerns me."

"Yes?" Harry asked. He was glad he'd built up some patience in the months he was with Hermione, or he never would have been able to endure the pauses in Malfoy's story. Just *tell* it through already, he thought. Surely it couldn't be that difficult.

"Cordelia and Charlemagne are closer than I thought they were," Malfoy said. "They rely on one another. They'll guard each other's backs in this battle."

"I didn't know we would be dueling—"

"A *political* battle, you twat." And then Malfoy hissed and threw his hands in the air. "Do you see?" he demanded. "We're insulting each other, circling each other clumsily even *now*, when we have to work together if we want to survive. It's not—things aren't going to get better, Harry. Not unless we make them better. We have to be united as partners to face Cordelia and Charlemagne. That means depending on each other. It means offering trust, and not grudging it. It means," and he took a step forwards, "we have to start thinking of each other as friends as well as pretending we do."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "I trusted you with the story of what I did to Ginny," he said. The words stuck in his throat—they wanted to be "the story of why I'm on the potion"—but it would be cowardly to pretend in front of someone who knew the truth. "That's not something anyone outside Hermione and the Weasley family knows about. I'm not sure what more I can do to prove I trust you."

Malfoy shook his head impatiently. "I'm not asking for demonstrations or proofs. I'm asking for the trust itself."

"You can't have it just for the asking." Harry folded his arms and turned away.

"We'll need it," Malfoy said. His voice was much closer now, and Harry shivered at the sensation of warmth along his side. It was as baffling and as inappropriate as the loneliness he'd felt yesterday.

Well. Sometimes, near the outer edge of his potions dose, he felt lust. He would just have to suppress it.

"I know you're an adult," Malfoy said. "So am I, Harry. Really. We can make a conscious commitment to work this out. That doesn't make our trust instinctive and involuntary in the way

you Gryffindors love, I know. But we have to *try.*"

Harry turned back. His neck felt stiff, resistant. Malfoy, as he expected, hovered far too close, staring at him.

"All right," Harry said, tongue heavy and clumsy. "I—I'll call you by your first name, I suppose, and not insult you?"

"Signs and demonstrations will do no good at all, I told you. This needs to be *inner.*" Malfoy stepped forwards and took his hand, working it away from his body and flexing Harry's fingers open. "I thought we were on the edge of friendship. Try to think of me as a friend. Remind yourself of it as often as you falter."

"And you'll do the same thing, I reckon?" Harry gave him a deeply skeptical glance. He could imagine circumstances under which he would want Malfoy—Draco—for a friend. He was a skilled brewer, a good listener when he wanted to be, witty and clever and full of a manic artistic energy sometimes. But he could not imagine what Draco would find valuable in Harry to build on, save for his magic. "I think it'll be easier for me than for you."

Draco hissed under his breath. Harry was absolutely *infuriating.*
But he was also more right than he realized. Draco knew Harry's weaknesses, now. He could feign friendship with him—and possibly coax Harry into attraction—more easily than with many other people.

But what he would have to have was true friendship. He'd felt able to offer it last week, when Harry told him the story of how he'd almost assaulted Ginny Weasley, but Harry had withdrawn rapidly in the days since then, as if eager to forget his own weakness. Draco needed to show, now, that he could do this.

"Probably you're right," he said. "But I'm still committed to trying."

Harry had a new shadow in his eyes now, and he quirked a smile Draco didn't understand. "If only for the sake of your business," he murmured.

"Of course." Draco snorted. "Honestly, Potter. Do you think we would ever have come near each other if you hadn't needed my help for Granger?"

Harry shook his head. He was still quiet, still thoughtful, and Draco wondered what new insight had occurred to him.

Ask. A friend would share it with a friend. This ought to encourage him.

"What are you thinking?" he said, and Harry started and stared at him in shock. Draco put up a hand. "No need to answer if you don't want to. But something obviously just crossed your mind, and that's the kind of thing friends tell each other. Sometimes."

"Sometimes, yes." Harry chuckled, and Draco didn't know why. That was infuriating, too. But he held his silence and waited, and Harry seemed to relax into that; Draco decided he probably appreciated the option to speak at his own speed, something he wouldn't get with Granger's hectoring and lecturing.

"I was just thinking that this can't be real on your side, no matter how much you might want it to be, no matter how much *I* might want it to be," Harry said. "It's for the sake of your business, and that's all. What would happen if I forgot that?" He shrugged. "I'm used to people moving on because I can't give them what they need. But I'm also used to their being honest with me. Susan Bones—my last girlfriend- told me right away when she fell in love with Zacharias Smith. I can imagine you tiring of me, hating me, and yet not telling me that, because you need my support for your business."

Draco frowned and stepped back to lean against the wall. It took effort not to fold his arms in a defensive gesture. Harry would probably nod his head sagely, decide he was right, and walk out. "You know my tendency to snap and insult people," he said carefully. "I could *say* something about tiring of you, but that wouldn't mean it was true."

"Make your words true." Harry was half-smiling again, peering at him. "If the most difficult part for me would be trusting you inwardly, I think the most difficult part for you would be honesty. But that's what we need."

Draco paused a long moment. His few friends had years of shared history behind them to ensure that they believed in the same principles as Draco did. Harry was *very* different from him, and he didn't have childhood memories of Slytherin or knowledge that Draco had once helped him out to soften his irritation with careless words.

True honesty, the kind Harry wanted, would expose the cracks in Draco's soul, and give Harry an opportunity to betray and hurt him badly. Draco hated that kind of vulnerability.

But he would have to live with it, even if he never grew more comfortable.

"All right," he said, abruptly, at last. He knew his voice was rasping, and he couldn't quite meet Harry's gaze. That would probably make him suspicious, and Draco was prepared to give multiple reassurances.

Instead, he saw Harry start a little, his eyes widening. Then he moved forwards and cupped a hand around Draco's chin, turning his face towards him. Draco stood very still, not used to such intimacy except with a lover.

But Harry just studied his face raptly, with no sign of lust. *Of course not,* Draco thought, as he stifled a frown. *That damn potion is forcing all of it down and away.*

"You mean it," Harry said, and then a smile slipped across his face and began to widen. "I really

think you mean it."

Draco took one deep breath to force away his fear. Enough of the Desire potion remained to him to give him some courage, that he might spring past the inevitable hesitation. "Yes," he said, and lifted his own hand to curl around Harry's fingers. "I do."

Harry was beaming at him, so openly that Draco couldn't help smiling back.

"Good," Harry said. "Then let's go down and start opening the shop for your big day, shall we?"

"*Our* big day," Draco said, and got an even wider smile. He basked in the warmth of it.

Harry shook his head in wonder. Draco's shop opened at seven on the dot, or so said the banner hovering above the door, but the line of patrons was already around the corner. He considered the barrels Draco had assigned him to move—he wanted them out of the way, so they wouldn't risk being tipped over—and then waved his wand to stick them to the walls. It was an elementary spell, which meant something Harry could perform with a great deal of power when he was on the potion. The barrels wouldn't fall on anyone's heads or spill their contents, even if something bumped them.
Draco was already behind the counter, which had been transformed into a glittering platform apparently encrusted with gold and gems and covered with small blue-green vials of Desire potion. Harry thought the effect tacky, but Draco had said his customers went for that kind of thing, and Harry had to bow to his superior knowledge of people who regularly shopped in high-end apothecaries.

Draco caught his eye, and smiled. The smile reminded Harry of the way he'd looked the day he came bursting into Harry's flat ready to brew the Desire potion. Narrow, cunning, excited, it made the excitement flare in Harry's own chest.

And he *had* been staring at Draco a little too long. Harry turned away, blinking. He took the potion on a strict schedule, which meant he could only have another vial when a full two weeks had passed from the time he'd taken the last one. But right now, he fervently wished that wasn't the case.

I don't like the way I'm looking at him. I don't like that part of myself.

Ginny's face floated before his eyes. Harry forced himself to stand a few minutes with his head hanging and his breath coming softly, despite the distracting, eager faces of people outside the shop. He was all right now. He could control his emotions. He had made an attempt to better himself. If it turned out not to be enough, he would take other steps.

He just—even if he wanted to pursue Draco, it would need to be on something other than the basis of physical attraction.

A clock Draco had hanging above the counter chimed seven precisely. Harry opened his eyes and

cast the spell that would unlock the front door of the shop.

People spilled inside: witches with wide, greedy eyes and small children beside them; reporters snapping pictures of the apothecary as if that would reveal something vital about the brewing process; older wizards who were probably on several potions already to control baldness. Numerous people stopped to shake his hand. Harry put his brain elsewhere for the moment and spoke the same few inane, welcoming words over and over, struggling to keep his feet in the rush.

He did manage to turn and face the counter for the moment when Draco announced, "And the first Desire potion goes for twenty Galleons to Roderick Foley. Yes, yes, sir, no need to thank me, but if you wanted to try the potion right in the shop, I would have no objections."

Mr. Foley had no objections either, Harry saw with a faint smile. He had already uncorked the vial and held it in front of his mouth. But he did stop to announce to the rest of the shop, "I think the thing I loathe most about myself is my fear of using spells more powerful than *Lumos*. Bloody embarrassing when you have to get a house-elf to do everything for you."

He gulped eagerly, spilling a few drops of the potion into his beard, and then closed his eyes and waited. Harry craned his neck, watching with interest. He'd never had the chance to watch someone actually *drink* the Desire potion, since Draco had done it at home and Hermione had locked herself in the loo to do it.

Mr. Foley took a deep, grasping breath. Then he opened his eyes, drew his wand, and said in a loud, deep voice, "*Gloria amplius!*"

A crackling glow, half-water and half-fire, shot away gamboling from his wand, and formed itself into a picture of a dragon such as Harry knew existed nowhere in the world: golden, smooth and shiny and friendly, without horns or plated scales. It opened its mouth and gazed around with happy, satisfied eyes, then shot towards the roof and flew around the room, wings beating a dazzling rhythm. Harmless light shot from its jaws and raked over dancing, squealing, laughing patrons.

Harry turned his gaze from the illusory dragon to Draco's face, and found the smile there—self-satisfied, proud, triumphant—quite as beautiful to watch as the *Gloria* spell.

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Chapter: 3

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Three—Getting to Know Draco and Hermione

"And *done*."

Harry smiled wearily. Draco was holding up the latest vial of blue-green potion. They'd applied a few of Hermione's modifications to the brewing process, and ended up with more of the potion produced in a shorter time, but it was also more magically exhausting. Harry hid a yawn behind his hand and pulled his sweat-soaked shirt over his head. He wanted to cast a drying charm on it, but it was easier to do that when he could hold the shirt in front of him and see the largest wet patches.

He heard Draco's breath catch. Harry kept his eyes on his hands and hoped that, if he flushed with embarrassment, it was hidden by the red already present in his cheeks.

So, all right, he *could* have performed a drying spell with his shirt on; the power of his magic meant few tricky charms were beyond him. But he had wanted to see what Draco would do when he saw Harry half-naked.

Harry cast the spell in a mumble, then looked up casually. Draco averted his eyes at once, but he had been staring. Harry felt a little quiver of satisfaction as he slid the shirt over his head. It wasn't as though he spent his time chasing down Dark wizards through obstacle courses, but he knew he was fit.

And if he *was* attracted to Draco, then lust would be part of the equation for the other man, at least. Harry had no objection to someone admiring his body. It was the other way around that was most dangerous.

Which reminds me.

"I wanted to talk to you," he said, folding his arms across his chest and noticing, with a small smirk, that Draco's eyes followed the way the shirt stretched on Harry's shoulders before he blinked and stared at his face.

"What about?" Draco had set the vial of potion down on the table beside him, as if he suspected a screaming argument coming, which of course would break the glass and spill the potion everywhere.

Harry had no intention of getting into one. Draco's flat was much nicer than his own, with delicate furniture and knickknacks everywhere. No room for a fight, but a nice place to entertain a guest. He smiled a little. "It occurs to me that one reason we were so disorganized when our marketing campaign for the Desire potion began is that we don't know very much about each other," he said. "So I want to know. Can I ask you some questions? I'll avoid all discussion of the war, I promise."

Draco's jaw dropped slightly open. Then he cleared his throat and said, "Does that include asking

questions about Hogwarts?"

Harry lifted his eyebrows, and nodded. It had not occurred to him to leave *that* out, as otherwise they would have only their lives since the war to talk about—and whilst Harry was willing to do that, he wasn't sure Draco was. It was important to him not to pressure the other man, not to coerce him into revealing anything he didn't want to reveal. He liked Draco too much to do that.

In oh, so many ways.

"I—all right." Draco ran a hand through his hair and glanced away. Harry thought it was the first time he had seen him off-guard, or flustered (mistakes made whilst creating the potion didn't count, since that had been new territory for both of them). It was cute. "What do you want to know?"

Harry thought for a moment, carefully, then said, "Do you think we would have been such enemies if we had simply met for the first time in school, instead of before?"

Draco winced. The memory of the little snot he had been was not pleasant, mostly because he could see now how that little snot's actions had led straight into most of his misfortunes and crimes during his sixth and seventh years.
"Go right for the heart, don't you?" he muttered.

"If you'd rather not answer it, of course you don't have to," Harry said gently.

Draco stared hard at him, but Harry didn't glance away or back down, and Draco had every reason to believe that his words were sincere. That was one thing his potion did for him: detached him from the normal impatience and irritation most people would feel and rendered him endlessly understanding.

Draco was grateful for it at the moment, yet even so he felt a deep coil of anger ignite in his belly. *How can you really like someone who maintains such a moral superiority over you? It would be like cherishing a bloody Muggle priest as your best friend.*

"I don't think things would have been different," he said reluctantly, the words sticking to the roof of his mouth as he spoke. He had never said them in front of an audience, but he'd thought them enough times, and he wouldn't lie, if he was going to answer the stupid question at all. "I still wanted Harry Potter as my best friend, just because he *was* Harry Potter. I would probably have been even more arrogant because you were in Gryffindor, and I wanted to impress you with how wonderful Slytherin House was."

Harry nodded, and his face was perfectly soft, his eyes shining, as if he found the information about Draco valuable enough to ignore what he was actually *saying.* Draco frowned and peered at him. Useful as it was to have someone who wouldn't snap at him for his youthful misdeeds, it did make Harry seem, well, not *human* sometimes.

"Thank you," he said. "Now. What would you like to know about me?"

Draco paused, his anger still boiling. Perhaps this was too touchy a subject to ask about, given Weasley's recent death, but, damn it, he wanted to know. And he wanted to push Harry's tolerance, too, get a hasty motion or a word he didn't mean out of him. "Why did you choose Weasley over me?"

Harry ducked his head and hissed out a breath, like someone absorbing a blow, but answered calmly. "I liked his attitude better than yours," he said. "When we met for the first time in Madam Malkin's, you made fun of Hagrid, who was the first friend I'd ever had—"

"Oh, come *on*, Potter." Draco folded his arms. He understood when he was being lied to. "Your first wizarding friend, you mean."

Harry shook his head. His face had gone blank. "My first friend," he said. "My cousin Dudley kept all the kids in our primary school away from me. And you reminded me of him. Spoiled. Arrogant. Wanting to impress someone else, even though you didn't know his name, just to assert your superiority."

Draco gritted his teeth to keep from snapping. Yes, all right, he deserved that. But he still couldn't believe what Harry was saying.

"Your cousin was *like* that?"

"Yes." Harry shrugged, and only long experience in reading people who didn't want to admit that they wanted a certain embarrassing potion let Draco see the shadows in his eyes. "You can see why I wasn't all that eager to continue the tradition of that being my only companionship when I went to Hogwarts."

"But your Muggle family—"

"I think it's my turn to ask a question now," Harry interrupted. Pleasantly, of course. He did everything pleasantly. But Draco had hit a nerve for the first time. He cocked his head and nodded, suppressing a smile. Harry might take it the wrong way.

"Go ahead," he said.

"Why won't your parents support your shop?" Harry made a gesture around the room where they stood, following it with a look of such genuine admiration that Draco felt absurdly flattered. "You're doing well, you'll be famous soon for the Desire potion if you aren't already—"

"There were two articles in the *Daily Prophet* this morning," Draco muttered, to gain time. *How does he keep picking the questions that I would refuse to answer if this was anyone but him? Some malicious genius?* "You may have noticed."

"I don't read the papers that much." Harry glanced at him apologetically. "That's a hard one, isn't it? If you don't want to answer—"

"I know, I know," Draco snapped. "I don't have to. For God's sake, Potter, I'm not a restless child in a Potions class anymore, and you don't have to repeat the same words six dozen times."

Harry smiled. Draco grumbled under his breath and sought for an answer for a moment before he found it.

Unlike his answer to Harry's earlier question, he only could have expected full understanding on this point from a Malfoy. "Not working is—important," he said. "Not really to the family, but to the vision that others have of us as a family. We're *aristocrats*. No royal blood, but we're free—freer than other people. We don't have to do anything we don't want to. And labor is something that most people do because they have no choice."

Harry stepped towards him, caught his hand, and gently squeezed it. "And so because you're supporting yourself," he said, "even though you *want* to brew potions, even though it's your art, your parents don't like you appearing less than free."

Draco stared openly at Harry for a moment before he remembered that Malfoys didn't gape like buffoons, either, and he could keep up *that* impression. "Yes, exactly," he said. "I could have brewed exotic potions in the Manor and sold them for very high prices or traded them for political favors. My parents would have approved of that. But not selling them to the public, and not dabbling in potions that anyone could brew. Malfoys should be—important. Unique. Special."

Harry laughed. "Then your parents must not have bothered to pay you much attention in the past few years," he said, and squeezed Draco's hand again. "Because I definitely think you're those last few things, whether you're working or not."

Draco felt dizzy. If this weren't Harry, he would have said the words were flirtatious, but surely that couldn't be, coming from *Harry*, could it? He licked his lips and tried hard to think of another question.

Oddly enough, the buzzing of the clock in the corner, which he had set to warn him when it was time to go to Daphne's, saved him. Draco felt dizzy again, this time with a surge of gratitude, and nodded to Harry. "Excuse me, but I have a prior appointment."

"Oh, really? With whom?" Harry dropped Draco's hand and moved back to balance on the balls of his feet, staring intently.

I wish I could understand his gestures. Is he jealous or not? The thought caused a rush of warmth to move through Draco, but considering Harry had brewed his potion to repress exactly that emotion, he knew it was unlikely. "With the investor who's bailing me out of trouble, given the debts I owe Cordelia," he murmured.

Harry at once relaxed. *Does that mean he doesn't see this friend as a threat to his interest in me, or does he trust me that much?* "All right, then," he said, with a small nod. "Remember that I'll come by the shop tomorrow morning to sign some autographs and move business along."

"And keep me company, of course," Draco said, deciding to push the boundaries a little.

Harry caught his gaze and gave him a dazzling smile. "Of course. I could never forget that."

And then he was out of the room, taking his confusion along with him. Draco folded his arms and scowled at the floor a moment, then turned away.

Daphne was waiting, and she didn't take impatience well. No matter how early Draco arrived, it would never be enough to content her.

"This place is *nice*," Hermione said, staring in several directions as Harry escorted her into the Garden of the Hesperides.
Harry smiled. Hermione taking an interest in things outside her research was a sign that she had recovered almost fully.

Of course, Diagon Alley's newest restaurant was meant to be stared at, at least by people who had never been inside it before. The walls were covered with glamours of leaves—and maybe real ones, too—stirring constantly in soft breezes. The tables were round, apparently formed of tree stumps, and golden apples hung from the rafters. The centerpiece of the restaurant was the enormous, living tree supporting the ceiling, more golden apples peering from between its branches, and a sleeping jade-green snake as large as Nagini encircling the roots. Now and then the snake lifted its head, blinked, and yawned theatrically to expose long, dagger-edged teeth.

Curious, Harry hissed at the snake in Parseltongue, a simple greeting. The serpent's head swung towards him, and the brilliant yellow eyes studied him a moment. Then the snake replied, "*Too tired to talk,*" and stretched its neck along one of the roots.

Hermione's hand clenched on his arm. "That thing is *real*, isn't it?" she muttered.

"Um. Yes?" Harry wondered if Hermione would announce the fact to the restaurant and start a panic.

But if Hermione was a law-abiding, justice-loving woman who really should have been in Ravenclaw, she also had a strong strain of the Gryffindor. After a tense moment staring at the serpent, she frowned and turned her head away. "So long as it doesn't actually attack anyone," she said stiffly. "And of course, you're here now, so you can talk it down if it goes into a rage." She arrowed towards a stump-table on the other side of the room from the tree.

"I don't think it will go into a rage," Harry said, grinning at her back as he followed. "It was very tired, which is usually a sign that a snake's eaten a good meal—"

"I don't want to talk about snakes eating." Hermione slid into her seat and touched her wand to the crystal in the center of the table, which lit up at once. A woman's pleasant voice bid them welcome to the Garden of the Hesperides, and two menus slid out of the crystal's base a moment later. Hermione glared at Harry as she picked one of them up. "*I'll* be trying to eat."

"It's so interesting how they unhinge their jaws—"

"Be *quiet.*"

Still unable to stifle his grin, Harry took the other chair and peered in interest at the menu. Most of the dishes had exotic names—Nymphs' Delight, the Garden Gates, Golden Apple Marvel—but the descriptions sounded normal enough. The really unusual things on the menu were the glamours of dancing nymphs in gauzy togas, which must have cost a fortune to cast and maintain, and the fact that nearly every dessert and some of the drinks, too, were made of apples.

"I'm having the Serpent's Choice," Hermione said at last, referring to a chicken stuffed and covered with baked apples. She glanced at him. "How about you?"

"Hm." Harry studied the menu once more, then shut it and nodded decisively. "Definitely the Nymphs' Delight." That was a fish enchanted to offer a different flavor with every bite, though the menu promised all of them were tasty, unlike Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans.

They leaned in and spoke their choices to the crystal, which flared once with brilliant light like a diamond and then swallowed their menus. Glasses of water slid out of the base in the next moment, enlarging amusingly and landing with a spinning motion that made Harry hasten to catch his before it could spill. He tilted it back and swallowed gratefully, then glanced around the restaurant; Hermione was frowning at the crystal, apparently in an effort to figure out how its magic worked, and looked as if she didn't want to talk.

Most of the tables were filled with young men and women, who paid as much attention to the decorations as the food. Harry suspected that was probably because this was the restaurant's first week; the Garden of the Hesperides would need to establish a reputation for *food* eventually, as well as pretty walls. A few older wizards sat near the tree, casting spells at it, which a discreet Shield Charm deflected. Harry wondered if any of them had figured out the serpent was real yet.

A shadow fell over him. Harry leaned back and found himself staring straight into Charlemagne Diggory's face.

"Harry Potter," Diggory said, just loudly enough to catch the attention of a few other people. He was smiling, that welcoming, sympathetic smile that had so fooled Harry the first time he visited his flat.

Harry's hand tightened on his glass, but he managed to incline his head. *Damn.* Most of the patrons hadn't glanced twice at him when he walked in; his hair covered his scar, and after he had

chosen to lay low for the past eight years, people no longer thought they saw Harry Potter around every street corner.

But this, and the new publicity that Harry had hoped to build up for Draco's shop, made sure he couldn't run away. From the way Diggory smiled, he had probably counted on that. Harry narrowed his eyes and smiled at the same time. If Diggory wanted a fight based on political power and public recognition, he would get one.

"And the lovely Hermione Granger." Diggory turned to Hermione and lifted her hand to be kissed. Hermione, warned by Harry of the things Diggory had done and said, studied him as if he were a spot on her best silver cauldron. "You might as well know that one reason I want to pass new laws to support Muggleborn Wizengamot members is to have your expertise on my side."

Hermione smiled blandly. "Why do you assume it would be on your side?" she asked.

Diggory's smile flickered, for just a moment. *He didn't expect us to be ready for him,* Harry thought smugly. *Or he thought being in public would require us to act polite. Ha.*

"Well, of course, you are welcome to choose any side you like, Miss Granger," Diggory said, and swept another bow. "I simply assumed that we would have interests in common, in ensuring that pure-bloods do not keep all the highest offices of wizarding government to themselves, and therefore we would be allies. I may have made a mistake?" He pitched his voice at the end of the question gently, wonderingly, as though to say he couldn't believe his benevolence had been rejected.

"I have other concerns," said Hermione. "More pressing ones. For example, even if more Muggleborns entered the government, whom would they serve? What positions would they hold? Could we be certain they had the expertise needed to enact laws?" She ticked the points off on her fingers and then folded her hands in her lap, staring evenly at Diggory. "I dislike the official and effective control of pure-bloods as much as you do, but some of them are good politicians, and many of them understand issues in the wizarding world that most Muggleborns haven't done enough research on."

"You are proof that anyone can *learn* to do the research," Diggory said quickly. "What I want to defeat is the sort of attitude that claims Muggleborns are inherently inferior, that they actually *can't* learn our laws or understand our social customs."

"Oh, yes, in that case, we would be allies." Hermione smiled sweetly at him, and Harry felt a moment's pang of sympathy for Diggory. That smile was Hermione's "about to launch missiles of logic" warning. "But integration works more wonders than simply yelling the truth at people and then marching over them. When people like me come into the Ministry, I want to be sure they *stay* there, not serve one term and then become swept away in the next election or because a pure-blood supervisor discovers they're actually incompetent. That would be a strike against any further hiring or elections. And we have prejudices of our own, after all. Some people like me don't *want* to do the research. Others left the wizarding world for good after the horrors they

were subjected to during the war. Why should they serve the Ministry, when said Ministry hasn't even apologized for housing people who believed Muggleborns stole wands from other wizards?"

"Such apologies can become a political issue, of course," Diggory said. "As for whom I will hire—surely, someone like *yourself* would be a good choice! And you can probably recognize people with the prejudices and limitations you talk about."

"But I already have a job with the Ministry," Hermione drawled. "And what set of criteria should I use to select those who would fill the posts? My own?" She paused delicately, as though inviting Diggory to answer.

Diggory opened his mouth, and Hermione cut in. Harry, sitting back and grinning with his hands folded behind his head, knew it would look to the others in the restaurant as though Diggory had rudely interrupted when Hermione hadn't finished talking. "You would probably say yours, assuming that we were allies and I worked for your campaign to become Minister. But I can't agree to that." Hermione shook her head briskly. "When Muggleborns are brought into the Ministry, and *when* house-elves are freed—a proposition you might have some trouble with, as I understand the Diggory family still owns house-elves—I want them to be the efforts of many people, not just one. If a politician is thrown out of office, or, worse, not elected at all, his collapse shouldn't mean the collapse of my goals." And she turned to the crystal, which had flared again and deposited steaming plates of food on the table. Harry inhaled the scent of apples greedily and almost wished he had ordered the Serpent's Choice instead.

Diggory stood in silence for a few moments more. Then he bowed, so stiffly Harry thought he must be badly thrown off-balance. He'd probably expected instant agreement from Hermione, underestimating her loyalty to principle instead of blood. "Thank you for sharing with me your opinion, Miss Granger," he said. "You have given me much to think about."

He turned to Harry, though his feathers were so ruffled by now Harry was amazed he was still trying. "And may I ask whom you're voting for, Mr. Potter?"

"Oh," Harry said, lifting a forkful of fish to his mouth and sighing in delight as it tasted of baked salmon, "a gentleman never tells his choice beforehand." He smiled straight at Diggory. "Though I do value friendship, and people who cooperate with me," he added, musingly.

Let everyone assume that means I'm voting for Shacklebolt if they want to. Diggory ought to know it means I'm supporting Draco against any of his machinations.

Diggory clenched his hands briefly on the folds of his robe, then smoothed out the wrinkles in both the cloth and his forehead. "Indeed," he said. "You have always been famous for your principles. Thank you for your time." And he turned and walked away as easily as if he'd won the concessions he came for.

Conversation at the tables around them gradually turned back to private affairs, though Harry

could still feel people watching. He ate ten bites of fish steadily before he asked Hermione in an undertone, "Are you all right? You're pale."

"The nerve of the bastard," Hermione hissed, and Harry realized he'd mistaken her lack of color as faintness. It meant fury instead. "To just *assume* I'd go along with him if he came after me in public, in order not to make a scene!"

"Well, he may genuinely have hoped you'd join him, too." Harry swallowed a piece of fish that tasted like a lemon, made a face, and reached for his glass of water. "He obviously knows you're smart and passionate about people who aren't pure-bloods rising higher in the Ministry."

"He should have done more bloody research of his own," Hermione said, and cut an apple in half savagely.

Harry nodded. He had to restrain the exultation rising in his heart, he thought, and be as cautious as he could.

We won this time, but sooner or later, if Diggory keeps coming after us separately, he'll get what he wants. Draco and I need to plan together and spend more time in each other's company, and I think we should include Hermione as well.

Harry found himself smiling foolishly, helplessly, at the idea that he might be able to be around Draco more. And Hermione, of course.

No, that will be no hardship at all.

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Chapter: 4

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Four—Point and Counterpoint

Draco woke slowly. He lay with his arms twisted behind him and chained—or tied, he thought, when he pulled; the material had the yielding feel of rope—together. A blindfold lay over his eyes, but when he turned his head to the side, it slipped off. Something sticky and cold was drying on his belly. He craned his neck until he could see, and grimaced. It looked like a mixture of blood and semen.

And of course his mind was as blank and smooth as the black cloth Daphne had used to blind him, ignorant of what they had done, under an expertly applied Memory Charm.

"Awake, dearest?"

Draco shivered in revulsion, but managed to turn a pleasant expression towards Daphne. It wouldn't be wise to upset her, with the rope writhing in tightening knots around his fingers and his arms full of small twinges and aches. Daphne sat in a plush chair near the bed, regarding him with an expression in which banked fire smoldered. Her blonde hair hung loose down her back; her cat-like eyes were narrowed with appreciation. She wore a small wreath of thorny roses in her hair and nothing else.

"I see you are," she said, with a smile for Draco's groin. She stood, took a rose from the wreath, and trailed it down his belly, thorns out. Draco controlled the impulse to flinch. She would score him with worse than a few light, bloody lines if he moved.

"And ready to play, too," she said softly into his ear, and laughed, probably at the expression on his face, as she moved to cover him.

Draco spread his legs obediently, and hoped that the impatient crowds waiting outside the shop for the Desire potion wouldn't batter down his door before Daphne let him go.

Harry slowed as he came in sight of Draco's shop. He couldn't believe the door was still shut when it was almost ten in the morning. Had something gone wrong? Had Nott or Diggory waylaid Draco, perhaps?
Harry hung back, a cloak over his head, glancing around warily. He wasn't out of place; at least half the people in the crowd seemed intent on disguising themselves so no one else would realize they were buying Desire. Harry saw no flash of white-blond hair, though, and no sign of Charlemagne Diggory, whom he could have recognized from the back now.

What he *did* see was the young man who had followed him in Diagon Alley a few days ago, just before Draco had put Desire on the market. He was standing with his hands in his robe pockets, continually fiddling with something. Harry narrowed his eyes and edged a few steps closer. Since the neat line was dissolving into grumbling, complaining clumps of wizards, no one really noticed. Harry pretended to pause at the outside edge of a group and nod along in sympathy with their words whilst aiming his wand at the young wizard under the edge of his cloak.

"*Sinus aspectus,*" he whispered.

His field of vision narrowed and turned white, then jerked forwards as if he were a fly being tugged along on a strand of spidersilk. Harry held still; he had found that if he moved too much when he used this charm, he got sick to his stomach. One of the more unpleasant side-effects of having less control over his magic thanks to his own potion.

His vision dived, and suddenly he was seeing into the pockets of the young wizard, the images side by side like a divided screen on a Muggle telly. One was empty. The other contained a glass vial filled with yellow flakes. Nine years ago, when he'd still been taking Potions classes, Harry

never would have recognized them. Now, since he did regular shopping at apothecaries to purchase the ingredients he needed for his brewing, he did.

Fool's saffron. It was a variant of true saffron often used in joke potions. It caused foaming at the mouth and intense reddening of the eyes and cheeks. But the effect wasn't *instantly* recognizable, and someone who watched a person take fool's saffron might decide he'd been seriously injured.

Harry could see the intended result of the flakes as if the young wizard had turned and described them to him. He'd go in, buy a vial of Desire, take it in front of everyone—as people were still doing when they wanted to test the efficacy of the potion immediately, or make other people watch as their loathed characteristic disappeared—and then slip the fool's saffron into the vial at the same time as the potion. He'd collapse foaming at the mouth and probably screaming about something worse, hallucinations and the like. Certainly he'd put the more timid souls off Desire at once, and probably create the excuse for a Ministry investigation.

Harry growled under his breath, and paused a moment to think over what his best course of action would be. Draco still hadn't told him who this man was, and intercepting him might carry hefty consequences. Nor, with the nervous way he was fingering his vial, could Harry simply Summon the fool's saffron out of his pocket and hope he wouldn't notice. He'd probably run away, and the next time he came back, someone might not be in place to counter him.

Before Harry could decide, white-blond hair flashed through the crowd, and several people turned and cheered. Draco raised a hand to them as he limped past—

Limped?

Harry canceled the Pocket Vision Charm so he could get rid of the distracting images bobbing in front of his eyes, and stared at Draco in concern. Yes, he was indeed limping, moving as if a muscle in his upper thigh had been strained. And his face seemed paler and bonier than usual, his eyes haunted. But he still waved and smiled courageously, and Harry felt his own face soften in something suspiciously like adoration.

It is adoration, and you know it.

Harry shook his head a little as he stepped briskly through the crowding wizards and witches to get to Draco's side. He had never experienced the process of falling into infatuation so fast; usually he dated a witch for a few nights, laughed and joked with her and asked her questions, before he proposed a more formal commitment. Was it just the business partnership between him and Draco that made this so different? Or was it really because Draco was male?

He shrugged off the thoughts and caught Draco's hand just as it touched the latch of the door. Draco flinched when he turned around, and outrage poured through Harry like hot wine. *Who did that to him? I swear, if it turns out this investor he bargained with to save his shop is hurting him—*

But in the next moment, Draco had recovered his balance and his poise. Harry knocked the hood from his head so other people could see him, and Draco turned around to hold Harry's hand high. "Along with the Desire potion," he announced, "Harry Potter will be signing autographs this morning!"

The fervent cheering followed them into the shop. Draco kept hold of Harry's hand all the way, and murmured as he started towards the counter, where a desk for Harry to sign was set up, "What is it?"

"The same wizard who followed me before," Harry whispered back. "Fool's saffron."

He didn't need to say any more than that; Draco's head jerked a little, and then his eyes glowed, as he undoubtedly went over the same possibilities Harry had.

"I know who he is," he breathed.

"*Who*?" They were almost to the counter and the desk now, and with the people behind them already shouting impatient orders, this was nearly the last chance they would have to speak.

"Theodore," said Draco, and sneered. "Cordelia's half-brother. Let me handle him."

And he swept behind the counter with a flourish, leaving Harry to settle behind the desk, wondering and worrying.

Will he really catch him when he comes up? What if he manages to palm the fool's saffron after all, and Draco doesn't notice? What if—

Then Harry forced away the crowding thoughts, and the concern he felt for Draco's limp, too. He would have to trust in Draco. For the moment, he needed to sign the parchment being thrust towards him by a witch who looked like a blonde Mrs. Weasley. Harry smiled at her with some effort.

"Who should I make it out to?" he asked, as he took up the quill Draco had provided and dipped it into the fresh ink.

"My daughter, Megan Whitbread," the witch said, and mopped at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Oh, she's never going to believe this!"

Harry froze the edges of his smile and wrote, telling himself that he was *not* watching the counter out of the corner of his eye.

Theo? Well, well.
Draco had suspected the truth the moment Harry told him about his follower, and now it hardened into certainty when he caught a glimpse of that stringy, pale face in the crowd, though Theo immediately waved his wand and cast a glamour to hide himself. No one was going to

notice, not when they were gazing with rapt eyes at the vials of Desire on the counter.

Cordelia could control everyone in her disgraced family if she wanted; her access to money and the fact that she hadn't been tarred with the brush of the Death Eater ensured that. Theo, the last Draco had known of him, was desperate for a little respectability, but he'd take Galleons over that. If his half-sister told Theo to come here and pretend to have an "attack" thanks to fool's saffron, he would.

Draco could, of course, simply wait until Theo was about to play his trick and then reveal the vial in front of everyone, but he didn't want to. For one thing, that would let Cordelia and Diggory know *he* knew about one of their pawns, and they'd find another—perhaps one less recognizable. For another, there would be people who would become more cautious about buying from him if they realized he had rivals. Foolish indeed, but many wizards and witches were reactionary enough to fear *any* touch of controversy.

No. He preferred a solution relying on his quick wand hand and his knowledge of Potions ingredients. He was, after all, an artist.

He glanced to the side, shifting his weight uncomfortably—Daphne had left him just enough memory of this morning's encounter to know it involved a net and trident—and peeked at Harry, even as his hands continued the business of exchanging vials for Galleons smoothly. Harry was signing parchments and books for the most part, though sometimes handkerchiefs or broomsticks or wands, all the while keeping up a flow of light chatter.

Draco snorted. *The Gryffindor Golden Boy never could have done that.*

But it was all so easy for him with the potion, wasn't it? It took him away from the situation, made him rational and calm. He'd be able to decide that pandering to the public's insatiable taste for Harry Potter was worth the prize he'd earn: greater publicity for Desire and more patrons for Draco's shop who, once inside, might choose to buy something else, too.

Draco ground his teeth. He *disliked* that potion. Harry ought to suffer the same consequences as everyone else. He ought to be scowling as he signed, turning disdainfully away from some of the things he was offered, eyes flashing.

But there was nothing to be done about it at the moment and perhaps not ever. Besides, Theo was getting close to the front of the line. Draco grinned as he watched the man palm the fool's saffron. Not at all subtle. He might have been warned even if Harry hadn't spotted him.

Or maybe not. I'm still a little dizzy from Daphne.

And Harry was watching. Perfect. Draco *did* enjoy impressing him.

Draco fought the urge to preen, handed the vial of Desire that Theo had purchased over with a smiling nod, and then cast his spell.

"Would you sign—" The witch in front of him was giggling so uncontrollably she couldn't complete the sentence. Harry was morbidly afraid of what would happen when she did. She ducked her head, and smiled into her own bosom, which left Harry to sit back and glance at Draco for a moment. The people in line behind the witch were muttering, but no one had resorted to pushing yet.
Theodore Nott, or at least a man who looked like him, in the same cloak, was just accepting a vial of Desire potion from Draco.

Harry stiffened and leaned forwards. The witch was still young enough to believe he wanted to see her breasts, and perhaps that was what she meant him to sign, because she smiled expectantly. But Harry was intent on the transaction over the counter. Draco had done nothing so far, and once again his gut clenched in worry. Did that mean Draco *would* do nothing? Was he going to let Theodore fall foaming to the floor, and—

The twitch of Draco's wand was so small that Harry almost missed it. He thought he would have done so were he not accustomed to the minute motions that Draco often had to make when brewing Desire. But he saw this one, and he saw the small beam of golden light, easily mistaken for sunshine, that shot out of the wand and enveloped the vial of fool's saffron. In a moment the flakes had become purple, the grains larger than normal. Theodore still tipped them into the Desire and gulped the potion down, apparently not noticing the change.

Harry felt a smile widen across his face so fast it was actually painful. The witch in front of him giggled again, and bounced a little, obviously trying to draw his attention back. But Harry wasn't capable of looking at her yet, no matter how much of a bad shift it would cause in customer relations.

Draco had changed the fool's saffron into lavender petals. They were a largely neutral ingredient to most potions, and that included the current version of the Desire potion. Theodore would have a slightly sweeter taste than normal when he swallowed, and that would be the only effect. He stood there now, looking rather like a sheep who had expected the sky to fall. He tilted the vial back and stared at it again.

An elegant solution, neat, simple. And also one that didn't let Cordelia Nott and Diggory realize that Harry and Draco were on to them. Harry felt like applauding.

"Well, man?" Draco was saying to Theodore now, whilst behind him the line of people waiting to buy their potions shifted restlessly. "You *could* step out of the way and let others have what they've come to purchase, you know."

Theodore mumbled something apologetic, sounding as if he would burst into sobs at any moment, and moved away. Harry hid a smirk, and finally turned back to focus on the woman in front of you.

"Sign my breasts," she said.

Harry gave her a cool smile. "I'm afraid I don't sign body parts," he said. "Did you have any parchment about you?" He made sure to look at her chest with no interest, and thanks to his own potion, that was easier than it might have been.

The woman stared at him with her mouth open, then slammed down a piece of parchment and told him, rather snippily, that her name was Caroline. Harry signed it "*To Caroline, from Harry Potter, with thanks for her patience*." She didn't even look at the signature before she flounced away into the crowd.

Harry had no time to lean back and relax before the next people in *his* line surged forwards again, but he did cast one more lingering look at Draco. He was working like a professional now, answering questions and distributing the potion without a sign of the pain that had troubled him earlier.

I wish I was dating him already. God, what a tale of cleverness that one is! It might even impress the Weasleys.

He felt a slight twitch of pain at the thought of Ron, but a year had gone by. He had to accept that his friend wasn't coming back. He knew his smile was slight and melancholy when he turned around again, but he corrected it before anyone in his audience had a chance to interpret it in the wrong way.

And then he saw a flash of red hair in the line waiting for Draco's services, and hissed under his breath. He knew the length and texture of that hair, and the way the body beneath it stood.

Ginny won't be here for any nasty reason, he tried to assure himself. *She's only come to buy the Desire potion like anyone else.*

Still, he couldn't quite help keeping an eye on her as he continued to sign. It wasn't every day that the person he'd once thought he would spend the rest of his life with showed up in the shop of the person he was currently thinking about dating.

Draco kept his expression bland when the she-Weasel appeared in front of him. The best way to disappoint one's enemies was simply not to give them the explosion they wanted. He nodded courteously instead and picked up a vial of the Desire potion.
"I didn't come for that," said Ginny Weasley, and damn her to hell, she'd cast *Sonorus* on her throat. Heads turned all over the shop, including those of people who had been clamoring happily for a chance to see Harry or picking among his Potions ingredients looking to buy something besides Desire. "I came to ask you what's in Desire, and why you can afford to sell it at such a low price."

Draco lifted an eyebrow. He hadn't counted on this. Was it revenge on Harry? Some odd social justice crusade of the kind that Gryffindors had been known to go on in Hogwarts? *Concern* for Harry? He had to admit the last was possible, however strange it seemed. She could have decided

that Draco was dangerous, to be feared, and that it would be best to get him away from Harry as soon as possible.

"I won't release my recipe where my rivals could benefit from it, of course," he said. "And I can afford to sell it at such a low price because the ingredients are relatively common."

"That's a contradiction in terms," said the she-Weasel, and though her eyes were flashing, she looked pale. Draco saw the way her gaze darted over to the side, and smiled thinly. So she was afraid to be in the same room with Harry, was she? Then she probably hadn't come here out of concern for him, no matter what her other motives were. "If the ingredients are common, then you don't need to sell the potion for much money at all. And you could release the recipe and let everyone brew it."

Draco sighed wearily. "Weasley, what part of *that would make me lose my profit* don't you understand?"

"I know that it's changing people." Weasley drew herself up. "Have you thought about what it costs the people who take Desire, and their families and friends, when you let them simply run away from their problems, instead of facing and confronting them?"

Granger didn't put her up to this, did she? That position had been Granger's in all the arguments they'd had over the Desire potion. But Draco did think, despite everything, that Granger was too good a friend to Harry to do that. He folded his arms and looked bored, which would play well with the crowd of customers watching in breathless silence. "I don't force anyone to buy my potion. They come to my door and do it eagerly enough. And since when is taking a potion for a little while to conquer their problems the same as running away from them? Would you say that people who take Dreamless Sleep Potion are running away from their nightmares?"

That had been a shot in the dark—he really had no way of knowing that Ginny Weasley still had nightmares about what Harry had done to her—but he saw her eyes widen. Her voice sounded thinner, despite the charm, when she said, "Then you will deny the truth of the claim that Desire potion is addictive?"

"I do," Draco said. "Show me the proof of your claim."

"Dreamless Sleep Potion is addictive. So are many pain potions used to relieve headaches and the like."

"Ah," Draco said, and smiled. "But Desire works on the emotional and mental problems that people have, most of all. It changes their perceptions of themselves, or suppresses certain foolhardy feelings and impulses, like excessive guilt." He couldn't help darting his gaze towards Harry. *If he had brewed it to get over his guilt at hurting this woman, I would have no problem with his using it at all.* "In some rare cases, yes, it has been found to have a physical effect, but most of the time it simply lets the drinker live with his or her problems."

"But it could still be addictive."

Draco laughed. "I know a person who regularly consumes a potion that forms the base for Desire," he said. "He has consumed it for more than half a decade now, and still it's possible for him to forget. Withdrawal from the potion results in no symptoms."

"How do you know that?"

"I took it myself." Draco shrugged.

"Then one consumption might not hurt someone," Weasley said. "But what about many doses taken over many years?"

"I told you, I know someone—"

"We have only your word on that."

Motion off to the side, and then Harry's voice said, "No. I might as well you tell you that I take the potion."

Draco held onto the counter to keep from falling, and stared at Harry as he stood. His leg was aching again, but that couldn't overcome the thrill at the sudden, unexpected show of support.

"I've taken it for six years, now," Harry went on calmly, though he had to hold onto the desk to control the urge to sway back and forth. "I've never encountered any painful or addictive symptoms. As conveyed in the initial advertisements, there is some slight lessening of the control of one's magic. But that is the only side-effect consistent from person to person."
Ginny's eyes were wide and moist as she stared at him. Harry stared back, calmly, without letting a hint of his inner turmoil show through. He knew Ginny hadn't come here to sabotage the sales of the Desire potion—the thought of her being in the employ of Nott and Diggory, or still wanting to hurt him that much, was laughable—but she might have come here with some misguided idea of rescuing him from Malfoy's clutches.

Right now, she was trying to work herself up to say something again, but her breath had obviously stuck in her throat at the sight of him, and she was a few moments away from going into a full-blown panic. Harry took over.

"I'm willing to answer questions about the Desire potion that won't cut into the time and money we've both invested in this," he said. "But I don't have to stand back and listen to unfounded claims repeated as if they were truth."

Ginny shivered. Then she turned abruptly and ran out of the shop.

A few patrons followed her, but not many. The rest were there for Desire, and they would stay for Desire. The more negative consequences would come later, as the news spread. Harry

shivered and sat down again, accepting the parchments that were passed eagerly his way.

He could feel Draco's eyes on him, wondering, questioning. He knew he would have to face up to the other man and admit some things later.

For now, though, he could sign, and smile, and didn't need to do anything more complicated. And he could pretend the flush in his face was from embarrassment at speaking out in public, and that the slight tremble in his handwriting didn't exist.

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Chapter: 5

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Five—Three Uncomfortable Conversations

It seemed to Draco to take far too long until noon arrived and the demand for Desire dropped off. At last it had been five minutes since the last patron entered the shop, and ten minutes since the last impudent person had crowded up to Harry demanding his autograph. Draco spelled the front door shut, then tilted his head towards the hidden door to his upper rooms and raised an eyebrow.

Harry nodded and stood, though his movements were heavy and reluctant as he walked around the desk. Draco thought he knew why. He *was* going to insist on knowing why Harry had stood up and declared that he was on a potion, and Harry, however good he was with declarations in the heat of the moment, would prefer to avoid long conversations about them.

Well, maybe not, Draco was forced to concede as he remembered the questions Harry had pressed on him the other day. *He does seem to enjoy learning about me.*

But he hadn't answered as many questions about himself in comparison, and Draco suspected he would have continued to avoid the duty if he didn't know that that was death to any sense of partnership or friendship with Draco. Along with supernaturally calm and patient, that potion made him more reserved, less anxious to expose anything of himself.

Draco felt a surge of frustration, and tried to get rid of it by stamping a little harder on the stairs than usual and thinking about the likely outcome once the *Daily Prophet* carried the report of the She-Weasel's outburst. The *really* skittish public would refrain from buying Desire for now, until they could be assured it was respectable. And that would take time.

It's good that I went to Daphne after all. Depending on Desire to pay off my debts in a week wouldn't work.

But Draco didn't want to think about Daphne, either, and thinking about his debts made him think about his profits—which had to be shared with the man who was slowly climbing the stairs behind him. Draco reached his rooms, stepped out of the way, and then turned around suddenly enough to startle Harry, who put a hand on the wall.

"Tea?" Draco offered.

"Something a bit more substantial than that, if you've got it." Harry shook a cramp out of his writing hand and then flexed his fingers. He had dots of ink on them, Draco noted. He thought Harry looked better like that, along with his rumpled hair and tired expression. He wasn't *meant* to be perfect. "A sandwich would work wonders."

Draco chuckled smugly. Harry lifted his head and eyed him curiously, and Draco thought he liked him like that, too, with that sparkle in his eyes.

He frowned inwardly. *No thoughts like that until Harry's off the potion. No matter how handsome he is, I'm not about to be wooed by someone as passionless and anemic as he is right now.*

"I don't keep in regular contact with my parents, but they don't know that I have contacts among their house-elves," he explained. "Whenever I really don't feel like cooking for myself—"

"Which would be fairly often," Harry stage-whispered.

"I ask one of them to come and cook for me," Draco finished, determined to ignore Harry's plebeian attempts at theatrics. "They don't have nearly as much to do as they did ten years ago, with Mother and Father not going out or giving fancy parties anymore, so they're pleased to be of service." He clapped his hands and called, "Patty!"

A quiet pop—Draco had let Patty know that he despised the loud sounds with which house-elves usually Apparated in and out—and a very proper female elf appeared in front of them. She wore a pair of spectacles, which Draco's great-grandfather had given her, and a towel modeled into a prim skirt. She folded her hands when she saw him. The effect was rather like an auntie, Draco thought, if aunties had green skin and a lot of ear-hair. "Master Draco has not been eating properly," she said. Then her nostrils widened and her ears twitched and came up like the ears of a dog hearing that magic word "walk." "Master Draco is hurt! A muscle is strained in his leg, and his poor stomach—"

"That's quite enough, Patty," Draco said firmly, sensing Harry's rising interest behind him. He didn't need to know about Draco's "arrangement" with Daphne, either. He was sure to disapprove of it, and Draco would like Harry to be proud of his partner, not embarrassed about him. "We'd like a meal."

"For two?" The notion of an extra guest for lunch distracted Patty quite thoroughly, as Draco had

intended that it should. She turned and measured Harry with her eyes, accurately estimating his height, weight, and health. "Then I recommend the chicken with lemon sauce," she said. "And the enriched pumpkin juice, which has healing properties." She studied Harry with a doubtful look. Draco wondered if she could detect the presence of that damn potion.

"Er," said Harry, bemused. Draco thought it was no wonder. Harry had probably been around inferior house-elves all his life, even counting that one he had freed from Malfoy control in Draco's second year. How Lucius had ranted about that during the summer! "All right. Thank you, Patty."

Unlike most house-elves Draco had known, Patty expected thanks as her due. She inclined her head regally and vanished again. Draco turned to offer a half-smile to Harry. "Lunch won't be long. Patty never does take a lot of time once she makes up her mind to do something."

"She's certainly different," Harry ventured.

"Yes, well." Draco shrugged and sat down in one of the chairs near the real window that permitted owls passage into his rooms, hoping Harry would follow suit without an invitation. He did, and Draco smiled a little. At least Harry was more comfortable around him than he used to be. "Mother bought her from a family who tolerated no incorrectness or slovenliness among their servants, even the house-elves, and Patty saw no reason to abandon those lessons. Mother insists on having her serve lunch every day."

Harry smiled back, but said nothing. He fell so naturally into silence, Draco thought irritably, whilst in Hogwarts it seemed he could never stop talking, even with his mouth full or on the Quidditch Pitch.

Well. No reason not to be blunt if he won't take the hint. He ought to know that I won't let something like his little stunt go.

"Why did you stand up and support me in front of your old girlfriend?" he asked.

Harry took a deep breath and dug his hands into the arms of the chair. Draco felt a little more of his confidence return. So Harry could still be prodded off-balance and made something more than the perfect wax doll he had seemed at first. That was a good first step.

"Because you needed the support," Harry said lowly. "And it *is* true that I'm taking the potion, so I didn't want you to look as if you were lying. And Ginny really could have caused some trouble once she fastened her teeth in this." He paused. "I knew she wouldn't dare face me for long."

"She's that afraid of you?"

"Of course she is." Harry's voice lost some of its emotion, and he raised an eyebrow at Draco. "You know why."

Draco shook his head impatiently. "I know what you told me. But that was, what, five or six years ago? She has no reason to be so afraid of you, still."

"You weren't there," Harry said. "You don't know what it was like for her, and you don't really know what it was like for me, either." He fixed Draco with an even stare. "You needed support. I stood up and let you have it. I'd think you'd be far more interested in discussing other things, such as whether Ginny is working for our enemies, or why Theodore Nott was there, or the information I sent you about Diggory cornering us in that restaurant."

Draco bit his tongue. He'd displayed too much eagerness in going after the subject of Harry's potion, and Harry was, now, apparently wondering why it mattered so much.

Well, it mattered *to Draco*, because he wanted to date Harry, and to do that he needed to get Harry off the potion. But the matter of Cordelia and Diggory and their efforts to disrupt the sale of the Desire potion were more actively important. Draco surrendered to necessity and nodded a little.

"And then," Harry continued, his eyes darkening and his voice deepening to what was almost a growl, "perhaps we can discuss what happened to you to leave you with a limp. And what did Patty mean when she commented on your stomach?"

Draco experienced a rush of exaltation paired with a rush of irritation at the same time. It was, of course, impossible that Harry should know about the arrangement with Daphne. He wouldn't understand. He would probably despise Draco for whoring himself out to Daphne—and to Harry, that was what it would be.

But it gratified Draco to know that Harry was feeling protective of him. He looked at the floor as if overcome and murmured, "She didn't mean anything by it."

"Bollocks, Draco. House-elves notice when something is wrong." Harry leaned forwards. "I told you about my potion and about Ginny—one of the worst things in my life. This can't be worse than that, can it?"

I really don't know, Draco thought. He didn't remember Daphne doing anything to his stomach, but she could have. "It's different," he insisted.

Harry's hand slid warmly over his. "Is it *that* different?"

Draco looked up into Harry's eyes and found himself catching his breath. Damn, Harry was closer than Draco had thought he'd bother to come whilst they weren't officially dating, and his breath was warm and actually smelled sweet. Draco felt his lips part slightly, and saw Harry's gaze flicker down to them.

Bang!

Patty had been trained to silence, but the other Malfoy house-elves had never managed to muffle their noise. Harry pulled his hand away from Draco's and whirled around, and even Draco found himself with a slightly increased heartbeat as he watched the elves bustle about setting up the table and the meal.

"Well," Harry said, and cleared his throat in an embarrassed fashion. His eyes came back to Draco, and he smiled weakly. He was careful to keep a good distance between them as he stood up, Draco noticed. "Shall we dine?" He bowed Draco absurdly towards the table, and Draco had no option but to follow.

And, of course, they talked about entirely different things whilst they ate. In between praises of the food—which of course was good, since it was Malfoy cooking—Harry told Draco that he intended to go talk to Ginny immediately after this and ask what she had been doing. He was confident she wouldn't lie to him.

He accepted Draco's word for it that they were best letting Theo run for now and see what else he might do. It would be better to have a known quantity than an unknown one reporting to Cordelia and Charlemagne.

As for acting together with Granger as a stronger political entity, Draco had to admit he approved of that plan. Harry was just hopeless and would get something wrong, especially if Diggory made the effort to corner him on his own. And Granger, who had gone back to her job in the Ministry, couldn't be with him *all* the time.

They'd wait for Friday, Draco decided and Harry accepted, when Cordelia would come by to collect the final payment on the debts she'd bought. Depending on how she reacted when Draco handed over the forty thousand Galleons, they would formulate their plans from there, and invite Granger over for a conversation either Saturday or Sunday.

When Draco mentioned paying off the debts, Harry bit his lip, clearly wanting to ask how exactly he had got the money. Draco held up his wineglass that contained the enriched pumpkin juice and smiled. Once again, Harry's eyes lingered on his lips.

Good as it would have felt to confess the truth about Daphne and his assignations with her, mystery trumped truth when it came to attraction.

Harry knocked on the door to the flat Dean and Ginny shared, waited a minute, and then knocked again. He didn't know if anyone was home, but he intended to be assured of that before he left a message. Ginny had often "not received" his messages during the few times in the last year when he'd tried to communicate with her. Harry had hoped their relationship could change when they'd both lost Ron and had a mutual grief to tie them together, but it seemed Ginny preferred to mourn her brother in the company of her family and her boyfriend.
Besides, if Ginny had taken off work in the middle of the day to come to Draco's shop, she might have come home to hide when her plan failed. Harry shifted his weight from one foot to the other and knocked again.

The door opened slowly, which disabused Harry of the notion that Dean was waiting behind it, at least. Ginny stared at him for a long moment, then averted her eyes. This close, Harry could see her trembling faintly, and also smell the strawberry-scented perfume she was wearing.

"Ginny," he said gently. "Can I come in?" He didn't say anything more than that, curious to see if she would invite him in of her own free accord.

Ginny swallowed, closed her eyes, and then fell back before him, gesturing weakly for him to take a seat. The flat was mostly furnished in early football, given Dean's passion for that Muggle sport. Harry took a seat on a bright orange couch and put his feet up on a stool that might have been brown in an earlier life. Ginny sat down across from him, her eyes closed, and then began twining her fingers together as if she would pull the cloth bunched between them apart.

Harry studied her in silence. The years hadn't lessened her attractiveness; if anything, Harry thought this woman was prettier than the one he'd dated, still flushed from her successful passing of her N.E.W.T.s. She had more lines of deep living on her face, more signs of thoughtfulness and wisdom in her eyes.

Of course, it would have been easier to see all that if she wasn't trembling like a rabbit at his presence.

Harry chose his words carefully. If he left even one in the statement that sounded like a threat, then Ginny would probably faint or lose her nerve entirely and run out of the flat. And then Harry would have another nasty confrontation with Dean or Mrs. Weasley, who didn't see why he and Ginny couldn't "just get along."

When he thought he was ready, he said, "You came to Draco's shop this morning."

Her hair rustled softly as she nodded.

Maybe blunt is best. But no accusing her of anything. Harry lowered his voice a little, to mask any possible emotion in the words. "Why?"

Ginny's nails dug into her skin, but at least she didn't leap up and scream. Harry waited. He didn't have anything urgent to get back to; he was still relearning the market for film after dropping out of it for several months to care for Hermione.

Finally, Ginny whispered, "I just—I don't like the fact that you're spending so much time with him, Harry. I've done some research on him. Did you know that he has a reputation as the best black market brewer in Britain, not just the best apothecary?" She lifted anguished eyes to his. "He's brewed potions, at least according to rumor, that make thefts easier, that make it easier for men and women to rape each other, and that kill people without a trace. I don't like you being associated with someone like that. You know how easily the public turned on you in the past. They could do it again, especially if you start getting involved in politics. You're opposed to

Charlemagne Diggory, aren't you?"

Harry blinked a little. He hadn't expected that rambling confession. On the other hand, it fit with what he had imagined Ginny's motivation to be. Ginny was the last person to work for someone like Cordelia Nott or Charlemagne Diggory. Of course, her plans to protect her friends didn't always work out.

"I'm opposed to him because he wants to get rid of Draco and the Desire potion as obstacles in his way," Harry said. "And I do think Draco is a good person. Whatever he's done in the past—"

"*Whatever* he's done in the past?" Ginny was sitting up, and there was a stern, positively Gryffindor expression on her face. Harry was glad to see it. That usually meant she was feeling stronger, more argumentative, and less likely to collapse. "You'll forgive him anything, any crime?"

"I'd have to have proof," said Harry. "And I'd have to have proof that he knowingly continued that practice. There's a difference between selling someone a knife and helping him commit a murder."

The reference to violence made Ginny flinch and then freeze, as Harry should have realized. He scolded himself, but didn't attempt to move forwards and touch her in comfort. It would have made things worse. He had to sit there and listen to her panicked, rasping breath and watch her hands becoming white-knuckled as she fought her way back under control. There was nothing else to be done, and so he shoved his hands under his knees and stared at his feet.

At least I'm on the potion so that nothing like that can ever happen again. And at least I can afford the ingredients, and I have the necessary level of skill to brew the damned thing. There are thousands of other people who aren't so lucky.

Ginny spoke in what was more or less a normal voice when five minutes had passed. "What if I could get you proof?"

Harry glanced up and studied her closely. "From what sources?"

"Friends of mine. People who bought from Malfoy until they realized what he is, and stopped." Ginny smoothed a hand down her skirt, and peered at him earnestly. "I just really don't want to see you get hurt, Harry, or have your reputation stained. You've had so much of that in your life. You don't need more."

Harry's heart warmed. Despite the fear and desolation he'd caused her, to the point that she'd needed therapy, she was still trying to be his friend.

Draco might think it sounded like nothing. Draco hadn't been there to see that shadow reaching down the wall, or feel the desire to control, to swallow, to *devour*—

Harry shook himself free of memories and said, "I'll promise to look at the proof. But I can't promise to abandon him. He's a friend, and a business partner." *And maybe more than that, if I can go slowly enough.* Their lunch today had nearly ruined that. Harry had found himself rushing into things, touching Draco and leaning into his personal space as if they were lovers already. He'd had to depend on Patty to save them from an all-too-hasty kiss.

"That's all I ask," said Ginny, and her arms rose in a timid, aborted move, as though she might like to hug him. Harry waited patiently, but instead she wrapped them around herself, and moved back as he rose.

"Thanks for having me here," Harry said, again careful to keep his hands at his sides and his words neutral and pleasant, and then left, shutting the door gently behind him. He spent some moments standing there, eyes shut, sniffing the perfume that still swirled in the air.

No, he didn't think they would ever work together as lovers now. But it still hurt to know that he'd been the one responsible for destroying the chance.

He left quietly.

"Draco." Cordelia came in alone that Friday morning, her cloak perfectly dry the moment she stepped into the shop, of course, despite the fact that it was pouring rain outside. No waterproofing charms for her, Draco thought. Her cloak was pure black unicorn hair, which meant water simply refused to touch it. She smiled at him and permitted him to take and kiss her hand. "I assume you have my forty thousand Galleons?"

She was playing with him, of course. She assumed no such thing. She just wanted to see him crumble in the moments before he had to admit that she owned him, and his shop, and all the potions ingredients, and the entire stock of the Desire potion.

Draco hesitated for long moments, as though his noble impassive façade were being worn down. Cordelia's smile grew sharper and brighter, more focused, like sunlight directed through a lens.

Then he swept a bow, and waved his wand. Out of the corner where it had been sitting, safely beyond the line of sight from the door, a trunk floated. Draco had carefully lightened it before Cordelia had arrived. Even shrunken, forty thousand Galleons were no easy thing to life, and he refused to sweat in front of a creditor.

His sole creditor, now. Daphne had taken her place, but Daphne wanted other things than money.

Cordelia stared as Draco settled the trunk in front of her. Her nostrils had flared, and her lips had turned very white. But she still managed to look up and smile at him. "Do you really think I'll believe this is all of it, Draco darling?" she whispered. "Of course not. You're keeping something back, aren't you?"

Draco faced her unblinking. "Cast any spell you like," he said. "I'm certain that you know the

charms adapted from the diagnostic spells Healers use, which reveal the number of wounds on a human body?" His own ankle throbbed viciously, but he was well-trained enough to conceal it. All he really remembered was that Daphne had had sex with him last night in a contortionist's posture. "You'll be able to count the number of Galleons in that trunk if you cast one now."

Cordelia did so, never taking her eyes from him. She still looked less deadly than Daphne had last night when she'd welcomed Draco to her home, so Draco could stand there genuinely unimpressed and unmoved.

Small red numbers appeared above the trunk and began changing, leaping at first by hundreds, and then by thousands, of Galleons. It finally shimmered *40,000* exactly, and Cordelia caught her breath in a long hiss.

"Do you see?" Draco spread his hands. "I keep my promises. You're free to go, and we're done with each other. Of course, you may come back if you ever want to buy some Desire potion from me." It took all he had to say those last few words without a cackle of glee.

Slowly, Cordelia's eyes rose to meet his, and there was hatred there. Draco managed to face her and arch an eyebrow, but it wasn't easy.

"This was never about the debts you owed me," Cordelia whispered. "You are no more than a pest. A nuisance. But a nuisance who will not go away will find himself poisoned."

And she Levitated the trunk into the air, then left with it.

Draco smiled. Very well. Threats were her reaction. He had a pretext to invite Harry and Granger around after all.

And now, I just need to bore Daphne into letting me go, and I'll be free to do more important things—like improve the Desire potion. And convince Harry that having me is worth getting his potion out of his system.

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Chapter: 6

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Six—Too Dignified To Be Called An Argument

"He has house-elves, doesn't he?"

Harry sighed and fought the temptation to bury his head in his hands. He should have known better than to describe the meal he'd had at Draco's shop to Hermione, even if it *was* in an effort to reassure her that Draco could be polite when he wanted to. Hermione had apparently not made the connection Harry wanted her to make—that excellent brewing skills implied good cooking skills, too—and now stood staring at Harry with an appalled expression.

Harry sighed. "Listen, Hermione, we're going in the morning, so he might not even *serve* a meal—"

"He has house-elves, doesn't he?" Hermione repeated insistently.

"He's still in contact with the elves who work for his parents, so, yes, you could say he has them," Harry said. "But look, Hermione, he treated them well when I was there, at least as well as I treated Kreacher, and you know you got used to Kreacher—"

"You were willing to moderate your treatment of him, even free him if necessary." Hermione folded her arms. "I don't believe that Malfoy would willingly do the same thing."

Time to prove that I was listening to her when she gave me those lectures on political skills. Harry stared Hermione straight in the eye, hoping that would help with his sincerity. "You told me once that politics depended on compromise," he said, "and the only thing you could *truly* hope for was to partially serve your goals without absolutely betraying your principles."

Hermione hesitated, "Yes," she said, finally, reluctantly.

"I'm not asking you to eat a meal cooked by house-elves," Harry pointed out. "You won't betray your principles. Just come along and have a conversation with Draco about the Desire potion, *without* bringing up the house-elf issue every five minutes."

"And if he brings it up?" Hermione was bristling a little, and Harry suspected she was envisioning Draco summoning one of his elves and then smiling slyly at her, daring her to object.

"*Then* you can argue, yes," Harry said. "But you're going to have plenty to argue about with him, anyway. We'll be talking about means to protect and promote the Desire potion, after all."

Hermione smiled at once. "There are certain concessions I'm going to demand in return for being part of this," she murmured, and then turned and approached Harry's Floo; Draco had agreed to open his hearth to Harry and Hermione today, so that neither Nott nor Diggory would see them coming through the streets to his shop on a day it was supposedly closed.

A sharp tap sounded on the window of his flat just as Hermione threw the powder into the flames. Harry trotted over to retrieve the owl, calling to Hermione that he'd follow her. Hermione had already said, "Draco Malfoy's shop!" and only gave him a distracted nod as she stepped into the green fire and was whirled away.

Harry shook his head as he opened the window. Hermione had spent so much time immersed in the political life of the Ministry lately that it had made her hungrier for argument. He only hoped she didn't manage to pick one with Draco in the moments before he arrived.

He blinked when he recognized the light, tawny bird sitting gracefully on his wrist. This was Ginny's owl, Aphrodite. His head light and his breath short, he opened the letter that Aphrodite offered him and then gave her a few pieces of bacon left over from breakfast, which she devoured.

The envelope was thick, and when Harry opened it, a number of sheaves of parchment tumbled out, all in different handwriting. Ginny's letter was on top, though, and she had formed the letters slowly and carefully, as though Harry was more likely to believe the accusations against Draco if she printed them neatly.

Here are the dispatches from my friends that I promised you, Harry. Go through them when you have some time to yourself and a clear head. I know you won't want to believe them at first, but there's just too much weight here to deny.

Oh, and one more thing: Dean thinks we ought to get together for dinner sometime soon, and I agree. Seeing you the other day made me realize… it's been six years, and I still haven't managed to move on, and I don't think you have, either. Maybe if we can talk this out instead of running away from each other, we'll have a better chance of overcoming the fear. And the guilt, I think, on your part?

Ginny.

Harry read that second paragraph twice, lingering over it. Only the thought that Hermione and Draco might well have proceeded to drawn knives by now kept him from reading it a third time. The lightness in his head had changed to a sharp feeling of anticipation.

If there was a chance that he *could* be free of the guilt that overcame him every time he saw Ginny…if there was a chance that he could manage to free her from fear as well…

The potion he took was a preventative, a protection against him ever harming someone again. It couldn't change his feelings about the Incident itself. Only conversation with Ginny could do that.

And maybe it had been too long since they spoke to one another frankly and freely. Dinner with Dean was a good idea, really. He could be there to act as a buffer between Harry and Ginny, and reassure Ginny that she wasn't alone.

Harry tossed the rest of the parchments on his table, and wrote a quick reply to Ginny, accepting the invitation, which he sent off with Aphrodite. Then he jumped for the Floo. Knowing Draco, he was already fuming over the time it had taken Harry to hurry to his side.

He thought he heard a second tap as he yelled out, "Draco Malfoy's shop!" but he didn't have time to glance over his shoulder and see what it was.

"The political sway of pure-bloods in the Ministry has nothing to do with a general belief in blood superiority, Granger." Draco hated the rasp of irritation that had entered his voice, but Granger had to be made to *see.* "Even the ones who still have some vestiges of that belief—and those are small vestiges, indeed—thought the Dark Lord was mad. Our power now is based on *knowledge*, not blood."
"If it's knowledge, it's only knowledge that anyone could acquire." Granger had planted her hands on her hips and was glaring at him, for what reason Draco couldn't *possibly* know. "Knowledge of wizarding customs and society, I suppose you were going to say?"

"I would rather be governed by the wise than the ignorant," Draco drawled, and looked impatiently towards the fireplace. When was Harry going to appear? He wasn't very politically astute, no, but he could deflect the worst of Granger's common, vulgar ideas.

"Then *teach* Muggleborns what they're supposed to know," Granger snapped. "Did you know there are still obscure laws in force declaring that you can't take certain books out of the libraries unless your parents were wizards four generations back? And some of the files in the Ministry archives are like that, too. How in the world are Muggleborns to achieve legal parity with pure-bloods unless laws like that are repealed?"

Draco sighed patiently. He would make one more attempt to do as Granger demanded and educate her, but if she didn't understand the simple words he'd used so far, he doubted she would understand this. "It's not book knowledge. I know you don't want to hear that," he added, before she could open her mouth. "You could study for the rest of your life and still not know everything about the wizarding world that I do. It's the way you're raised, the unconscious things you absorb when you're a child. You can never know exactly what I do or act exactly like I do—"

"Thank God," said Granger with obvious distaste.

Draco gritted his teeth, but continued pressing politely forwards, though he couldn't keep himself from throwing another longing look at the fireplace. "You can't fit into the wizarding world because your *attitudes* are different. So is the way you think about things. You won't notice the things or make the little connections that are vital to functioning as a full member of society. I'm certain you know things about the Muggle world I never will, and I would be just as out of place if I visited it," he added generously. "But the fact remains that you're asking for the impossible, and frankly, if Diggory promised to support that kind of thing, it's one more reason to be wary of him. It's the sort of 'struggle' that would make him *look* good to the voters without ever coming out in something so disastrous as results."

"If the system is broken," said Granger, with a quiet voice but a maniacal gleam in her eye, "then perhaps it's time to change the system."

Harry tumbled out of the fireplace just then with a whoosh and a fall of soot, which spared Draco

from having to answer. He turned away from Granger with a dignified shake of his head and went to assist Harry, who was tripping over his own robes. Taking Harry's elbow and helping him to his feet wasn't *enough*, but it was the kind of small touch Draco would have to be content with until he could gently suggest that Harry get off the potion.

And until I can get rid of Daphne. Draco frowned slightly. He had gone to her last night expecting that it would be easy to bore her—he'd just do everything cheerfully and complacently, and she would drop him because she liked the challenge of knowing he *hated* what they were doing—but she had laughed. She hadn't Obliviated the memory of the conversation wherein she explained that she found his new attitude refreshing, and that she could tolerate a Draco whinging in pleasure as easily as one whinging from pain. Then his knowledge of the evening dimmed into fog, and Draco really wasn't sure what they'd done next. Luckily, or unluckily depending on one's point-of-view, the only reminder of it he'd found when he scanned himself that morning was a love bite on his arse.

"Thanks," Harry said, and stepped lightly back, apparently as cautious as Draco was about letting their bodies touch for too long. "Now can we…"

He looked across at Granger, sighed, and glanced from one to the other of them. "Have you been arguing *already*?"

Harry felt exasperation welling up in him. Granted, he didn't know how long he'd stood and looked at Ginny's letter, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes. And still Draco had managed to make Hermione puff up like Crookshanks.
"We weren't having an argument," Draco said, and put his nose in the air with a haughtiness that Harry told himself he should *not* find adorable. "It was too dignified to be called an argument."

"Malfoy evidently thinks it's perfectly fine to let pure-bloods rule in the Ministry, and he's told me Muggleborns *can't* learn everything that people raised in the wizarding world know, so there's no point in trying to change things," Hermione hissed.

Harry stepped gently between them. He might not be any good at politics, but he was better at handling his friends. Draco didn't deserve the protection, perhaps, but Harry would rather focus on the issue that had brought them here. "Draco isn't the enemy," he reminded Hermione. "Diggory would like to see him stopped as surely as he'd like to see us supporting him. The Desire potion is a nuisance to his campaign."

"It's rather more than that," Hermione snapped. Harry nodded encouragingly. At least she was letting herself be led away from the prior line of argument and towards a better one. "It's drawing public attention away from coverage of the speeches and parties and other means to get elected the candidates for Minister are using. I'd say that means Diggory wants the potion gone so he can actually get more people to become aware of what he's saying. I've heard more people in the Ministry talking about the Desire potion than the election in the past few days."

"That's exactly what we want to happen," Draco said, looking smug. "The more people talk

about the potion, the more will become convinced they have to try it, and the sooner we'll get past that little bit of awkward publicity the She-Weasel brought us."

Harry rolled his eyes and turned so Draco could see him doing it. Draco shut his mouth and glared sullenly. "Don't call her that," said Harry mildly, satisfied the point had been taken.

Sure enough, Hermione, pleased by his defense of Ginny, wasted time with only a short glare before she moved on. "And you said that Cordelia Nott openly threatened you when you repaid her Galleons?"

Draco nodded and leaned back against the wall next to his fireplace, folding his arms. He was near one of the windows—well, one of the false windows, Harry thought—and a shaft of sunlight drifted in, making his hair blaze. Harry tried to tell himself he wasn't staring, realized he totally was, and blinked and glanced away just as Draco said, "Yes. I think they counted on getting rid of us fairly quickly, and probably on enlisting your help in the campaign for Muggleborn rights, too, Granger. Cordelia called me a pest, and she seemed personally enraged that she would have to expend more energy on me than I'm worth. The problem is that I'm not sure what their next move is."

"They'll strike through our vulnerabilities, of course," said Hermione, as if she had already figured it all out. And of course she had, Harry thought. She was quick like that. "Which, in this case, probably means at the person in this room with the least experience of politics." She glanced expectantly at Harry.

Harry frowned. "I think I'm cautious enough by now to avoid any approaches from Nott and Diggory, Hermione."

"But they may approach you disguised," said Hermione gently. "And you've never been that great at seeing through disguises, Harry. You go with your instincts and your gut, and that works in desperate, sudden situations, but this will be the result of long-range plans. Now. Has anyone spoken to you in the past few days in an odd manner, or acted strangely? In any way? Even the most innocent interaction?"

Harry hesitated, and swallowed. He knew one thing that qualified right away, of course. But revealing it would mean that he was betraying Ginny's confidence.

Besides, he hadn't had a chance to look at the information Ginny had sent him. It *might* be from people duped by Diggory and Nott, or from Diggory and Nott themselves, acting behind a front. But it also might not be.

And I'll probably ruin my chance at reconciliation with Ginny if I betray her confidence.

It was one of those times he really had no idea what to do, and wished he could ask someone about it. Of course, the perfect person would have been Ron—and Harry caught his breath for a moment, then shook his head—but with him gone, there was only Hermione. And asking

Hermione about it with Draco in the room would rather defeat the purpose.

Unfortunately, he'd hesitated too long. Hermione narrowed her eyes and leaned forwards. "Something's happened already, Harry, hasn't it? *Tell me.*"

Draco straightened up and listened intently. Harry gnawed his lip for a moment, then went with his gut in the way Hermione had described him doing and decided that half the truth would have to do.

Draco wanted to roll his eyes. It was *obvious* when Harry was lying. He couldn't look at anyone else straight on to save his life, and he bit his lip as if it were a sweet. But he was still charging ahead as if his only audience was blind and gullible.
"Uh, well, someone sent me information that purports to be about Draco," Harry admitted. "His past as a black-market brewer." He sneaked a quick, guilty look at Draco, who wanted to snort aloud. *As if* that *weren't obvious!* "I think it could be people acting for Diggory and Nott. Whether it's them or people honestly agitated by Desire and the fact that Draco's selling it, I don't know."

Draco glanced to the side, and met Granger's gaze. They stared at each other for a moment, in a perfect exchange of glances. Of *course* Harry was lying; he most likely knew exactly who had sent him the information. But confronting him now would result in defensive bluster, and force him to choose that person's side over theirs. Better to wait and trap him later when he wouldn't feel so much on the spot.

It was really too bad that he and Granger had so many philosophical differences, Draco thought, as she turned back to face Harry. They would have made a formidable team if they could agree on anything beyond the necessity to confront their political enemies and not provoke Harry.

"All right," Granger said soothingly. "Can you bring that information to us, Harry, so we can evaluate it?"

"It's in my flat." At least Harry looked vaguely ashamed of himself. He stood and headed towards the Floo with alacrity, though. "You want me to bring it now?"

"I'd appreciate that, yes," Granger said dryly.

Coming from one of Draco's friends, such a tone would have been cause for a fight. Harry appeared to be used to it. He nodded, cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames, and called out, "Harry Potter's flat!"

When he was gone, Draco turned to face Granger. "I suspect I know exactly who sent him that information."

Granger sighed. She'd taken a seat, finally, on the least comfortable chair in the room, as though enjoying herself in Draco's private quarters was against her principles. "Ginny," she said. "She's

the only one he would want to protect so fiercely."

"So what do we do about it?" Draco folded his arms.

"Let him hide whatever would reveal she sent it, and pretend not to care," Granger said. "Meanwhile, I'll get in touch with Ginny. She's not frightened of *me*, and she knows that I'm opposed to Desire in practice. I can coax out of her whether Nott and Diggory are behind this—if she knows about them, of course."

Draco made a noise of frustration. Granger raised her eyebrows. "You know how he feels about her," she said. "You have a better solution?"

"I just don't like him tormenting himself with guilt over an incident that was relatively minor," Draco muttered. He knew well enough not to bring up his feelings for the Weasley family in general around someone who had almost married into it.

Granger hissed like a cat. "I saw Ginny's face shortly after that incident," she said. "It wasn't minor, whatever else it was. She looked like someone had tried to eat her, and partially succeeded." Then she put up a hand and shook her head. "But let's *try* to get along, all right, Malfoy? I think we can agree that Harry is the one Nott and Diggory will try to strike at first. But they surely won't leave us alone. What *else* will they try?"

"About Cordelia, I'm not exactly sure," Draco said, drawn back into the discussion despite himself, and despite his immediate instinct to contend that forgetting this incident as soon as possible would be the best thing for Harry. "Her tactics in the past are well-known, but those were with jilted lovers. I'm not that to her; I was wise enough not to become so." He smirked. "But I should say that the next step Diggory will make relates to you. He wants to control the Ministry. You're *in* the Ministry. If he takes over, he won't want you there, and he likes to think in the long term. He's going to try to undermine you at your job if he can, Granger."

Granger drew her breath to dispute, but then let it collapse into silence, and shook her head. "You may be right."

"Of course I'm right." Draco tossed his head. "I always am."

"What's wrong with that statement would take too long to explain, Malfoy." Granger stared broodingly at the far wall for a moment. "I wonder if he'll approach through Abigail?" she murmured, and explained when Draco lifted one eyebrow, "A supervisor who doesn't like me. She's never directly taken her ire out on me, but she has muttered comments to the effect that I shouldn't be there."

Draco nodded. "I'd keep an eye on her if I were you, Granger. And set up what defenses you can."

Granger nodded back, and then her eyes narrowed and chilled. "You *do* realize that you could

take away one of Diggory's main weapons by just putting a few restrictions on Desire? Willingly submitting yourself to the oversight of an outside committee, whilst demanding the right to sit in on the decisions? That would also defuse some of the negative publicity, and let you make the rules by which you were supervised."

She wouldn't have made a bad Slytherin, if only she didn't rely so much on what's right instead of what's real, Draco thought, and then shook his head hard, both to deny her suggestion and because no thought had ever scared him so badly. "I don't want those restrictions," he said. "The newspapers would find some way to spin it. Desire has side-effects we never noticed before, and now we're being called to account for them. Someone somewhere has blackmail on us, and forced this through, and we were helpless to stop it. Desire really *is* dangerous, and anyone who took it is destined to die in two weeks. The result wouldn't be as positive as you hope for no matter what happens."

"It would be for the best in the long run, though," Granger said stubbornly. "And that's what we need to think in terms of, since Diggory's so fond of it. You would prove that you *can* listen to the will of the public—"

"The *whim* of the public—"

"And police yourselves. Do it well enough, and there would be no need for anything but nominal outside interference."

"It might be the best solution in the long term," Draco said. "But I don't know anyone in the Ministry I trust enough to be in charge of a committee like that—what's wrong?" Granger was on her feet, wand drawn.

"Harry's been gone an awfully long time," Granger said lowly.

"How do you know something's wrong?"

She gave him a superior look, and Draco felt a wave of irritation. He hated that she had known Harry longer and better, and he doubly hated it when she flaunted that in his face. She didn't bother speaking, but stalked towards the Floo.

Harry tumbled out of it a moment later. Draco found himself anxiously scanning the other man for injuries. There was no blood, although Harry's face was pale.

"What is it?" Granger asked.

Harry held up a letter. "There was a second owl waiting when I went back," he said, voice dead. "From Minister Shacklebolt himself. He needs to talk to Draco and me right away. Apparently there's been a death from Desire."

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Chapter: 7

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seven—Regrettably

"Who died?" Draco asked.

Harry checked a sigh. He had already told Draco several times that Shacklebolt's letter said nothing about who died, and only summoned them to the Ministry. And now they sat on a bench in the Auror Office, with suspicious people passing them and staring at them every few seconds, and this wasn't the best place to talk.

But did that stop Draco? *No*. For the first time since he'd started having an inappropriate physical attraction to Draco, Harry reflected on how very annoying he could be.

Well, if we're utterly incompatible and can't offer each other anything, better to know now, I suppose.

"I don't know," he said, and leaned back to stretch his arms over his head. One of the Aurors passing him immediately clutched at his wand and gave him a look full of something akin to panic. Harry stopped mid-stretch and stared back until the Auror seemed to realize how foolish it would be for Harry to try something here and walked away. Harry dropped his hands to his sides and added, as Draco's mouth opened again, "And I don't know how they determined the death came from the Desire potion, either. Shacklebolt didn't say anything about that in his letter."

"All right, then," Draco said. He was speaking through gritted teeth from the sound of it. Harry didn't look at him, but just continued staring at the Minister's silent, shut door. *What will the Weasleys say when they hear of this, I wonder? Ginny will probably say that of course I shouldn't be associating with Draco any more. But he wasn't the only one who brewed this potion, and he needs my support no matter how much of an idiot he is.* "Then why didn't they send someone to arrest us?"

"Maybe Shacklebolt wanted to see if we would show up on our own." Harry leaned against the wall and tried in vain to get comfortable on the bench, which was too thinly padded to allow it. "Or maybe he decided that arresting Harry Potter would bring on media attention he didn't need right now."

"Or us." Draco made a disgusted noise, as if he were on the verge of spitting. "Have you considered what this attention could do to the sales of the Desire potion? And what it will do to my business? Just as I got out of debt, too."

Harry glanced at him finally, and felt his heart clench. Draco was putting up a good front, but Harry could see the pallor behind his sneer and the shaking hands. He reached out and laid his hand gently on the other man's knee. "Let me do most of the talking," he said softly. "If anything can defuse this and get us some consideration, it's the power of my name."

Draco looked at him without speaking. Harry assumed he had an opinion about this plan, but he didn't get to hear it, because just then the door of the Minister's office opened and Shacklebolt said, "Harry? Malfoy? Come in."

Draco had to conceal his contempt as they stepped into the Minister's office. One would think that Shacklebolt could be properly decadent, or, failing that, that he would put up a good façade in order to impress visitors with the power of his position. But the walls were simply lined with cases of files, as if Shacklebolt's office were an extension of the Ministry archives, and the shelves held ledgers and photographs of criminals and large loose stacks of parchment, without so much as an Order of Merlin. Draco shook his head and turned to the Minister with a yawn just trembling on his lips.
Shacklebolt's glare, though, was purely impressive. Draco took his seat quietly, and listened as Harry said in a soothing voice, "Can you tell us what happened with the death, Minister? Who died, and how do they know it was from Desire?"

The Minister surveyed them in silence for long moments. Draco wondered if he was trying to scare them.

Well, it's working.

"The name is one you ought to know," said Shacklebolt at last, and his tone was hollow. "And we're not releasing it yet, because of the panic it would cause among those who have already taken Desire. If they thought it was an instrument of the Chosen One's revenge…well, quite a lot of people have angered you at some point in the past, Harry."

Harry blanched. Draco winced. That would look guilty. Didn't Harry know anything about controlling his expressions at *all*?

But, well, no, he probably didn't. Not whilst he was on the potion, anyway. Draco wished he knew a spell that would take the potion directly out of Harry's veins and stomach and disperse it in a cloud against the wall. Then he might get Harry bristling defensively, the way he was *supposed* to do when he was accused of something.

"I still don't know who died, Minister," Harry said.

Shacklebolt reached down and opened a drawer in his desk. Draco tensed, but he only drew out a small, clear vial and balanced it in the center of his palm. Of course, recognizing that didn't make Draco calmer. His breathing sped up, and he clutched his sweaty palms on his knees to keep from wiping them frantically everywhere.

"Will you consent to be under Veritaserum for this conversation, Harry?" Shacklebolt asked.

And Harry, like the fool he was, didn't even glance at Draco to see if it was all right. "Of course," he said, and rose to open his mouth. "I have nothing to hide," he added, when Shacklebolt didn't move, perhaps stunned by the speed of his response.

The Minister shook his head, but took out the cork of the vial and dabbed three drops on Harry's tongue. Harry swallowed, then nodded and sat back. Draco found it hard to watch his face. He had seen Harry under Veritaserum before, and it was completely eerie how little his expression changed.

Shacklebolt added a few test questions, apparently unable to believe the potion was working, and then added, "Were you at all involved in the death of Dolores Umbridge from the Desire potion, Harry?"

Umbridge. Draco squashed the impulse to ask why in the world they weren't being called in and thanked for doing the wizarding world a *favor.* He doubted Shacklebolt would look kindly on those words just now.

"I was not," Harry said, calmly and clearly.

Shacklebolt relaxed, but said, "And you are not trying to use the Desire potion for personal revenge on your enemies?"

"I am not."

How in the world could anyone think Harry Potter *is planning to take revenge?* Draco thought in disgust, and then remembered the way Harry had acted during his fifth year, when Umbridge had taught at Hogwarts.

And Draco had been part of the Inquisitorial Squad.

He pushed the memory sharply away and concentrated on Shacklebolt's conversation with Harry. It would be important that he know it later, in case someone questioned him over it or they had to get their stories straight.

"Did you know that the Desire potion had been sold to her?"

"No, I didn't."

"Do you know how she could have died?"

"No, I don't."

Shacklebolt leaned back with a grunt and folded his hands in front of him. Draco eyed him sideways, but didn't know him well enough to say what the little sounds or even the expression on his face meant. *Is his friendship with Harry really strong enough to let something like this go? Or at least modify the effect?*

"As a matter of fact, she died from trying to break into Gringotts," Shacklebolt admitted. "The aspect of her Desire appeared to remove was a small amount of sanity and common sense where magical creatures were concerned. She decided that goblins should not have so much power in wizarding society and tried to steal objects from someone else's vault to prove their security ineffective. Said security killed her."

"And you're blaming *us*?" Draco asked, making sure to keep his voice restrained to a level of polite shock and his eyebrows elevated. "I hardly think you can blame us for that. It would be the same as blaming a Firewhiskey brewer for her entering Gringotts on liquid courage."

"Except, Mr. Malfoy," said Shacklebolt, facing him with a tight mouth, "the legal precedents in the case of Firewhiskey are worked out, and every bottle bears a warning. How did you think—" He closed his eyes and shook his head. "Why in the world did you think you would get away without having restrictions on the sale of the potion?"

"Because the restrictions proposed didn't come from the Ministry," Harry said, apparently under the impression that the question was addressed to him. "They came from Charlemagne Diggory and his ally Cordelia Nott. They want Desire out of the way and restricted so that it can't interfere with Diggory's campaign for Minster. Not the best of reasons to be careful with the potion."

Draco shut his eyes as he saw the comprehension sweep over Shacklebolt's face. *Potter, you idiot. This is why you don't just take Veritaserum when someone hands it to you.*

"I see," Shacklebolt muttered. "So this *does* have the edge of a political fight." Then he raised his voice. "But you still should have come to the Ministry. Any potentially dangerous new potion is required to undergo registration. Because of your mistake, the restrictions on Desire will be much tougher than they would be otherwise."

"Will you make the potion illegal?" Draco asked, because he saw no reason not to be blunt if the Minister was being so.

"That may be the recommendation of the committee involved." Shacklebolt stared at him and shook his head. "Your father was more subtle than this when he played political games, Malfoy. You had no *reason* not to have contacted me the moment you figured out how this potion works."

Draco bit back the angry words about how he hadn't *wanted* to be involved in politics, and how he knew perfectly well that common variations of love philters created every day weren't registered with the Ministry. He leaned back in his chair instead, and gave a resigned nod.

He would just have to ensure that there were ways to get past this, and continue to sell Desire, and not be interdicted by other brewers.

Harry felt the Veritaserum wear off. He could suddenly control his tongue and lie, if he wanted, and the deep calmness that had subdued all his emotions retreated. He sighed. He had rather liked that calmness.
He and Draco were waiting for a lift. Shacklebolt had let them go with a stern warning not to antagonize any reporters, not to sell any more Desire, and to come back to the Ministry in two days, so they could be present when the newly formed committee to evaluate Desire wanted to ask questions. By the look of things, Draco, his head down, was already plotting furious revenge.

Harry leaned towards him and whispered, "Don't do it."

Draco's head came up, and he arched an eyebrow. "What?"

His innocent look had long since ceased to fool Harry. "Whatever you're about to do," Harry said. "We *can't* sell Desire during the next few days, no matter how much you want to. If we don't seem to be cooperating with the Ministry—"

"Relax, Potter," said Draco, and the distance his last name put between them made Harry step away, uncomfortable. "I'm simply thinking about the best way to speak to this committee and convince them that Desire can't be restricted because of what it *might* do, any more than they can stop the selling of sedatives because someone *might* take too many and go into a coma."

"Really." Harry stared at him. Not that this was a hardship, really, considering how lively and intriguing he found Draco's face. He just didn't trust the calmness glittering in those gray eyes right now.

"Really." Draco nodded firmly and then turned around to punch one of the lift buttons, as if that would summon it faster.

"And if the committee does declare it illegal?" Harry asked, absently flicking his wand to check for eavesdropping spells within a few feet of them. No one was *obviously* listening, but still, he would have preferred to wait to discuss this until they were back in the safety of Draco's shop.

"I'll obey them, of course," Draco said, giving him a strange look.

Harry concealed a sigh. He knew that look, too. Draco was a black-market brewer. Let the Ministry try set the cage of laws around him, and he'd dodge between the bars. He'd been doing it for years, though Harry doubted he had sold any potion quite so dangerous.

And what was Harry going to do if he *did* turn to the black market?

He couldn't conceive of abandoning Draco now, he thought, as the lift arrived and they climbed into it. On the other hand, he couldn't conceive of dashing heedlessly into illegal activity, activity

that might *hurt* people.

He would have to think more carefully about things. He would have to read through the evidence that Ginny had sent him—in Draco's presence—and listen to Hermione and his own conscience as well as the impulses that urged him to stay with Draco always, to deepen their friendship and—

Harry felt himself blush. He stared at his hands and said nothing on the ride down in the lift, or the Apparition back to Draco's shop. But when he went to open the door, Draco put a hand on his wrist. Harry looked up, and met a pair of sharp, glinting eyes that seemed to have fear behind them, though why that would be the case, Harry didn't know.

"I just—I don't want you to come in right now," Draco said carefully. "I know that you left those documents here, but do you trust me to look through them first and make my own judgments on them? I promise I won't steal anything, or burn anything, or change anything."

Harry peered at him, his worry over his own course of action giving way to concern. Draco's eyes had taken on a feverish cast, and every now and then he craned his neck back to stare at the shop as if he could change the interior with his gaze.

"If you really want me to leave you alone right now," Harry said slowly, "I can do that."

"Yes, yes, good, that's exactly what I want." Draco gave him a frantic little push between the shoulder blades. "Go away and think, right? And remember that we have to be in front of that committee in two days. I'll owl you tomorrow, and we can think up strategies. It will be good to have a day to sleep on it."

He was babbling by now, and Harry couldn't help catching his hand, though he knew Draco was desperate for him to leave. "Draco," he whispered, leaning in. "You're all right, aren't you?" He was remembering Draco's limp, the comment Patty had made about Draco's stomach, and the mysterious creditor Draco had apparently managed to convince to pay off forty thousand Galleons worth of debt. "You're not in trouble?"

Draco gave him a despairing look, but then he shook his head and stood up. "Sometimes, Harry," he said loftily, "you just need to learn when you aren't wanted."

Harry winced, but kept hold of his wrist and kept looking at him. If Draco was in trouble, it didn't matter how personally insulting he was; Harry still wanted to help him.

And perhaps Draco sensed that, because after a moment he gave a strained smile and glanced at his shop door again. "Harry," he murmured. "I'm sorry, but I really do have to go. I'll owl you."

"Fine," Harry said, and convinced his fingers to release Draco's wrist. It was a hard effort, one that made his hand cramp, and then he had to fight the impulse to snatch Draco into his arms. He walked away slowly, glancing over his shoulder, but Draco opened the door of his shop and

stood inside, waving enthusiastically until Harry Apparated.

And so then he had a new dilemma. *How much independence is it actually appropriate to give him? What if he's in trouble, hurting and needing help, but too proud to say anything about it?*

One thing was for certain. His life had got quite a bit more complicated since he had crossed paths with Draco Malfoy.

Draco made sure the CLOSED sign was hung prominently on the shop door, and then turned to face Daphne. She was sitting on a chair near a barrel of hens' teeth, idly running her fingers through them. She rose when she saw him, though, smiling a little.
"How did you know I was here?" she asked, in the same deep voice she'd used for the conversation when Draco tried to bore her.

"I could see the sunlight glinting on your hair," Draco said, leaning against the door and trying frantically to get control of himself. His heart was beating like a hummingbird's. "And since I doubted there was a pile of new-minted Galleons waiting on the floor of my front room, I thought it must be you. Nothing else shines like that."

"Why, Draco, how very sweet." Daphne stepped forwards and rested a hand on his brow, still smiling. "But you didn't want to introduce me to your friend? I haven't seen the famous Harry Potter since he defeated the Dark Lord."

"No, I didn't want to introduce you to him," Draco said, flinching. The fingers crawled over his skin like spider legs. He had no idea what the glittering dust that covered her fingernails might be or what effects it might have, and he had to subdue visions of waking up writhing in pain, quite alone, tonight. "You knew him in school. That's really all the acquaintance with him you need to claim, don't you think?"

Daphne chuckled in her throat. "I knew him as well as any Slytherin knows a Gryffindor," she said. "Which means, not very. But you certainly seem to be getting close to him, Draco." She reached out and laid her wand against his stomach. "If I were a jealous woman, that might be a problem."

"It's not," Draco said, and then pain blossomed in the center of his stomach and sent him to his knees. Moaning, he clasped his arms around his gut.

"Oh, yes," said Daphne, and from the sound of it, she was tapping her wand against her teeth. "I forgot to tell you about the small modifications I made to your body during one of our play sessions, didn't I? Well, you'll find out about them fast enough when you try to eat something that has milk in it. Or when I do this." She moved the wand again, and the pain became so agonizing Draco froze, his muscles tensed into one long curve of anguish.

Daphne stooped down in front of him. Her green eyes were all he could see in the light through the window, glittering and pitiless.

"Not," she whispered, voice breathless with excitement, "that you'll be allowed to remember the latter." And she placed her mouth on his.

"Well, the answer's obvious to me, Harry." Hermione was pacing the living room of her flat, her hands clasped behind her back. It made her look so much like McGonagall that Harry had to check himself before he made an unfortunate comparison aloud. "If Malfoy does something illegal, then of course you can't be involved."
"I've supported him so long," Harry muttered. "And I can't abandon him now." He was sitting on Hermione's couch, listening to her half the time and brooding all the time.

What *had* been wrong with Draco in those last moments before he left him at the shop? The thought of Draco suffering, and Harry not knowing, not being able to do anything about it, made him want to leap up and run back to the apothecary. But Draco would probably push him away. There had to be some reason that he didn't want Harry to know the truth, and undoubtedly it was a good reason.

Maybe. But questioning Draco would say he didn't trust him.

"Harry, are you *listening* to me?"

He started and looked up, the lie dying on his tongue when he saw how distressed Hermione was. *This is hard on her, too,* he thought, and rose to put his arms around her. "No, I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just—I'm so worried about what this means. What kind of stories are going to come out now? How can I get Draco out of this mess that I've got him into?"

Hermione shoved at him, and frowned severely as Harry jumped away. "I think he's cooperated quite as much as you have at putting himself into this mess," she snapped. "And the simple thing would be to stop brewing Desire with him until he agrees that he won't do anything illegal to promote it."

Harry blinked. The solution was indeed simple, so much so that he hadn't thought of it at all. "But—but that would mean his business stands a good chance of going under, Hermione. No one will come and buy ordinary potions there, even if he stops selling Desire."

"Then he can fall back on his parents and let them support him." Hermione folded her arms. "Forgive me for not having a great deal of sympathy for someone so privileged."

"That would kill him, I think," said Harry, and jammed his hands into his robe pockets whilst Hermione stared at him incredulously. "His parents don't support his shop. He told me that. They don't think Malfoys should work."

Hermione made an exasperated noise. "What would you rather see sacrificed, his pride or his life? And the latter is what will be in danger if he tries to sell Desire illegally. Do you think Nott and Diggory will stop at just killing *other* people?"

Harry swung around to face her. "But Shacklebolt told us how Umbridge died," he said. "There's no way Nott and Diggory could have set that up."

"Even if they put someone near her to observe what effect Desire had on her, and then to influence her in the right direction?" Hermione shook her head. "Really, I'm surprised Malfoy didn't think of this. Or maybe he did, and just didn't consider it important, since Diggory and Nott are already opposed to you. But *really*, Harry." She lowered her voice. "I don't want to see you get hurt, and you don't want to see Malfoy get hurt. For both reasons, you should refrain from letting him sell Desire."

Harry nodded slowly. He dragged in one breath, and then another. "There has to be another way," he whispered. "Draco's good at planning. I'm sure that he can operate within the bounds of the law and still sell the potion."

"It all depends on what the committee says," Hermione said firmly. "And I think it helps that no one in the Ministry really liked Umbridge, or will mourn her loss, and that the cause of her death was so indirect. Malfoy's business can still survive, Harry, but only if you do everything *right.* And making plans to rebel against the Ministry's decrees immediately isn't a good move."

Harry nodded, and forced out a weak smile. "Now I just need to convince Draco," he said. "I don't think he'll like this."

Hermione wore an expression that said where Draco could take his dislike and shove it, but a tap on the window distracted Harry. Aphrodite was hovering there, and sure enough, when he took her on his arm and unrolled the letter bound to her leg, it said that Ginny and Dean had chosen the Garden of the Hesperides for dinner in a few days, and could he come there?

"That's Ginny's owl," Hermione said, her voice soft with amazement.

"Hmmm," Harry muttered, looking around for owl treats and something to write with. "We're having dinner in a few days, to try and talk over the problems between us."

"That's *wonderful.*" Hermione's voice softened and warmed. "Maybe you can finally stop taking the potion, if you stop feeling guilty?"

Harry went still, then turned around and looked at her.

"Listen," he said, his voice shaking a little, "I'll let you advise me on handling Draco and on handling the Desire potion and the politics. You know more about it than I do. But I'll decide what potions I drink."

Hermione folded her arms and looked mulish.

Harry shook his head and was glad for the distraction of Aphrodite flapping her wings. "Do you

have something I can give her?"

I don't know why everyone's so frantic over what I *decide to drink,* he thought, as Hermione joined the hunt for owl treats. *I'm in less trouble than anyone else at the moment.*

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Chapter: 8

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Eight—Strategizing

"You're all right."

The moment the words were out of his mouth, Harry felt ridiculous for saying them, and he bit his lip in vexation. But he *had* worried about Draco after he went home yesterday, and wondered if he would show up this morning to find him with something worse than a limp.

Draco raised an eyebrow at him, and if he hadn't been cradling his left arm against his side, seemingly to soothe a wrenched shoulder, Harry would have been contented by his apparent invulnerability. "Of course I'm all right," he said, and stepped back fluidly, inviting Harry up the stairs that led to his private rooms. "I'm always all right. I'm Draco Malfoy."

Harry smiled, and he knew there was an anxious tinge to the smile, and he didn't care. He waited until they'd left the staircase to speak again; he didn't want Draco to pretend to be distracted by taking his next step. "Draco," he said. "I'm worried about you. Look. What exactly did you *offer* to your creditor, to win free from your debts to Nott?"

Draco looked past Harry's shoulder, his eyes distant. His voice was light and teasing. "Concerned, Harry?"

"Yes, damn it, I am," said Harry, and stepped up in front of Draco whilst the other man was still gaping at him, apparently unsure of how to react. Harry found himself putting his hands on Draco's shoulders, drawing him near, trying to use his eyes to dig past Draco's blank face and read the thoughts written on the surface of his mind. "Whatever it is," he said, "for whatever reason you let this person hurt you, it's not worth it. Please, tell me. We'll work out a different way to pay off the debts."

Draco curved his mouth into something that was probably meant to be a sneer, but he wasn't *actually* very good at that when Harry was this close. Harry could feel too much of the shudder of his breathing, could feel the way his muscles quivered and jumped as if he were a cornered

unicorn. "Along with coming up with a way to keep the Desire potion legal, challenge Diggory and Nott, and free ourselves from accusations of murder?" he muttered.

"Yes. All of it." Harry leaned closer, passionately needing Draco to believe in their ability to do this as much as he did. It was the strongest emotion he'd felt in years, or at least the strongest emotion that wasn't distress and guilt. "We can do so much," he breathed, his lips practically in Draco's hair. "As you said, you're Draco Malfoy—master potions-brewer, artist, stubborn and determined enough to make a career of your own even without your parents' support, which anyone looking at you a few years ago would have thought was impossible. And I'm Harry Potter—stubborn and slow and ignorant of politics, but gifted with a political *name* that can be a powerful weapon. Not to mention a killer reputation." He smiled, and did his best not to squeeze down so hard on Draco's shoulders that he would hurt the other man. "We've just got to work together."

He leaned nearer again, unable to help himself, and delicately smelled the scent clinging to the back of Draco's neck. He smelled like Potions ingredients. It made Harry think of the moment when Draco had changed Theodore Nott's fool's saffron into lavender petals, so smooth, so perfect.

"Please?" he said.

Draco experienced a great wave of longing to just fall forwards and into the sanctuary waiting for him.
Harry Potter's arms. Who could have ever imagined that I'd find sanctuary there?

But there were all sorts of reasons why he couldn't, and he doubted that Harry would have understood half of them if Draco had tried to explain. Draco didn't want to tell him about Daphne, for one thing. He didn't want to see the look of disappointment that would come over Harry's face, shortly followed by disgust, when he understood exactly what sort of "trade" Draco had made.

And he didn't want any kind of romance—which Harry was swiftly steering them towards—until Harry was off the potion. Giving in and letting Harry control everything was not something Draco could stand, despite his liking for jealous, powerful partners. He refused to share his bed with half a person.

Besides, he quite liked the notion that Harry would chase after him as long as he didn't know what was wrong. Would he become standoffish and cool again the moment he had Draco? Probably, if the cordial, fond, amicable way he referred to most of his past relationships was real. Harry wouldn't quite care if he broke up with Draco, because the potion wouldn't let him care.

And, too, pursuing a romance at the same time as they were trying to save the Desire potion didn't appeal to Draco. Later, when the immediate moment of danger was past, *then*… but not right now.

He raised his head, and defeated the longing, and fixed Harry with a cold, sharp gaze that made Harry take a step back and assume a wounded look. Well, let him. Draco said calmly, "What I've chosen to do with this creditor is my own business. And it needn't prevent us from working together to save the Desire potion—unless Granger has managed to convince you that it *should* be illegal."

Harry huffed, and Draco was gratified to see a flare of temper shine in his eyes. But it died out in the next moment, of course, and Harry said with exquisite courtesy, "No. But she has convinced me that we need to be polite and submissive, not act like defiant rebels, in front of the committee."

Draco smiled. "Of course. I never intended any less."

"Then what strategies should we pursue for keeping the potion safe?" Harry let his half-folded arms fall back to his sides and assumed a polite, expectant expression.

Draco turned away to keep from snarling a curse, and picked up a piece of parchment on which he'd written most of his ideas. Harry wouldn't understand why he was so upset, and Draco was *sure* that he didn't have the words to explain. "These are my initial ideas," he said. "Have a look at them and see what you think."

Harry took the parchment calmly from his hand, and surveyed it calmly, and in general did everything so damn calmly that Draco was tempted to throw a curse at him just to see if he would take boils calmly, too. Draco soothed himself by watching the expressions that appeared on Harry's face, though, as he scanned over the list of considerations Draco had set out and how they might arrange to take advantage of those considerations. His eyes narrowed or widened, his mouth worked as he bit at the inside of his cheek, and once his nostrils flared. Draco wondered if he was clamping down on a smile.

He could be so handsome—so wonderful, really. I wonder if I'll get away with hinting to him that I'd like him off this potion, or if I'll have to say it outright? But saying it outright at the moment will just drive him away. I wonder—

"I like three of these ideas," Harry said suddenly, making Draco jump. That jolted the strained arm Daphne had left him, and he grimaced and rubbed his shoulder. His skin warmed when he saw that Harry followed each movement he made attentively, but he pretended not to notice. "I think we can use them."

"Only three?" Draco pretended to be indignant. There were over twenty ideas on that list. Of course, some of them were more far-fetched than others.

"Contrary to what you seem to think, I do not have extensive political connections in the Ministry," said Harry dryly. "Nor can I go into the Ministry and hypnotize everyone who might be on the committee with the power of my name. We don't know *who's* going to be on the committee, remember." He rapped the parchment, making it rattle. "And we definitely can't

count on their thanking us for getting rid of Umbridge."

Draco pouted a bit. He *liked* number nineteen. "Leave off your scolding," he said. "What ideas *are* the ones you like, then?"

"The first one," Harry said, leaning against the wall near the window that let owls in, "about emphasizing the difficulty of the brewing process. This isn't a potion that anyone can make from scratch, and I think we should tell the committee that."

"You want to release a recipe to them, don't you?" Draco asked suspiciously. *He'd* thought about emphasizing the enormous amount of magic involved, not the fairly common ingredients, but that wasn't enough for Harry Potter, Gryffindor and Savior of the Wizarding World, who hated to keep a secret.

"I do." Harry met his gaze calmly, and held up a hand when Draco started to protest. "It will reassure them that we mean no harm. There's nothing in that potion that is poisonous on its own. The ingredients aren't all that uncommon. And telling the committee about the potion isn't like releasing the recipe to the public and every rival brewer."

"Unless someone just *accidentally* happens to let the details leak outside the room where we talk about it," Draco muttered, unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

"We can't count on that happening, either." A small steel edge had come into Harry's voice. "I say we trust them, Draco. The more honest we can be, the more submissive we can act, the better."

"You like that, too," Draco said.

Harry laughed a little. "Well, yes." He shrugged with his palms spread, as if inviting Draco to gaze upon the spectacle of Gryffindor idiocy and marvel.

"What was the second idea you liked?" Draco doubted he could talk Harry out of giving the recipe to the committee, and he would probably have to be resigned to it. But at least he could pretend the idea didn't exist, if he just talked about something else.

Harry tapped the parchment hard again. "Number five. The one where we *both* take Veritaserum?" he said, when Draco deliberately blanked his expression.

"That, Potter," said Draco, "was a *joke.*"

Harry raised his eyebrows. He failed to see why Draco would put any ideas on the list as a joke. "We're supposed to achieve absolute honesty with them, if we can," he said. Draco's face still continued to darken, so Harry relented. "What about just *me* taking Veritaserum when we talk to them? Will that satisfy your paranoia?"

Draco dragged his hand through his hair, then winced. That movement had also jolted his sore

shoulder. Harry quelled the urge to reach out and wrap his arms around the other man again, or cast healing spells until he found every injury this unknown creditor had inflicted and healed them. Draco had said that he didn't need help. Harry had to respect his privacy.

No matter how much it hurts.

"I don't want anyone to take Veritaserum," Draco said in a tight voice. "Do you know how much you *revealed* to Shacklebolt when you blindly accepted his proposal, Harry? He could have asked *anything.* And there's no saying the committee will confine its questions to acceptable topics, either. They might possibly ignore the opportunity to interrogate me, but there'll be a fan of yours in the room. You have to know that. Or maybe an opponent. Or maybe just someone looking for a story to sell to the *Daily Prophet* for a few Galleons. You *have* to be more guarded with your tongue."

Harry folded his arms and took a few deep breaths, fighting down on the impulse to kick something. Luckily, as it always did now, the rage drained away before it could fully form, leaving him clear-headed and able to think. "I just think we should be honest with them. The Veritaserum would reassure them we're being honest."

"So would Unbreakable Vows," Draco said. "And you don't see me jumping at the chance to take one of those."

"I wouldn't ask you to," Harry said, beginning to feel a little nettled. "I can. Or I can take Veritaserum."

"And I said no." Draco's face was closed off.

Harry studied him for a moment, frowning. Draco seemed to have a severe lack of faith in the world. Maybe it wasn't a surprise, considering he'd mostly been associating with people like Cordelia Nott and black-market brewers, but *still.*

"They may suggest it," he warned. "We may look like we're not cooperating with them if we refuse it—"

"Which we still have a legal right to do." Draco leaned forwards. "Guard your tongue, Potter, or I'll insist on our being called in separately."

Harry glared at him. Again the anger went away before it could become fierce. This time, he was almost disinclined to let it. "You're such a Slytherin, Malfoy," he said, but without much heat.

"Yes. And this time, that's what's going to contribute to our survival, considering you have the political instincts of a hummingbird high on sugar." Draco folded his arms and took a step away from him. Again, he winced when he moved his left arm, and again, Harry couldn't quite conceal his glance of concern, and again, Draco ignored it. "What do you think of the thirteenth idea? I assume that that's the other one you like."

Harry felt a brief flutter of warmth in his chest. It was, of course, ridiculous to feel so good about someone else knowing him, but he did.

"Yes, I like the idea of creating our own sense of the regulations we'll accept, and sneaking those regulations in as suggestions," he said. "But I find it hard to believe the committee won't notice we're doing it, however much I like it."

"That's why we need to be *subtle*, Potter," Draco said, and then shot him a considering glance. "Do you know that word?" he asked in a bright voice. "I realize that it's probably not in your vocabulary, and probably hasn't been since before we left Hogwarts." He leaned nearer and lowered his voice. "Basically, it means that we *don't want them to know what we're doing.*"

"Fuck you, Malfoy," Harry replied, but he couldn't help laughing, and that released some of the pent-up anger at Draco and his anxiety at facing the committee, both. He cocked his head. "Explain to me how manipulating them into imposing some regulations and not others fits with the policy of absolute honesty we're pursuing otherwise."

"That *you're* pursuing otherwise."

Harry's eyes narrowed. His heart hammered in his chest and stuttered and leaped as if he were on a broom. Really, this was odd. His emotions changed so often around Draco, which wasn't restful, but he didn't want it to stop. He was starting to wonder if this was the reason that he hated being away from the other man now, because he had got used to the crazy things his feelings did around him. "We work together, Draco, or it won't *work.*"

Draco gave him one of his own open-palmed shrugs and a very nice smile, which Harry could wish wasn't quite so close to a sneer. "What can I say? I'm a Slytherin. Absolute honesty isn't in my vocabulary. I'll be honest about the recipe and most of our selling practices. You can't really require much more of me than that. If you could, then I would have agreed to the idea of using Veritaserum."

Harry sighed. He *was* being hopelessly naïve to hope that he'd get perfect agreement out of Draco, and he knew it. "Just don't mess up too badly, all right?"

"I do not 'mess up,'" Draco said. "My plans fail with a kind of spectacular brilliance, like a star going nova, or they come off perfectly."

"No stars going nova," Harry reiterated firmly. "We should decide now what we're going to say, and approximately how we're going to say it, and what regulations on the potion's existence and sale we'll be willing to accept."

"*Approximately?"* Draco raised an eyebrow. "Is that a hint of a shadow of a doubt on the bold Gryffindor self-righteousness that I hear? Do you actually acknowledge that the conversation might differ from the perfect caricature of it you're carrying around in your head?"

"I've found it much easier to accept that other people are right, these past few years," Harry said, with an open, friendly smile that he hoped would allay any fears about *his* honesty Draco might have had.

Strangely, the reference to the potion made Draco's face shut down, and he gave Harry a curt nod and reclaimed his parchment, tossing it behind him and seizing a new sheet. "Let's make a list of the regulations, shall we?"

They had a productive morning together, but without the camaraderie and joking there'd been earlier. Every time Harry tried to resurrect it, he received a chilly, aloof stare, and then Draco turned his head and looked in another direction, as if he couldn't be bothered with Harry's plebeian friendliness.

I don't get it, Harry thought, in some bewilderment. *I'd think he would be delighted about the potion. It ensures that I'm not quite as much of a prat to him as I was in school. I can actually consider other people's feelings now.*

Of course, Draco had told him that he thought Harry's guilt over Ginny was misguided, but he hadn't mentioned it much since then. Surely that meant he hadn't clung to those feelings?

Maybe something else I said or did antagonized him.

Harry swore a silent vow to be more gentle and considerate in the future.

Draco made a certain point about what exactly the committee would be looking for, his eyebrow sarcastically raised, and Harry felt his heartbeat quicken and a light heat work its way into his cheeks from his chest.

If I can. Damn. I've never met someone who inspires me to go beyond my boundaries and push theirs like this.

Harry had finally gone home, and Draco was pacing back and forth in the middle of his rooms, highly energized. They had a plan, and it was a good one, and a workable one. When they went to face the committee tomorrow, Draco was confident they would triumph.
But he was irritated, stung and whiplashed by irritation, by Harry's mention of the potion, and by the effects of the potion he could see, restricting everything from Harry's small, common reactions to his grand gestures.

If I like him so much even in his subdued state, what would I find him to be like when he's free of it?

A memory flooded Draco's mind, of Harry Potter, clad in the scarlet of the Gryffindor Seeker, staring at him as they rolled along, broom to broom and knee to knee, chasing the Snitch over Hogwarts. The intensity in those eyes had meant nothing to him at the time; it had caused only

frustration that Potter wouldn't lie down and *die* already. But now Draco found his breath coming short and a distinct, interested stirring in his pants. He pressed a hand over his crotch and smiled wryly at nothing.

Yes, if he shows even a fraction of that when he's off the potion, then I want him off it. Maybe I should start dropping hints. He's too polite now to press further when I draw back and look disgusted.

Absently, he called Patty and ordered lunch. He could have made it himself—Harry's visit had only taken an hour-and-a-half—but he didn't want to. He preferred to pace and think about how infuriating Harry Potter was, effortlessly, after all these years.

The lunch was a sandwich and fish soup, of what kind Draco didn't know and didn't care to know; it wasn't a Malfoy's province to know such things. He inhaled it, and picked up the thick sandwich, munching steadily through a blend of chicken and the house-elves' unique sauce that made him close his eyes in pleasure.

Then he bit into the cheese.

Chains of agony immediately stretched from his stomach up his arms. Draco's hands spasmed open, and he dropped the sandwich to the plate. He was gasping, tears standing in his eyes, his mouth distended, but he couldn't make a sound.

A memory sprang into his head. It had been lurking behind a modified version of the Memory Charm, Draco thought dazedly, in the moment before the pain became too great. Daphne had told him that she had placed a spell on him that would react when he ate something with milk in it, but then she had made him forget that part of their conversation—until the moment when she wanted him to remember it.

Draco's heart sped up. And it continued speeding, beating so fast that Draco knew it wasn't natural. The pain increased, too; his back arched like a bow and his neck stretched almost to the point of breaking, and still he couldn't *scream*.

And then the crushing pain centered in his chest, and he knew with sudden and painful clarity that he was having a heart attack.

He closed his eyes and concentrated with all his might on thinking *Help! Help! As I am an heir of the Malfoy line, help me!*

There came a whirl and a squeaking, and then a flow of cool magic struck his chest and centered around his heart. Some of the pain eased, and his heartbeat began to slow. Draco opened his eyes, making a little gasping sound, and met Patty's terrified eyes. Her hands never stopped moving, never stopped channeling house-elf magic into his body.

The Malfoys had arranged some centuries ago to create a spell that would let their house-elves

know at once if they were in trouble, even if they couldn't call out verbally, as long as they formed a certain sentence in their mind and the house-elves had been in the same room within the past hour. Despite more centuries of experimentation, they hadn't managed to make the spell more powerful than that—a fact Lucius had always deplored.

At the moment, Draco didn't care. He threw his arms around Patty and held tight. She petted his hair with trembling fingers, whilst her other hand kept working. Draco knew his pulse was back at normal levels now, and he could even speak.

"Thank you," he whispered. "Thank you."

"Master Draco should go to St. Mungo's!" Patty said in alarm. "Master Draco should—"

But she broke off and started casting again, because the very name of St. Mungo's had sent a deep shaft of pain into Draco's chest, under his ribs. He gritted his teeth and folded his arms around his torso. The pain eased off again, but it took several minutes this time, and Patty's face was strained by the end of it.

"No," Draco whispered. "I can't. I'm involved in the middle of a scandal, with all public eyes on me. If I went to—to *that* place, there would be too many rumors." He knew Daphne must have added something to her spell to make it react at the mention of St. Mungo's, which was terrifying, but he didn't care. Probably, if he went under a Healer's care, something even worse would happen.

"Master Draco is in trouble," Patty moaned, wringing her hands. "Master Draco should have help."

Unbidden, an image of Harry flashed before Draco's inner eye, and he grimaced. Harry sounded like the one person who could help him—

But to do that, he would have to hear about Daphne, and Draco could never tell him.

"I know, Patty," he said absently. "I know."

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Chapter: 9

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nine—The Potions Committee

"Now, there's a good chance that Diggory and Nott influenced Madam Wilberforce, so you'll have to be especially careful of her."

"Um-hmmm."

"And what's her name—" Hermione flipped through several pages, swearing quietly, and Harry would have looked at her if he could have, to enjoy the unprecedented sight of Hermione forgetting an important fact. But, well, she *had* been at the Ministry all day yesterday gathering what facts she could about who might have encouraged Umbridge to go to Gringotts, and then up all night collating the facts, so maybe he shouldn't be surprised. "Oh, yes, Rosa Andalucia. Be especially careful of her, too. She apparently lost some money to Narcissa Malfoy a few years ago and is very upset about it."

"Uh-huh."

"And then there's Fleshly Spigot."

"Uh—wait, what?" Harry blinked and turned to face Hermione. "Even for a wizard's name, that takes the cake."

"That wasn't a wizard's name, that was an attempt to make sure you were paying attention to me." Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, cradling the lists of names and facts protectively in her arms. "You need to be paying attention to *me*, Harry, and not staring at Draco." She spoke in a furious whisper; she was under a Disillusionment Charm so it would appear Harry and Draco were alone in the corridor whilst they waited to be called before the committee that would determine the legality of the Desire potion.

"Sorry, Hermione," Harry murmured, but he couldn't keep his eyes from wandering back to Draco a moment later.

The other man was leaning against the wall of the corridor, staring vacantly into space. His hands were clenched and trembling in front of him. His face was pale, and now and then he put up his right hand and rubbed at his chest. He was rubbing the left side of his chest; Harry had already noted that.

Above his heart.

Something was happening to him, and as reluctant as he seemed to be to talk about it—at least if it concerned his creditor, about whom he had told Harry not to bother him—Harry didn't think he would be able to hold off from pushing much longer. Concern was an emotion he could easily feel, whether he was dosed on the potion or not, and now it was surging through him like warm water. All the strategies they had planned for confronting the committee and keeping Desire legal would be worth nothing if Draco was too weak to back Harry up.

But it was more than that, Harry had to admit. He wanted to date Draco. He cared for him as a

friend already. And the sight of him obviously hurt made Harry want to stand like a wall between him and his tormentor, never to back away as long as Draco lived.

Or needed me, Harry thought, but his rewriting of his own thoughts was unconvincing. He wanted to stay with Draco until Draco told him to go away. He was already more to Harry than most of his girlfriends had been. He could more easily raise Harry's spirits with a chuckle, or break them with a dark look.

Hermione sighed next to him, and touched his shoulder. Harry glanced at her in surprise. Hermione smiled a little. "Go to him," she said. "You aren't concentrating on the names, and anyway they aren't that important. I can only know what their personal animosities are, and *maybe* who they work for, or worked for. I can't know what their opinions on the Desire potion are. And I wasn't able to learn about everyone who'd been selected to appear on the committee, only those two members."

"Thank you anyway," Harry murmured, squeezed her fingers, and then moved over to Draco.

Draco turned his head listlessly towards him and nodded once. He was trying to smile, but Harry was familiar with efforts at the same expression on Ginny's and Hermione's faces—and Ron's—and knew it for what it was. "Hey," he muttered. "Did Granger learn anything special?"

"A woman named Rosa Andalucia is going to be on the committee," said Harry, watching his face keenly. Maybe this Andalucia was the one tormenting him? "Hermione says that she's an enemy of your mother's."

Draco chuckled under his breath. "Not really an enemy, just someone who hates to lose. My mother's lost money to her, too, before now. She'll probably treat me with cold courtesy, but no worse than that." He closed his eyes. His breathing was shallow.

Harry couldn't take it anymore. He moved to kneel in front of Draco, and took the other man's hand. As Draco's eyes flew open in startlement, Harry leaned his cheek against Draco's knuckles and whispered, "You're in pain. Please, let me help. It hurts me to see you hurting. *Please.*"

Draco swallowed and stared down at Harry. Harry's eyes were wider and greener than he had known they could become, his voice soft and appealing. Once again, Draco felt as if he could fall forwards and find sanctuary in Harry's arms, but this time, the feeling was far stronger than before.

And then the door across the corridor opened and a voice Draco recognized as Rosa Andalucia's called, "Gentlemen, if you please."

The moment was past—the dangerous moment when he might have abandoned his pride and endangered Harry, too, by telling him of Daphne's existence. Draco managed to draw in his breath and release it almost at once, in an amused snort. He tugged at Harry's wrist, urging him to his feet.

"Come on, Harry," he said. "We need to do what we came here to do."

"We can do other things, too," Harry whispered, softly, urgently, even as he let himself be guided up. "Draco, please. You know I would do almost anything for you, don't you?" He put one hand on Draco's shoulder as if he suspected the gesture would be unwelcome. "You know that I care for you greatly?"

Draco bit his tongue in frustration. Yes, he knew that, but it didn't really matter, not what he had to think of some way out of the Daphne mess on his own.

"I know that," he said, more shortly than he meant to, and then stepped past Harry into the office where the committee was meeting, hoping Harry would give up his concerns and focus on more important things now.

The office itself was impressive, crowded with Orders of Merlin and documents of Mastery in several disciplines. Given that the Ministry itself awarded the Orders of Merlin, Draco was more impressed with the documents from outside the country. But he didn't have much time to study them; he had to look at the people assembling themselves in front of him.

Rosa Andalucia was easily recognizable, and not just because Draco had seen her laughing with his mother several times during his childhood. She was a pure-blood witch, but from a Spanish family, an emigrant to England three decades ago when she'd been a child. She had dark eyes, dark hair, and a chin so firm that Narcissa had once said she could smash walls with it. She wore a shawl on top of her robes, and her eyes met Draco's with calm seriousness.

Next to her sat Kingsley Shacklebolt, and next to him a large woman whom Draco guessed was Vesta Wilberforce, if only because she had the Wilberforce face that a portrait showing one of his great-grandmothers also did. Bright blue eyes, wispy pale blonde hair, and a long nose and thin, sallow cheeks that could have given Professor Snape competition. Wilberforce stared at him with dislike, and Draco painted a meek expression across his features in response.

Next to Wilberforce was a tall man with a harried expression and potion-stained fingers. Draco hadn't seen him before, but by simple process of elimination, he had to be Victor Feldorsius, head of the Ministry's Potions program. Draco nodded to him, and Feldorsius inclined his head back. That might be a hopeful sign, or at least one that he regarded Draco as a colleague.

The last man didn't give Draco much confidence at all. He was handsome enough, in a rough, craggy way, and a pure-blood. But still, he was Amos Diggory, father of the dead Cedric and uncle, or a cousin of some kind, to Charlemagne. Draco controlled his immediate reaction and managed a tight smile.

Harry had no such defenses, of course, and might have been incapable of employing them even if he did. He stared at Diggory for a long moment, then swung his head and looked accusingly at Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Shacklebolt only raised his eyebrows back, and Draco did not know enough about him, or his political alliances, to say what *that* signified. Perhaps that he hadn't been able to prevent Diggory from joining the committee. Perhaps that it would have looked suspicious to exclude him. Perhaps that he believed it would come out all right after all, despite Harry's telling him about Charlemagne and Cordelia and how they had reason to want the potion out of the way.

Or maybe, Draco thought, disgust welling in him, *Shacklebolt simply has to prove that he has no animosity towards a relative of the man who's trying to replace him.*

The Minister cleared his throat. No chairs had been provided for them, Draco noted. They were to stand before the table like defendants on trial. "This meeting is to determine the legal status of the Desire potion, now that it has killed," Shacklebolt said. "Mr. Malfoy, I understand that you were the apothecary who managed to brew the potion. Would you please tell us how you achieved that?"

And Draco had cause to bless Harry's stupid Gryffindor forthrightness as he had not thought he would have. He took the recipe for the potion out of his pocket and stepped forwards, ignoring the way Wilberforce and Diggory both laid hands on their wands. If they thought he was so stupid as to attack the Minister in the Ministry itself, then he need not fear them, because they would misjudge all his other actions, too.

"This is the list of ingredients for the potion, sir," he said politely, "along with the list of spells needed to change them as they enter the cauldron so that they brew Desire and not an explosive mess."

Feldorsius, of course, leaned eagerly forwards, extending his hand, and after one bewildered glance at Draco's notes, Shacklebolt let him have the parchment. He cleared his throat and shook his head, as if Draco had thrown him off the reading of an invisible script with his unexpected action. "Was it your intent to create a potion that is possibly more powerful and dangerous than any other known?"

"No," Harry said, taking up the question, as Draco and he had agreed he should do. The more often they could alternate responses and thus the committee's attention, the more likely they could avoid things like irritating Draco's temper or catching Harry flat-footed. Of course, they had also worked out a few signals to alert each other if the question they had picked up was too much for them to handle. "We wanted the potion to help people. Brewer Malfoy was actually basing the potion on a recipe I've used for a number of years, altering it so that it would serve other people as well as I am served. My potion is specifically attuned to me and only me, mostly through the magic I use to make it. The Desire potion involves an alteration of the spells."

Diggory stared at Harry. There was definitely fervor in his eyes, but in what cause, Draco couldn't say. He might despise Harry for the death of his son as well as for the obstruction he presented to the hopes of the Diggory family's favorite. "And what exactly do you take the potion to control?"

Harry gave a faint smile and coughed. "My temper. I was rather famous for it in school, and it got me in trouble several times. It resulted in a violent quarrel with my friends several years ago—so violent that I feared I'd lose them. Hermione Granger helped me research the potion, and then modify the recipe so that it would remove the part of myself I most loathed."

Diggory slumped back, seeming temporarily defeated. But Feldorsius had glanced up from the recipe. His face was filled with conflicting emotions. Draco thought envy was one of them. He, of course, would have liked to discover this potion for himself. "Who created the original recipe?" he asked softly. "Miss Granger? I have never heard of her applying for a potions mastery."

"Severus Snape," Draco said, taking over. "He created it when he was young, and, as far as we know, never used it when he was a Death Eater," he added, as Feldorsius's face contorted with disgust. "If he had, we may be assured the Dark Lord would have acted very differently." He shuddered. He did not even want to imagine a Dark Lord with what he loathed most—probably his fear of death—gone.

"That doesn't answer the main question," said Vesta Wilberforce, voice as harsh as a raven's. "Why did you simply release this potion, without approaching the Ministry about the licensing of it?"

"That was indeed our fault." Harry bowed his head contritely, moving a minute step forwards so the committee's attention would shift to him. Draco approved of the modest, embarrassed expression on his face. No one could play mortification like a Gryffindor. "We believed, at the time, that Desire was simply like a greater variation of a Calming Draught. We didn't realize its true potential—and we didn't realize how popular it would be." He laughed a little and glanced up through his eyelashes. Wilberforce was mesmerized. Draco experienced a tiny surge of jealousy, but what Harry was doing wasn't *quite* flirting. He was merely exercising his celebrity appeal, and if Wilberforce let herself be taken in, that was her own lookout. "In fact, one of the reasons we went out of our way to advertise it is because we assumed most people wouldn't buy it if we didn't."

"You didn't even *suspect* the possible consequences?" Andalucia's voice held polite disbelief. "You didn't think it might annihilate someone's death wish, and have them stepping out in front of Muggle traffic?"

"The Desire potion *is* sold with instructions and warnings," said Draco. "Like Firewhiskey. Like love philters, which have remained legal and easy to find despite the Ministry's many attempts to regulate them." He hid a smile at Feldorsius's instant discomfiture. The Potions master probably would have argued that love philters should remain unregulated because they were fairly easy to make and thus gave brewing practice and confidence to his own students, or people who might become his students. "It is not our responsibility if people misuse it *after* they have bought it, far away from the shop, where we can't do anything about it. Should we have been more responsible? Yes, we should have. But I don't think it's too much to ask for more responsibility

from our clients, as well—particularly when we sell only one dose at a time, and to have the potion last for longer than two weeks, our clients must come and buy another dose."

That was not entirely true; some people had bought two vials, as long as they signed a parchment stating that one of the vials was for someone else. But they would be guilty of lying if they had personally taken both doses. Draco didn't see what more he and Harry could do than providing the parchments for them to sign; refusing to sell more than one vial at all would earn them even worse publicity.

Of course, the committee might not see it like that.

"That sounds reasonable," said Andalucia, and Draco realized with a surge of relief that she was on their side, after all. Of course, she was still stern-faced and frowning, but that didn't matter; it was necessary, to fool the other members of the potions committee for the moment. "They have taken what precautions they could—"

"It is not *enough!*" Diggory leaned forwards, his face flushed. "Don't you see, Andalucia? Don't you see how they're getting away with it again?"

"Again, Amos?" Andalucia turned and frowned at him in perplexity. Draco kept his mouth tightly shut and caught Harry's eye. Harry grinned at him and was still. He could evidently see, as well as Draco could, that Andalucia was luring Diggory into a trap for them. "What do you mean? I am unaware of their previously having tried to sell any potions together, even love philters."

"Harry Potter always gets away with everything, because he's *Harry Potter*." Diggory spat the words and reared up like a cobra. Harry took a step nearer to Draco, eyes cool and calculating. Draco would have been pleased with that if he hadn't known Harry was working out a way to protect Draco, and not himself. "He was never even tried or charged with the murder of my son—"

"That old grief, again?" Andalucia sighed. "As sad as it makes me to say, the main reason your son's death is notable is that he became the first victim on the night You-Know-Who rose again."

"No one killed him but Potter!" Diggory roared.

Draco felt a warm glow in his chest. He was sure it had seemed a stroke of genius to Charlemagne Diggory to put a relative on the committee which would investigate the legality of the Desire potion. But Amos couldn't control himself and was simply betraying his unreasonable bias. Draco just waited, and listened to his enemy condemn himself out of his own mouth.

"You don't know Harry Potter. You don't know him like I do. You don't see the evil hiding behind his eyes." Diggory pointed a shaking finger at Harry's scar. Harry watched him with a blank green gaze, but Draco could see from the pinched lines at the corners of his mouth that he was hiding grief. "He carried You-Know-Who in his head more than once. And Malfoy was a *Death*

Eater!" He turned around, and his hands spread. "The Desire potion, it's called. Why shouldn't it grant the greatest desire of both their hearts? To bring *him* back!"

"I've examined the recipe," said Feldorsius sharply. "It does nothing like that. Unless you're about to accuse me of complicity with them, Amos, I suggest you *sit down.*" He sounded more embarrassed than anything else.

Diggory opened his mouth again, but Shacklebolt lifted a hand, and in the end he sank back, frustrated and angry. Draco bit very hard on the inside of his mouth, and managed to present an innocent face by the time Diggory looked at him.

"I suggest we refrain from wild accusations," the Minister said dryly. "Now. I have provided you all with a Pensieve memory of Harry's testimony, in which he denied having anything to do with the death of Dolores Umbridge—under Veritaserum. We do have testimony that claims to counteract that." He turned and nodded to Wilberforce. "What did you want to say, Vesta?"

"I knew Dolores well," Wilberforce said, sitting up, "and spent much of her last few weeks talking to her. She was suspicious when she heard about Harry Potter's involvement in some new publicity stunt, since he spent so much of his time in the last few years lying low." Her eyes pierced Harry, but what for—reappearing just when the wizarding world had started to safely forget him or not remaining around in the first place—Draco didn't know. "She found out about the Desire potion, and took it herself, because she would not have exposed any of her underlings to danger. She went wild the moment she took it. It was murder, what was done to her, and I cannot believe it was a coincidence that Mr. Potter made such a fuss about the potion that did it. He had to have known that Madam Umbridge would hear of it, try to stop him, and die in the process."

Shacklebolt looked at Harry, who lifted his head and spoke with quiet force.

"I could have punished Umbridge at any time in the past eight years, if I wanted." Harry's face was a brilliant red, but he kept his voice calm. Draco wondered if he would be made to appreciate Harry's potion yet. "My cachet was so high right after the defeat of Voldemort that it would have been easy. I wanted her punished for what she did to Muggleborns during the war—and maybe for what she did to me during school. I'm not going to lie. I disliked her.

"But I could never have known that she would buy the Desire potion and take it *herself.* She could have studied it—sent a sample to the Potions master here." He nodded to Feldorsius. "It was not a murder plot. I'll take Veritaserum again if I need to, Madam Wilberforce. I don't know what else I can say to make you believe me."

Fool. But Draco bit down on his tongue. The offer to take Veritaserum was politically the best move Harry could have made at that particular moment, though Draco was indignant he should have had to make it.

"That sounds reasonable enough to me," said Feldorsius, "particularly with the Veritaserum

testimony. I don't believe it was a murder plot, either. I would have tested the potion if Dolores had only brought it to me." He leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers together, looking pleased. "I've had a chance to study the recipe, Shacklebolt. Really, I don't see any reason to treat the Desire potion so differently from many other possible potions, say Dreamless Sleep or the Draught of Living Death. Those require an expert skill to make, which is one of the reasons they're restricted. And this is the same, Kingsley. The major exception is that the ingredients themselves aren't poisonous, and none of them are illegal. And I don't think that anyone in the whole of Britain but these two young men could brew it, no matter how much they studied the recipe."

"Really?" Shacklebolt blinked. "But surely you yourself could produce Desire…"

"I do not have the magic." Feldorsius looked almost affectionately at Draco. He realized the older man had a kind of triumph in his eyes, as if he admired any brewer who managed to somewhat escape the punishment of the law. "This is a very, very rare alliance, between a master brewer and someone strong enough in magic to make the potion happen in the first place. And I agree they should not be held responsible for what happens *after* they have sold the potion. Some more restrictions on its sale are necessary, yes, but I think we can modify the ones that control the Draught of Living Death right now and produce a satisfactory compromise."

Draco was dizzy with relief. They hadn't even had to *suggest* the laws they'd like. Presenting the recipe and being perfectly honest about how hard it was to brew the potion had worked.

Just as Harry had said it would.

Draco briefly caught Harry's eye and grinned. Harry smiled back, quietly, faintly, and Draco felt irritation surge to the fore of his own emotions. Damn it, without the potion he would probably be whooping and clapping and catching Draco in his arms for a kiss. This victory *deserved* one.

Harry frowned, probably catching the shift in Draco's face and not understanding it, but the Minister spoke again before he could say anything.

"Does anyone disagree?" Shacklebolt glanced down the table. "All in favor?"

His hand rose. So did Andalucia's and Feldorsius's. Diggory sat with folded arms. Wilberforce hesitated, then sniffed and put her hand up. Draco heard her mutter something about only believing it because of the Veritaserum.

"Excellent." Shacklebolt nodded. "Then Feldorsius shall draw up the new regulations and send them to you by owl in a few days, gentlemen. Congratulations to you both." He rose and gathered up the parchments in front of him, adding dryly, "I do hope, next time you invent a miraculous new potion, you show some more sense in distributing it."

Harry caught up with Draco as he walked towards the lifts. He knew something wasn't right. Draco had looked sour even when Harry was smiling at him. It had to have been something

Harry had done, but he was tired of not knowing what.
"Well?" he demanded.

Draco turned around to face him, crossing his arms. "Well, what?"

"Who hurt you?" Harry said. "Why did you seem so upset when I was smiling? Can you please just tell me what's wrong? I want to know." He reached out to put a hand on Draco's shoulder.

Draco knocked his hand away and turned to the lift. Harry sighed as his rage reared and then drained off. He folded his arms and leaned against the opposite wall, his gaze fixed broodingly on Draco.

He couldn't see any other option but to go on trying to talk to Draco. It wasn't as though he could force the truth out of him. He had hoped the success of their honesty with the potions committee would cause Draco to see that it could succeed elsewhere, but apparently not.

"Harry!"

Hermione was hastening down the corridor towards them, her eyes bright and her arms open, and Harry had to catch her in an embrace and tell her all about what the committee had said. By the time he thought to glance around again, Draco was gone.

Harry checked a sigh. Of course he was going to keep on wooing Draco, difficult prickliness and all. What else could he do?

I care too much for him.

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Chapter: 10

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Ten—Dinner With Ginny

Harry, this looks acceptable.

Harry stared at the note for a moment, then crumpled it with a violent motion and flung it into a corner of the flat. Then he paced back and forth, swearing steadily to himself, for a full minute.

He allowed himself that much indulgence before the rising emotions drained away and he flung himself on his couch with a sigh, staring at the ceiling.

Responses the length of that note was the most he'd heard from Draco since their meeting with the potions committee. Short, brisk letters, without even a signature, conveying only essential information. And *that* note was the response Draco had made to the committee's new list of proposed regulations for the potion, which Harry had written a long, careful letter to him about. He'd asked questions, determined to know what Draco, who had more information about potions and the laws governing them stored in his head than Harry could hope to learn in a year of study, thought of this list. Was there anything he should ask about? Any "innocent" regulation that might prevent them from getting the ingredients they needed or brewing as they should?

And Draco replied like this.

Harry knew something was wrong. He also knew that trying to force Draco on the issue didn't work, no matter how gentle his plea, no matter how much he swore that he would try to help and listen uncritically. He had slipped several reminders into his latest letter about how they had to work together or Nott and Diggory, who worked together without a gap between them, would overwhelm them.

Apparently, Draco didn't care.

Harry gritted his teeth and spent a moment rubbing his eyes. Flopping and sulking and moaning around his flat like this wasn't helping anyone. He should return to the latest piece of film he'd been developing before he'd had to spend so much of his days with Draco, brewing Desire and then selling it. That, at least, was useful work. Harry longed to feel useful. Withdrawing from the world was all well and good as long as it proved he wasn't about to take advantage of his celebrity status and kept the reporters away from him, but it also meant he had few connections now, outside of his immediate circle of friends.

Fewer people who needed him.

It's not that I want to be a hero, Harry thought, and forced himself to rise from the couch. *I just want to* do *things.*

Dinner with Ginny and Dean that night, which he been wary of, suddenly began to seem a lot less like a penance. At least it would get him out of the flat, give him a chance to talk to other people, and show him faces and voices that responded to him.

I should get a girlfriend. I never suffered from loneliness this much when Susan was around, or Nicole.

But he didn't want a girlfriend. He wanted Draco.

Crankily, Harry went to take a dose of his potion. He was a few minutes late, having ignored the chime of his clock in order to brood about Draco. Maybe he would feel calmer when he'd had it.

Draco couldn't breathe.
No, that wasn't true. He *could* breathe. It was just that the pain from his broken ribs was so intense it kept making him lose track of the neat rhythm and counting he'd set to accustom himself to the movement of his lungs.

He opened his eyes slowly. They were gummed shut with some sticky substance that he thought probably had blood in it, but as he was a long way from his mirror, he couldn't be sure. He was lying on the floor of his own rooms, where Daphne had come to him last night. He vaguely remembered writing a note to Harry just before she appeared, walking through his wards as if they didn't exist. Draco suspected she'd altered them, or made him do so, during one of those periods he couldn't remember.

She'd let him remember the conversation from last night, though.

She'd stooped down in front of him after a casual spell had knocked him to the floor and bound his legs to his back. She ran a hand through his hair, and chuckled. "You've seen the effect of my spell with foods related to milk, Draco?"

He groaned out a yes, though he was winded from the fall. He knew not answering her questions would be even more dangerous. And her hand did linger on his forehead in a sweet touch for a moment, as if he had pleased her. Draco wanted to turn away in revulsion from his own relief and happiness.

"Well." Daphne stroked his shoulder. "It's not that I want to give you up, or kill you, when you're one of the best lovers I've ever had. But *uncertainty.*" Her voice deepened into guttural lust. Again, Draco wanted to shudder, but it was rather difficult in the position he was in. "Draco, there's nothing more exciting than uncertainty. Knowing that you might die at any moment, from one of the foods that has milk in it which you never knew about? Knowing that you might die or be badly injured from a number of other spells I've put on you? It's enough to take me to my knees in the middle of working."

Draco grunted, and tried to lie very still as her fingers stole over his face. Of course, she was a Legilimens, so he couldn't really hide his thoughts from her anyway, but he was trying not to provoke her into reading his mind in the first place.

"And now," Daphne whispered, "you're thinking of telling Harry Potter. I've had you watched sometimes, you know. You like him. You would go to his bed of your own free will, as you would not to mine." Her voice was soft and full of wonder and puzzlement as she spoke those words.

"But it won't do any good. Mention this to him by words or in writing, Draco, and—something will happen." She laughed a little. "To you, to him? I don't feel like giving you that much of a clue.

"But yes, it *will* happen. Be assured of that."

Then she'd taken him to bed. The next part, he still didn't remember with any accuracy, though she seemed to have modified the Memory Charm again, and some images that could have been from last night played before his inner eye like distorted nightmares.

Now Draco closed his eyes and licked his lips for a moment, easing the dryness of his throat with several swallows of saliva. He never wanted to move too fast after one of Daphne's sessions, and he needed to make sure of what was hurt and what was not.

Broken ribs, yes; he breathed in deeply and then flinched. He pressed his arm cautiously along the side of his body, but though he found a few bruises and tender spots on his flanks, he thought the ribs were the only injury in his torso.

Then he shifted, and his leg screamed with pain. Through the red haze that followed, Draco thought Daphne had probably arranged him carefully so he wouldn't feel that pain until he tried to move.

He couldn't even lift himself from the floor to look and see if it was broken or "merely" fractured. He did know that he couldn't feel his toes wriggling, and that was a very bad sign. He would have to have help, and that was only one person he could be fairly sure wasn't included in Daphne's spell.

"Patty!" he called.

The house-elf appeared silently before him, and stared. Then her eyes filled with tears, and she gave a single, distressed tug at her ears. "Master Draco's leg is broken," she whispered.

Well, that confirmed his suspicions. Draco gave a shallow nod. "I have some potions for pain, Patty," he said. "They're in the cupboard above my bed. I want you to fetch me the smallest glass bottle of red potion and the biggest crystal bottle of green potion, do you understand me?"

Patty nodded and vanished. And Draco knew he could depend on her. House-elves had a memory and a dedication to duty that no human could surpass.

He closed his eyes, resting, gathering strength for the moment when he would need to lift himself on a knee or elbow in order to take the potions. And he knew that he would have to get rid of Daphne himself, both to save his life and to end the threat she posed to Harry.

He couldn't make elaborate plans, or she would simply read that out of his mind with Legilimency. Nor could he be certain that he could cast spells she couldn't counteract. For all he knew, she could have impressed certain commands into his mind that would trigger more pain if he attempted to defy her through magic.

No, it would have to be through the one art that was his completely and which Daphne had given no sign of understanding: potions.

Patty appeared, and Draco made himself sit up. The pain screamed at him from his side and his leg, but luckily it was over quickly.

Harry stepped into the Garden of the Hesperides and turned his head briefly, scanning the features of the people around him. Then Ginny called his name and waved. Harry smiled, waved back, and made his way to her table, which was right next to the immense serpent coiled around the tree. The serpent turned its head to examine Harry and hissed a lazy compliment on the green of his shirt and cloak. Harry nodded, not about to risk a hiss back when the restaurant was this full of people. The Garden was evidently doing well.
Ginny stood to welcome him, though she clasped his hand instead of kissing his cheek. Harry understood her reasons for that, and they had little or nothing to do with the possible jealousy of Dean, who stood close at his girlfriend's side, rubbing her shoulders. Harry nodded to Dean, and his old friend nodded back, caution and welcome both visible in his face.

"Shall we order?" Dean asked, and Harry agreed, glad to have a few extra minutes to gather his thoughts. It didn't take him long; what he'd had before was good enough. Then he watched Ginny and Dean poring over their menus and murmuring to each other.

They suited one another, he thought, steadfastly ignoring the ache that reminded him how well Ginny had once fitted at his side. Dean gave Ginny protection simply by leaning his head towards her. Ginny accepted it, given the timid smile on her face, but she gave more back. Her trust was absolute. When she dropped a napkin, she didn't bother reaching for it; Dean would catch it. She leaned extravagantly back in her chair, and he supported her.

And why not? Dean was honorable to her all along, rather than having honorable intentions that came along too late.

Harry swallowed his pain and his guilt. This dinner was about getting past the wounds for both him and Ginny, not tearing them open. He clasped his hands in front of him, trying to look calm and attentive, and was rewarded by a slight widening of Ginny's smile when she and Dean had ordered at last and were ready to deal with him.

"Now," Dean said softly, looking back and forth between them. "Tell Harry exactly what you told me, Ginny. He deserves to understand—to know why you're still so frightened of him six years later." He caught Harry's eye, seeming to offer silent support even though he didn't, couldn't, approve of what Harry had done to Ginny. Harry returned a stoic nod, then focused on his old girlfriend.

She looked at the table, and he saw traces of the terrified eleven-year-old who had been Tom Riddle's prey in the Chamber of Secrets. Then she looked up again, and he saw the grown woman who had come to the Battle of Hogwarts with the rest of her family. She nodded decisively, and that could have been a response to Dean's statement or simply to her own inner turmoil.

"Your magic came out and wound about me," she said.

Harry nodded and closed his eyes. He could see the shadows, the *chain* of shadows that his magic had created. It was like no other magical effect he'd read about—not that he'd done much reading. This wasn't an ability to cultivate, like the Quidditch talent he'd found himself blessed with, but something he would have preferred to forget, a misbegotten talent, a birth defect.

"But it did more than that," Ginny said, her voice outside the cocoon of self-loathing slowly enveloping Harry, but present, so close, like the touch of a hand to a blind person. "It started to eat me. I could feel my magic slipping away. I could feel memories going. It was—it was like being eaten by Tom Riddle. Exactly like. I would wake up after he was done possessing me and feel as weak and helpless as I was just then. I—Harry, since that day, my magic isn't as strong as anymore. You ate it."

Harry braced his palms flat on the table and repeated to himself, several times, that they were in public and he couldn't vomit or he would attract attention. This was one time when he wished his potion could work on emotions other than jealousy, lust, and rage. The remorse ate at his stomach like acid.

But he didn't open his eyes and look at Ginny again. He knew that would make him sick up, too.

"I've had six years to come to terms with that," said Ginny. "I should have done it by now. And—you never tried to come near me again, never tried to finish what you started. That proves to me that you're a good man. And—the potion you're taking. It's to keep you from ever doing something like that again?"

Harry could open his eyes now. He could nod without feeling like his skull would crack and his brain would fall out.

"Good," Ginny said. She smiled, and it was a smile without a tinge of fear or horror, the first one Harry had seen her give the Incident, at least when she was aware of his presence within a room. "Then as long as you're taking it, I'm safe. And—" She exhaled deeply and pressed her palms together. "There's no need for more than that. I should have told this to you a long time ago, Harry. I suppose I thought you might react violently." She laughed and shook her head. "And I should have known to trust you more than that."

She reached across the table. "Friends?"

Harry clasped her hand and held it tightly. She didn't flinch or draw away, though from the tension of the muscles in her arm, he knew she'd been tempted. She just watched him instead, with a kind, patient eye.

"Of course we're friends," Harry whispered. "You're trusting me again, after what I nearly did to you. I can't refuse that trust."

Ginny frowned a little and glanced at Dean. Dean shrugged, then nodded. Ginny gave a little flicker of her eyelids in response. Harry felt a momentary ache of desire—not for Ginny, not even for the idea that he might *someday* have someone he could be close to, but for *that*, that level of silent communication and no more.

I don't think I'll ever share that with Draco, no matter what. We're too different, and those differences are tearing us apart.

"Harry," Ginny said, turning to look at him, "we don't want you to treat this like you're a—a criminal. You're not. You've proven that. We want you to be able to accept my *friendship.* And Dean's. Come talk to us sometimes without being specially invited. Share a meal with us without that hangdog expression on your face. I've *forgiven* you." Her hand tightened, and Harry again felt her arm ripple as if she were fighting the desire to be away from him. But she was sitting there, holding on to him, displaying strength he knew it must have taken her years to grow back. "Can't you forgive yourself?"

Harry choked back a sob, and then picked up the glass of water that had already popped out of the crystal in the center of the table. "I don't know, Gin," he said, after a drink. He gulped the water again, finding he needed the chill burn in his throat to loosen the words. "Maybe there are some things that have no forgiveness."

"Not this," Ginny said fiercely. "Just listen to me, just work with me, just keep *talking* to me. I want to treat you like a normal friend and a member of the family again, Harry. My brother. Or my brother-in-law, if that's too close a relationship for you." She smiled to let him know she was joking. Her arm had stopped quivering at last. "And I want to be able to watch out for you and protect you when you're vulnerable," she said, lowering her voice a little. "You've got political enemies now, don't you? And your association with Malfoy isn't doing you any favors."

Harry took a moment to get his bearings. "I do have political enemies," he said. "But Draco and Hermione are helping me fight them. And—well, I looked over the information that you sent me, Gin, and it's just not very convincing." He neglected to mention that he'd done it in Draco's company, one of the afternoons they'd got together to brew Desire, and that they had laughed over most of the documents. "Most of them can't even identify him as other than a blond brewer. No distinctive features. Where did you get the information?"

Ginny frowned. "I told you. People I know who've dealt with him."

"But what were their names?"

"Sorry, Harry." Ginny's voice was low and apologetic. "I think Malfoy could still hurt them if he knew who they were."

Harry hesitated, then spoke the words he'd hoped he could get through the conversation without uttering. "I just wonder if they were people that Nott and Diggory primed with information, in order to try and put a rift between me and Draco."

Ginny's eyes opened very wide. Then she said, "But how would they have *known* that I was going to send you information about this? I was just owling friends I knew had bought many potions in the past."

"If one of those friends *told* them…"

Ginny slapped her free hand flat on the table. "I won't hear any words against my friends, Harry." Her voice was dangerously quiet. "Just like I'd fight to protect you and welcome you back into my home and life, I'd do the same thing for any of them."

"I didn't say that they'd do it knowingly," said Harry. "They may have done it for the best of reasons, thinking Draco is really dangerous—like you do—or they may think Diggory would be a fine Minister and telling the truth as they see it to help his campaign along is a noble act. But I can't and won't take the accusations seriously until I know who made them."

Ginny shook her head. "What you're talking about didn't happen."

"You're certain?"

"Positive."

And with that, Harry had to be content. He still thought finding a fund of information against Draco was just too good to be true, but Diggory and Nott's plan had still failed; he was allied with Draco and would continue to be.

Although, if you really want that to be true, you should visit Draco as soon as possible and make sure you're still on the same page about what lies between you.

Harry vowed to do that after dinner before he could change his mind, and then settled back to enjoy Ginny's company. She spoke lightly, freely, of her Quidditch playing, the articles she had started writing for the *Daily Prophet* about Quidditch, the times she volunteered in the joke shop with George. Dean told Harry she had a horrible secret: she wanted to give all their children the trendiest American Muggle names. Ginny shrieked and pretended to throw her bread at him as he described having daughters named Madison and Taylor someday, and a son named Phoenix.

Then Harry argued that naming a baby Phoenix was not the worst thing that could happen to him, and Dean and Ginny joined in throwing bread at *him*.

Yes, Ginny was happy, Harry thought, leaning back in his chair. And if he wanted to be happy in the same way, then he would have to take steps on his own, like trying to free himself of guilt that *might* be excessive and figuring out what the hell was going on with Draco and what he *wanted* to go on with Draco.

The second before the first. It's more important.

Harry Apparated carefully into the alley next to Draco's shop. He hadn't drunk anything at the Garden of the Hesperides, but he had spent every spare moment during the conversation, and during his journey here, trying to decide how he wanted to speak to Draco, and still not finding the right words.
Of course, the journey over here was pretty short.

Harry sighed, and raked a hand across his scalp, digging deep and tugging until he knew his hair stood on end like a porcupine's quills. Well, that was not his fault. And when he went up to Draco, he thought it wouldn't really matter what he looked like. So far, Draco had shown signs of being attracted to his magic, when they brewed the potion together, and maybe the way he gave his trust. Messy hair wouldn't help or hinder his chances.

And it was honesty that was best, in the long run, Harry thought, as he moved slowly towards the shop, glancing up in hopes of spotting a light in the window. He would just tell Draco that he'd like a romantic relationship with him, and explain why. And if Draco refused, at least Harry would know it was a refusal, instead of the uneasy silence that seemed to hang between them these days, and he could regretfully tuck away thoughts of a romance.

He couldn't pretend not to be disappointed, but he could move on. That was what you *did* when someone didn't want a romantic relationship with you any longer. Draco's friendship would be enough.

Finally, he remembered that Draco's upstairs rooms had only enchanted windows; the one real window that opened to owls wasn't visible from the outside to any ordinary wizard. He made a noise of disgust at himself and jogged to the door.

A moment later, he paused, but for a different reason. Draco's wards were much weaker than Harry had seen them the last time he came to the shop, the day before they met with the potions committee. Now they were a barely pulsating shimmer on the air, and Harry could have broken them easily; even a child's accidental magic might have done so.

It didn't fit with Draco, who was paranoid about his shop in general, not just his stock of the Desire potion.

And then a figure moved in the shadows near the shop's entrance. Harry fell back a step, narrowing his eyes. He would have just charged ahead when he was younger; now he wanted to wait and catch a glimpse of the face if he could.

The figure didn't come into the light, though. After some studying of the wards, as if to confirm something he'd heard of, he nodded and held out his wand. Three words of Latin followed, too quick and hurried for Harry to make out.

And Draco's shop tilted, twisted, rumbled, and began to fall, stone by stone.

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Chapter: 11

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Halfway through the story now, and at a tipping point.

Chapter Eleven—Arguments With a Weak Man

Harry recognized the Local Earthquake Spell a moment before he began sprinting forwards to do something about it. His mind was one steady stream of swear words, save for the part of him frantically wondering if Draco could have been somewhere else tonight.

But he had no surety of that. And he *did* have powerful magic, which had not actually increased in strength since he started taking his potion but did hover closer to the surface and become easier for him to access.

He aimed his wand at the door and the walls of the shop, which were tearing themselves apart in accordance with vibrations that began in the stone itself, and roared the incantation for a Stasis Spell. For a moment, everything paused, though the Local Earthquake was still working and had already started to butt up against his control.

It will not break through, Harry vowed, and wished for a moment that he had his broom with him. But he didn't, so he would just have to make do.

"Draco!" he bellowed, breaking the wards with a pop like a soap-bubble, stampeding through the front door, and making directly for the door that concealed the staircase to Draco's upper rooms. The wards in here were still intact. Harry swore under his breath and spent a few precious moments wrestling with them, before he decided that, given everything, he would prefer to rely on brute strength.

He called up as much magic as he could wield without random flares of light breaking through his skin, and flung all of it directly against the ward that prevented strangers from Apparating inside the shop. With a roar, he broke through the ward and landed in the upper rooms, spinning around to analyze the chairs and couch quickly.

Not in his sitting area, not in his work area, not at the large table where he and Harry had done most of the strategizing for the potions committee. Damn it. Harry raced towards the one area of the house where he hadn't yet spent a lot of time, Draco's bedroom.

The Stasis Spell broke on the way there, and the earthquake started up again. The floor tilted, and

several of Draco's smaller pieces of furniture slid between the gaps that had appeared in the stones. Harry forced himself to ignore that. Saving Draco's life was more important than saving his knickknacks.

If he was here. If Harry hadn't raced into a collapsing building for nothing.

He stabilized himself by catching the sides of the doorway into the bedroom, and then jumped directly over the hump forming in the middle of the floor and landed on the bed. It had extra charms to keep it still even if someone on it thrashed around in his sleep, and thus it wasn't moving right now.

And there was a lump under the sheets. Harry seized what he thought was Draco's shoulder and screamed into his ear, amazed that he had managed to sleep through the racket so far. "Wake *up!* Your house is falling down! Wake *up*, you stupid bastard!"

Draco snorted and turned over, but still too slowly. Harry thought the charms on the bed would only last a few more minutes, and he danced up and down with impatience, swearing aloud. Draco yawned and spoke in a voice thick with cotton. "Harry? What—what are you doing?"

His eyes were glazed. He was on some kind of potion, Harry thought. He swore again and snatched Draco up into his arms.

Draco cried out in pain. His leg was broken and dangling, Harry saw, and he was wincing and trying to crawl away from Harry's tight clasp on his torso, too, indicating that there were more wounds there.

Just what was his creditor doing to him?

But that would have to wait. Harry wrapped Draco in a tight hug, supported his leg as much as possible, and Apparated to his own flat. He broke his own anti-Apparition ward on the way, and landed on the floor shaking and exhausted, so covered with sweat that his first attempt to lift Draco simply failed due to the slickness sliding between them.

Draco lay limply on the floor for a moment, then lifted his head and stared around at the walls. "Your place," he said accusingly to Harry. "We're at your place. This isn't my bedroom. And my leg hurts." He gave a little whine and put a hand on his knee.

"I know," Harry said as soothingly as he could. He thought of trying to explain, and then decided that Draco was too out of it to listen to him. He was already muttering about how Harry should have left him in his bed to just ride the pain potions out. He obviously had no idea what had happened.

Best and simplest if he sleeps. Harry waved his wand and cast a Sleeping Charm that Draco would have been able to resist in an ordinary state. That he slumped down and started snoring at once showed how badly he needed rest.

Harry carried him in and tucked him into the bed where Hermione had spent so many weeks resting. Harry had never conceived at the time that Draco would ever require his help like that. For a moment, he stared at the spray of blond hair across his pillow, and sighed. He had imagined it there often in the last few weeks, but always in, well, slightly different circumstances.

He turned away and flopped into the chair he'd set beside the bed when Hermione stayed here and still hadn't moved. Then he put his hands over his face and shook.

His potion subdued rage, but did nothing about fear and guilt. Draco could have *died.* Harry might as easily have decided to go home after dinner at the Garden of the Hesperides, and then what would have happened?

Death.

He'd come too close to losing Draco tonight, Harry thought, as he dropped his hands and stared at the figure in the bed again. He wasn't sure who had done this, Nott and Diggory or the mysterious creditor—and perhaps Draco's wounds and the collapse of the house had been caused by two separate sources. But he couldn't allow it to go on, no matter how much Draco argued against him, no matter how much he fought.

Resolved, Harry stood and Apparated back to the remains of the shop, to see if there was anything that could be salvaged.

He came back two hours later with a heavily warded trunk full of Draco's clothes that had managed to survive the fall from his rooms, a number of his potions books—also heavily warded, to the point where rubble had hovered above them instead of crushing them and made them relatively easy to find—and a few unbroken vials of potions. Harry didn't know what kind they were, though none of them had the blue-green tinge of Desire.
He hadn't been able to distinguish Potions ingredients from the general debris scattered about, and so in the end he hadn't picked up anything of that type. And of course the shop was a complete loss, as well as the larger pieces of furniture.

Draco's life as he had known it was gone, destroyed in a few minutes.

Harry's back hunched with tension and worry as he made space for Draco's books on his shelves and Draco's clothes in his closet. What was he going to *do*? He'd invested thousands of Galleons in that shop and in those ingredients, and now they were all ruined. He would have to find new investors.

Maybe. But with this creditor dogging him, I imagine he'd be reluctant to do that. What kind of debt is paid in blood and pain?

He would have to have a new center to sell Desire out of; they couldn't very well make it Harry's

flat, not when he had Muggle neighbors. He would have to find another place to live. Harry wondered for a moment if he would go back to Malfoy Manor, but he doubted it. Draco had made it clear that his independence from his parents was too important to him, though Harry thought Lucius and Narcissa would have been willing to provide for their son more than Draco thought they would.

He wrote a letter to Hermione detailing what had happened when he was done with the chores of moving Draco into his flat, and asked her not to tell anyone else what she knew. The story would be all over the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow morning, but of course no one would know what really happened.

Hell, Harry himself still didn't know what really happened. The cloaked figure could have been anyone.

Maybe someone who could come here, who knows where I live, and who might try and kill Draco again.

Harry set to work on his wards. First he fortified the ones that protected the flat. Then he set up a new assembly on the bedroom, connected to Draco and designed to let Harry know when he was hungry, sleepy, in pain, or merely stirring. Then he went to strengthen the building's foundations. What their enemies had tried once, they might try again, and Harry had no intention of letting a Local Earthquake destroy *his* home.

Draco stirred slowly and stared at the ceiling for a long, sluggish moment before memory caught up with his eyes. He sat up at once and stared around, not needing much prompting to recognize Harry's bedroom. This was where they had conducted a few of the early experiments on Desire. Sitting up reminded him that his ribs ached, and so did his leg. They were on their way to mending, but neither would heal without regular doses of pain and healing potions.

If I'm here, I have to assume that I won't have access to my regular stocks.

And then he caught brief, blurred glimpses of Harry's face, and he remembered the shaking of his bed, and—

The door opened, and Harry came in at a low run. He came to a stop quickly, though, and sighed gustily in relief, putting his drawn wand away. "Thank Merlin," he muttered. "I felt you in pain, and thought maybe your attacker had come back."

"My attacker?" Draco asked, ready to deny that anyone had inflicted these wounds on him against his will. Given Daphne's spells, he rather had to do that.

"The one who knocked down your shop with an earthquake spell," Harry said soberly, sitting in the chair next to the bed to regard Draco. "Maybe the same one who weakened your wards, too."

Draco swallowed. "My shop?"

"Gone." Harry exhaled hard. "I'm sorry, Draco. I managed to save a few things; I have them for you. But your home and the Desire potion are gone completely."

Draco closed his eyes and sat very still. The shop was the largest and most important symbol of his independence from his parents, of the life that he had made for himself even when everyone was screaming and arguing with him, claiming that he *couldn't* live free and he should stop trying. And now it was gone. Whether Daphne had destroyed it, or Diggory and Nott, he couldn't say.

But Harry might know.

"Who did it?" he asked quietly.

"Figure in a cloak," said Harry. "It had to have been someone who'd observed you closely, though, to know you were lying upstairs dosed with a pain potion and couldn't get away."

Which eliminated no one, of course. Diggory and Nott could pay people to work for them. Daphne had a sophisticated spy network, and maybe she'd got bored of the uncertainty of spells and wanted to try this new way to kill him.

"I owe you my life," Draco whispered.

Harry said nothing, so Draco opened his eyes in time to catch the tail end of a nod. Then Harry looked straight at him with the same calm, implacable expression he'd sometimes adopted around Granger, during the days when depression had rendered her unable to move.

"You're going to tell me the truth now," Harry said, "even if I have to drag it out of you. Of course I'll help you set up your new life. But I won't have you risking it again at a moment's notice because you *won't* tell me who your enemies are."

Draco clenched his hands in his lap. There was so much he wanted to say, and all the words bubbled at the end of his tongue behind an impenetrable barrier. Of course, even explaining the reasons why he couldn't talk about the danger his life was in was impossible.

Harry folded his arms and stared at him steadily. Watching him, Draco thought for a moment that you didn't really need anger to have an argument—one of the things that he thought had kept Harry from pressing him so far. You only needed to have iron patience and a resolve great enough to wear down the first defenses someone might try to establish.

But he didn't know if Harry really had that kind of resolve. In fact, Draco rather thought he didn't, since his compassion for other people was so great. Draco could be honest about his pain, and that would save him being honest about his fear.

"I really don't want to talk right now," he whispered. "I need pain potions for my ribs and my leg,

and I'll need to buy them since I can't brew them right now. Will you go to Diagon Alley for me? I'll give you a draft on my Gringotts vault for as many Galleons as you'll need to purchase the potions, and a good description of them, so you don't stand a chance of buying others by mistake."

Harry's eyes narrowed, and for a moment Draco had the horrific feeling that he was considering letting Draco suffer just so that he could get his answers. But in the end he stood, nodded shortly, and went to fetch ink and parchment.

Harry was very careful. He bought the red and green potions that Draco advised him to get, and bought duplicate vials from a few different shops, just in case one set had been poisoned. He checked several times to make sure that no one was following him. He ducked out of sight the moment someone tried to make a fuss over Harry Potter.
He got home, and gave the vials to Draco, and watched carefully as he sniffed them. He evidently didn't find any foreign ingredients, for he drank them down at once and then sighed in contentment. Harry put the extra vials in his cabinet in the loo with the rest of his own potion, and then prepared a corned beef sandwich for Draco, who ate it hungrily.

Then he sat down in the chair again and said, "Tell me about what happened to your ribs and leg."

Draco closed his eyes and murmured, "I'm so tired, Harry. Can't I rest just a little longer? I really don't want to talk right now."

For a moment, Harry was paralyzed with rage. Draco *knew* how important this was, and yet he kept putting it off! How the *fuck* was Harry supposed to save his bloody life if he didn't even know which enemies to watch for—

And then the rage slid away, because his potion sensed and subdued it. Harry was left shaken and determined, but not sure that he would be able to carry out his determination.

"Don't go to sleep, Draco," he said grimly. "We're going to talk about this now."

Draco opened his eyes and stared at him for a moment. Harry supposed he'd really thought his little act would get him out of talking about this. He averted his eyes then and started picking at the blankets.

"These potions make me loopy and sleepy, Harry," he whispered. "You saw the effects yesterday. I took the same potions then that I took now, so—"

"But we have some time before you go to sleep." Harry clenched his hands together to keep from shaking Draco. "Come on, Draco. Tell it as shortly and clearly as you can."

"I can't," Draco whispered.

Harry opened his mouth to retort, and then paused, studying Draco's expression. There was a hint of pallor to it, a hint of terror. And there was a hint of subdued pride, too, but Harry thought that was the smallest ingredient.

"You magically can't, right?" Harry said flatly. "There's some kind of spell that will invoke consequences on you or me if you do."

Draco met his eyes, an expression of relief running across his face like rain. "Yes, that's exactly right."

Harry shook his head. "And you think that the same enemy collapsed your building last night as did this to you?" The rage was rising again, though the potion fell on it like soothing balm and kept melting it away. The conflict of emotions made Harry rather dizzy, struggling for balance.

"I don't know about that," Draco said. "I suppose she—" And then his breath came out in a great wheezing rush, and stopped.

Harry refused to allow his fear to overwhelm him, or his conflicting rage and calm to make him slow. He pointed his wand at Draco and cast a charm that would force his lungs to labor and move, providing oxygen to his body, even if his throat closed up, which he thought was the thing happening now.

Draco gasped harshly, and then began to breathe in a normal pattern again. He nodded to Harry, thumping himself on the chest.

"You don't know what the spells' limitations are, or you could just talk around them," Harry said, more flatly than before. Draco nodded. "Even identifying your enemy in writing might do that to you?"

Draco hesitated, then nodded. But no spell reacted. Apparently simply replying to Harry's random guesses was safe.

"You stupid fucker," Harry said, but there was less heat than he wanted there to be behind his voice. "Why in the world did you let it get this bad? Why didn't you talk to me *before* these spells settled into place, or set up precautions of your own?"

Draco felt a flicker of guilt. It did hurt to remember how stupid he'd acted around Daphne, how confident and naïve he'd been to believe that he could simply bore her into ending the liaison at any time he chose, and therefore he didn't need limits or restrictions. She was in control now precisely because of that.
But at the same time, answering Harry's questions would mean talking about Daphne. And Harry already knew he couldn't do that. And Draco had no wish to be reminded of his own stupidity when he was already dosed up on pain potions.

"I don't want to talk about this," he said again, and shut his eyes.

A hand settled on his shoulder, inescapable, too firm. Draco opened his eyes. "You're hurting me," he whispered.

"I don't believe that for a second," Harry said. "If your shoulder was hurt, you would have told me and had me get a separate potion for it." Draco silently cursed his own detailed descriptions of the pain potions. "Now. I want to know as much information as you *can* tell me about this person, and how to keep you safe."

"I *can't* tell you!" Draco snapped. "What do you want me to do? Keep speaking and keep running into the limits of spells that might do *anything*, make me stop breathing or cause me to have a heart attack or chop my arm off?"

"I need to know what you can tell by any means possible," Harry said calmly. Always so calmly. *God,* that pissed Draco off. "Hermione has some skill at Legilimency, though she doesn't like it, so she doesn't use it often. She should be here in a few hours. I want you to let her have access to your memories—"

"*She's* a Legilimens, idiot!" Draco snapped. "Why do you think I don't know anything about these spells? She's altered my mind so I can't remember them! And God knows the traps that Granger's unsophisticated poking around in my mind would spring!"

He stopped, panting for breath, and surprised he'd managed to get that much out without one of Daphne's spells biting him. Maybe she didn't care that her enemies knew she was a Legilimens. Maybe that would make the confrontation between her and Harry inevitable, and bring him into a trap.

Fear seared Draco's skin. Yes, that had to be the explanation. There was no way that she would have simply *forgotten* one of the major clues that might point out her identity.

And Harry was standing with his head cocked, eyes bright as a hunting hawk's, obviously already making provisions to hunt Daphne down.

"A female Legilimens," Harry said. "Someone you felt comfortable enough with to ask for a great deal of money. That certainly does narrow down the candidates. I can easily have Hermione do the research."

"Harry, you've got to give it up," Draco whispered. "I don't want to lose you, too. I like you. I'd like to start dating you—"

"Really?" One of Harry's eyebrows shot up. "And here I thought the idea was repulsive to you, the way you reacted when I reached out."

Draco hissed between his teeth. Well, he'd made one mistake by speaking the truth. Might as well follow that up and compound it with more.

"What I find repulsive is that potion," he snapped. "How in the world you can stand to be on it, to be so calm and inhuman all the fucking time, is more than I can understand. You don't look at all different when you take Veritaserum, did you know that? And what I want is you the way you were in school, sparking temper and excitement and passion. I can't have that as long as you're on the potion."

Harry had fallen a step back. To Draco's outrage, though, he didn't appear to be greatly affected. His other eyebrow had risen to join the first, that was all.

"Well," he said. "If what you want is the Hogwarts schoolboy, you can't have that anyway, even if I was off the potion. That boy has matured out of existence. I wouldn't get the same pleasure from calling you a sneaky Slytherin now."

"Not *just* that," Draco said. "Will you comprehend it better if I say that I want the whole of you, that not knowing some of you is driving me mad? That I like jealous lovers, and you could be that around me, and I wouldn't mind? That I find your magic arousing, and even being so close to something powerful and Dark wouldn't change me the way it changed your she-Weasel? That what's most important about that incident to me is that you *stopped*?"

"Stop talking," Harry whispered, watching Draco intently.

"What I want is *you*," Draco said. "Not some inferior, potion-altered version of you."

Harry turned and walked out of the room. Draco let his head fall back on the pillow and closed his eyes. It was for the best the argument had stopped when it did, anyway. The pain potions were whirling and buzzing in his head, and making it whirl and buzz in response.

Harry couldn't get his breath. He tried twice to write a letter to Hermione about hunting a female Legilimens, and in the end he had to put his head between his knees and breathe deeply until he stopped hyperventilating.
Draco wasn't afraid of him.

Draco wasn't afraid of him.

He had heard the worst possible truth about Harry, and whole, not in broken bits and pieces the way he'd confessed it to Ron and Hermione, and still he wanted to be with him.

Harry had no idea what to do about the new, fragile feeling that opened in him at the words, or the way that feeling exalted him, or the way it depressed him.

But calm was a habit of six years' standing, now. In a few minutes, he managed to soothe his troubled breathing, lift his head, and reach for the quill and ink.

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Chapter: 12

Thanks for all the reviews!

Chapter Twelve—From the Ashes

The next time Draco woke, his brain was clear of the mists of pain potion, and when he shifted cautiously, his leg ached instead of paining him so insistently that he knew he couldn't rest. He waited for a moment, but Harry didn't bother to break down the door this time. Draco hoped he'd removed the spells that alerted him when Draco woke, so they could both have some actual *privacy.*

For a moment, he worried about what Harry might have discovered about Daphne already, and then he forced himself to dismiss that. It wasn't as though he could stop Granger's research from his bed.

Then he tried to worry about what he'd said to Harry concerning his variant of the Desire potion, but he couldn't be too concerned on that front, either. As long as Harry didn't dump him out into the street and declare they were finished as business partners, Draco counted the consequences as mild.

He *did* have to think about what would happen to his business with his shop in ruins, though.

He ground his teeth together, and then dug his fingers into his palms until his nails ached. He was envisioning the rubble the shop must have become if Harry had managed to find only a few of his possessions. He thought of his sanctuary in his upper rooms, destroyed. His bed would be crushed, too, and all the work he had put into his wards and the enchanted windows wasted.

Rage blew through him like a sandstorm. Draco welcomed it, and even used his wand—which Harry had thoughtfully left on the bedside table—to cast a silencing charm so he could scream to his heart's content.

Two screams did it, actually. Already Draco's rational control was reasserting itself, along with a Malfoy's desperate need not to do anything too undignified.

So. He had lost his shop. He had lost the stock of Desire potion. He had lost his home. He had lost most of his potions ingredients and completed potions. He made himself face and accept the losses, and then he made himself turn the question around and look at it from another direction.

What did he still *have?*

A fairly strong Gringotts account. The recipe for the Desire potion safely locked in his head. Harry's support and friendship, and a home to live in whilst he plotted to recover what was *his*.

None of those things were small, Draco told himself, over his rapid breathing and heartbeat and the urge to pound his fist into the pillow. They weren't as much as he *should* have, considering all the time and effort and money he'd invested in his shop over the years, but they weren't small, either.

He lifted his hands in front of his eyes and stretched them out.

He had, too, his knowledge of potions and the skill in his fingers to create them. He was an *artist*—something he hadn't remembered much lately because he'd been so busy playing politician and salesman and frustrated lover.

He would not let go. He would not back down. He would not let his enemies destroy him. He was Draco Malfoy, who was better than that. He was a master brewer, more skilled than that. He was *himself* and all the attributes and skills he'd developed over the years, stronger than that.

He bared his teeth in a smile that would have frightened his enemies, could they have seen it.

He would pursue three parallel courses. It would take him time and energy, but he had more than enough of the former, especially considering that he wouldn't be moving about for a while, and he had never had trouble summoning the latter.

First, he would try to discover who had destroyed his shop. It was an odd tactic for any of his enemies to employ—though it was possible Daphne had done it simply to see what would happen. Nott and Diggory were more cautious than that, and they appeared to have focused more extensively on Diggory's campaign at the moment. He'd been all over Britain in the last few days, making passionate speeches.

But no matter. Draco would learn their motives, and he would learn the identities of the lackeys they had hired (as he doubted either Cordelia or Diggory would have been foolish enough to approach his shop themselves). And when he found them, as well as indisputable proof of their involvement, he would force them to repay him. How they did that—through open trial or blackmail—hardly mattered. Besides, he probably wouldn't be able to predict which tactic he needed until he learned who had cast the earthquake spell.

Second, he would demand that Harry join him in more brewing of Desire. The potion had a reputation greater than its detractors could manage; Draco had received five owls yesterday—or the day before yesterday, it would be now—asking about stocks and for multiple vials to be sent by owl, even though those posting him were too chickenshit to enter the shop themselves. The demand would recover, and they needed to have a supply to meet it.

Third, he would buy the ingredients necessary to brew those black-market potions that turned the quickest profit. He still had his contacts among brewers and distributors—people who had never

been his creditors but *had* been his debtors. If Diggory and Nott had managed to discover them, Draco would eat his own wand. If Daphne had probed his mind to learn who they were, it would have done her no good. Draco knew only handles, not true names.

He would build up his money. He would make sure that he started establishing the base of an independent fortune again, and if that took some time, so be it. He would outlast his opponents. He could *do* that, too.

And—

Draco paused and blinked up at the ceiling. He had counted on Harry's support, but he had forgotten one of the greatest benefits of having it.

Harry had powerful magic. Draco had not even thought of rebuilding the shop on the same spot so far, even though he owned the site, because the cost to hire wizarding architects would plunge him too far into debt. But Harry had the magical strength of three, or at least it seemed so, and Granger was capable of researching the necessary spells.

What if he appealed to their friendship—and the uneasy something-more with Harry—to ask Harry to rebuild his shop?

Draco would have rejected the thought out of hand only a few days ago. His pride was too great. He needed to do things himself. It was how he had made his living since the war, how he lived with himself from day to day. But he'd broken silence on his feelings about Harry's potion, and Harry was close to finding out the truth about Daphne anyway. Couldn't Draco swallow the tatters of his pride that remained?

And Harry wouldn't think less of him for asking.

Granger might.

Draco snorted. Granger was useful, but her moral approval and disapproval wasn't something he courted. His life would not collapse if she gave him another lecture on the morality of the Desire potion, or if she looked at him with pity in her eyes, though of course he would not enjoy it.

Ask. The worst he can say is no.

And if Harry did say no, Draco had his three other plans to keep him busy, comfortable, and filled with a sense of purpose.

He grinned at the ceiling again. *Daphne, Cordelia, Diggory, I could almost feel sorry for you. You'll think I'm defeated when you hear the news, and it simply isn't so.*

Harry blinked when he drew the scroll tied to the tawny owl's leg off and read what was written there. He'd sent an owl to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy with a message about Draco's health

yesterday, and hadn't received a reply. This message, though, was sealed with the Malfoy crest and had spiky writing that was certainly *snobbish* enough to be Lucius Malfoy's.
Harry snorted to himself. Evidently his friendly feelings for Draco didn't extend to his father, though that was hardly a surprise.

Dear Mr. Potter:

Thank you for contacting us about our son. Due to circumstances beyond our control, the chances that we can help are slim. We will require an apology from Draco first, for certain hurtful things he said the last time he saw us.

Sincerely,

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry rolled his eyes and dropped the scroll next on him on the table. "No reply," he told the owl, which turned its back with immense dignity and flew out the window. Harry spent a moment more staring at the scroll; he hadn't expected much help from Malfoy Manor, but that Lucius would try to make it into a bargain was outrageous. *Who's the parent here, and who's the child?*

The wards buzzed to let him know someone was near the front door of the flat. Harry rose warily to his feet, wand in hand, and then sensed Hermione's familiar magical signature. He still went through the motions of testing the wards before he opened them, though, both because Draco's safety rode on his shoulders and because Hermione would give him hell if he didn't.

She nodded at him briskly and slipped inside. At once, she held out a piece of parchment towards him. "I brought you the information you asked for," she said in an officious tone.

Harry opened his mouth to ask her to be more specific, but Hermione moved her wand in a sharp motion, and sparkling green-gold letters appeared in the air before Harry. *Talk openly in a moment. Diggory and Nott are trying to spy on us.*

Clamping his lips together, Harry nodded and looked briefly down at the parchment. Hermione had compiled a list of three names, all female, followed by a bunch of numbers Harry didn't grasp right away but thought were probably financial evaluations in Galleon terms. All three, then, were female Legilimens who fit the right profile.

"Where is Malfoy?" Hermione asked in a normal tone.

"In there," Harry said absently, pointing to the bedroom, whilst he read the three names over and over again. *Maria Edgewood. Daphne Greengrass. Alexandra Roland. Which of them is Draco likeliest to have contacted? They all seem familiar, but I've probably heard of them before because of their wealth.*

"It seems your fate to give up your bed to others, Harry," Hermione murmured, and then ducked

into the bedroom before he could protest. She shut the door. Harry blinked, but shrugged. If she wanted privacy from him, she could have it. If she wanted privacy from Nott and Diggory, then presumably she wanted to talk to Draco about the spying devices they were using.

He turned back to the parchment, as if his staring could make the three names give up their secrets.

Draco blinked when Granger appeared in front of him, and still more when she shut the door. He wondered if she was counting on finding him weak and vulnerable from the collapse of his shop. Did she imagine she would get something out of him that she couldn't get with Harry listening, or at an ordinary time?
The bruised weakling you imagine doesn't exist, Draco thought, and shifted upright in his bed so Granger wouldn't have a psychological advantage over him.

Granger rolled her eyes as if she knew exactly what he was thinking and found it ridiculous—which she couldn't unless she was using her amateur Legilimency on him, and Draco didn't think she was—and then spun her wand in a counterclockwise pattern. Something small and gray dropped off her sleeve. She cast another complicated spell, and a hovering dome of blue light appeared over them. Draco felt his eyes widen; he was reluctantly impressed that Granger knew such a sophisticated anti-eavesdropping spell, one that would fill the ears of any listeners with a stultifying abstract discussion of the differences between wizards and Muggles.

"I found this on my sleeve after someone in my Department brushed past me on my way here," she said, and held the gray thing that had dropped off her sleeve towards him.

Draco took it and stared hard. It was shaped like a tiny moth, with wide-spread wings and glittering blue jewels for eyes. Most people, finding it, would assume it was harmless, a cheap bauble dropped by a passer-by.

Because Draco used a variety of shops in wizarding Britain that most people didn't even suspect existed, he knew better. This was a Flutter-Ear, a serious version of the Extendable Ear the Weasley twins had created. It created a magical connection, rather than a physical one, between the ears of a listener in the central location where the Flutter-Ear had been brought to life and the target. Distance was no object to its working, and it honed in on the sound of its target's voice. Diggory and Nott, of course, would have chosen the most sophisticated version available on the market.

And it was genius to try and plant it on Granger rather than Harry or Draco. Granger would be less suspicious of the device even if she discovered it because she was less important to Nott and Diggory, and she knew it. And of course, in the Ministry, she was subject to many more chances to have the Flutter-Ear successfully planted.

Except, Draco thought, as he raised his eyes to Granger's hard, glittering ones, *they didn't count on how suspicious Granger is, or how experienced from helping Harry in his half-witted adventures.*

"It's what you suspect it is," he said. "And yes, I'd suspect Diggory and Nott of using this to try and spy on you."

"Not your precious Legilimens?" Granger asked, taking the Flutter-Ear back and sticking it on her sleeve again. Draco arched an eyebrow. Amusing, and amazing, how they had agreed without words that it would be best if their enemies were fooled for just a little while longer.

"Keep away from the subject, Granger." Draco could feel his breath growing short just by speaking of Daphne. He coughed and cast a glance at the blue dome of her anti-eavesdropping spell. Already breaking apart. He would have to make this quick. "I'd like you to try and track down the wizard who destroyed my shop."

"Why?"

"Because you're Harry's friend, and the person who did this may threaten him too—especially once they learn that *he* rescued me." Draco could feel himself bristling a little. With one disdainful word, Granger had seemed to question his continued existence as well as his right to Harry's support.

The infuriating woman rolled her eyes. "That's not what I meant, Malfoy. I mean, why should I do that instead of something else, like tracking down She-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? Harry would probably like to be the one who found *this* particular culprit. He was quite—eloquent—in his letter about what he felt on discovering your life threatened." Her gaze grew wide and questioning for a moment.

Draco wasn't about to let her see the delicate state of emotional affairs between himself and Harry. If Harry wanted to tell her, let him. "Because I think you should give—*her*—to Harry instead." That allusion seemed to neatly evade Daphne's spell. Draco allowed himself to relax a little. "You didn't see his face when he realized what—*she*—had done. I think he thinks of the sanctity of my mind as more important than the collapse of my shop. Besides, you're more mobile, and tracking down this person will require more mobility. Just staying close to me may help Harry discover *her*, since he can watch my face and listen to my words for hints." And that Draco would have Harry nearby when they began to replenish their stocks of the Desire potion would be a benefit. Besides, he wasn't entirely sure that he wanted to trust himself to Harry's wards alone just yet.

Granger eyed him, then smiled thinly. "That makes sense. I suppose I should stop looking for dark motives behind your every suggestion."

No, you shouldn't, Draco thought, smiling blandly back. *Especially since I'm about to start brewing illegal potions that would make you throw a fit. But if you want to pretend I'm upright, Gryffindor, and moral, I'll pretend with you.*

"I'll ask Harry about what he saw that night," Granger was saying.

"Precious little." Draco let his breath out on a sigh. "My wards were so weak by then that it wouldn't have taken a wizard of any extraordinary power to get inside them and cast the Local Earthquake Spell. And that's one almost anyone can do once he knows the incantation."

"But not just anyone with the knowledge and the power would have a reason to want your shop destroyed," Granger said. "Logic, Malfoy. It's something wizards don't use enough of, but I've never entirely abandoned that portion of my heritage." She tossed him an ironic salute as her blue dome dissolved, and departed to talk to Harry.

Draco leaned back against the pillow. It was almost time for one of the milder versions of the pain potion, one that would speed the last mending of his ribs and eliminate the pain creeping back into his broken leg. He arranged his face in the most pathetic expression possible.

It couldn't hurt to remind Harry that he was a *patient*, one who needed *special care.*

Harry nodded as Hermione cast an anti-eavesdropping spell, then explained the device to him and who had put it there. She was going to hunt for the person who had collapsed Draco's shop, she said. Harry told her what he knew, but the cloak and the indistinct voice were all of that. He had the idea the person had been male, but that was only his hurried, fleeting impression, taken at a time when he was just beginning to understand the danger—and it didn't eliminate Diggory. "I'll hunt him anyway," Hermione said. "You stay here and take care of Malfoy, and do what you can to get the name out of him." She paused a moment, then let her finger brush along the edge of the parchment. "I did manage to find out that Daphne Greengrass and Maria Edgewood were both in Slytherin."

And then she was gone, the dome *popping* above her as she went. Harry was glad to see her stride determined and her eyes fierce. He was doubly glad that she had her own private stock of a few vials of Desire potion, so she wouldn't be as hurt by the collapse of Draco's shop.

He checked the time, started, and fetched the pain potions for Draco. Draco greeted him with a wan smile as he came through the bedroom door and examined the vials carefully before he drank them. Harry wasn't insulted by his care. The only potions he felt absolutely comfortable around were Desire variants, and the last thing he wanted was Draco poisoned because he'd swallowed what Harry gave him too blindly.

"Thank you," Draco whispered as he handed the empty vials to Harry, blinking pathetically up at him. "I have a few favors to ask you."

Harry's heart melted. At that moment, watching the weariness cling to Draco's lashes and the corners of his mouth, he would have given up all thought of chasing the female Legilimens who had done this to him, as long as he could remain by Draco's bed and give him every care he needed.

But the calm granted him by his own potion made it easier to grasp reality, too. What this witch

had done once, she could do again. He sat down beside the bed and took Draco's hand. "What do you need?"

"Ink and parchment first, to make a list of ingredients." Draco turned his head towards Harry, and his eyes shone with determination, courage, excitement, hope—too many things to name. Harry caught his breath. Draco didn't appear to notice, but the hold of his fingers in Harry's grew a bit tighter. "We need to start brewing the Desire potion again as soon as possible. And I'll have other potions that I need to brew. Viable sellers, to build my money back up." Draco wrinkled his nose, looking resigned. "I promised myself when I began doing very well with my apothecary that there were certain potions I'd never brew again, but I certainly didn't anticipate the *destruction* of my entire apothecary."

Harry hesitated, and then spoke, because as much as he was proud of Draco in that moment, his own conscience and Hermione both would have killed him for not asking this question. "Are any of the potions illegal?"

"Several of the love philters," Draco said, unfazed, "and one of the potions that clouds the brain. Yes."

Harry shifted away from him.

"None of them are like the potions that Nott and Diggory accused me of brewing and selling through your she-Weasel." Draco paused, probably because he saw the expression on Harry's face at the name he'd given Ginny, but didn't apologize. "The *reason* they're illegal is because the Ministry can't agree on how to regulate the ingredients going into them, Harry," he said patiently. "It's the ingredients and not the potions themselves that are the problem. There's an enormous bother about getting hold of dried Eos flower, for example, because it's endangered in one of the countries where it's grown and the others try to make exporting it illegal."

"Still," Harry said, "the last thing you need right now is to get in *further* trouble with the Ministry, and do Nott and Diggory's work for them."

Draco snorted. "I know the channels, Harry. I've done this for a *long* time. And if you really want to stop anyone at all from selling love potions, why don't you march down to Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes and tell them you disapprove?"

"They don't sell the illegal kind," Harry said uncomfortably.

"Oh, yes, they do," Draco said. "As well as potions that cloud the brain worse than the one I'll brew. Theirs imitates a permanent Confundus Charm. Mine simply makes it a little more difficult to remember certain things, and is used mostly by people with war trauma."

Harry swallowed. Draco could sound so reasonable, but Harry had to remind himself of his own bias in favor of the other man. "Then why is it regulated?" he muttered. "That sounds like a perfectly legal use."

"Ingredients, again." Draco's hand squeezed his. "If it helps, I'll be sending you after *substitutes* for the banned ingredients. I wouldn't want to trust you to walk into a black market, all Gryffindor guilelessness and famous scar, and try to receive service."

Harry ducked his head.

"Of course, my potions will still be illegal, because I can't change the law overnight, and because I'm not about to owl the Ministry that I've discovered perfectly safe and legal substitutes that also cost less." Draco snorted again. "I've got *some* business sense left.

"I'll ask for your help with that, and your help brewing the Desire potion, and—do you think Granger will be willing to help us study architectural spells? I want to rebuild the shop, and I think your magic will be strong enough."

Harry's own hold on Draco's hand grew tighter as he listened. Draco spoke calmly, with a grim certainty shadowing his words. He didn't sound *happy*, but neither did he sound like a man whose entire life had fallen down the night before last. He had managed to absorb the blow and go on.

He was taking measures to cope with it, to do what he could, the same way that Harry had invented his own measure to cope with the aftermath of the Incident when he threatened Ginny.

How could he refuse to help?

How could he feel anything but pride for the man who sat in this bed, wounded, ruined, with his enemies still out to get him, and planned how to rise from the ashes?

Harry finally became aware, when Draco coughed, that he was still waiting for an answer to his question about Hermione.

"Yes," Harry murmured, and that single word answered more than just the single question.

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Chapter: 13

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Thirteen—Artistry and Permanent Decisions

Harry peered in worry at the note that Hermione had assigned an inconspicuous barn owl to

deliver to him. It had only seven words on it.

On trail. Don't worry. Very close. Hermione.

But Harry *did* worry, because the man—or woman—who had brought down Draco's shop with a Local Earthquake Spell hadn't worried about murder once. Maybe things would be different in the broad daylight, but on the other hand, maybe Hermione would pursue him into a dark corner where he thought he could get away with another attempt. And Hermione mostly dealt with people who didn't want house-elves to be freed. She was fine in a legal argument, not so much in a duel.

"Harry! I need your help to brew the Desire potion!"

Harry sighed and laid down the note. At the moment, he had no idea where Hermione was, anyway. And he had to trust her to handle herself, since he couldn't help.

He went to do what he *could* do, which had been the tone of most of his actions within the past year.

Draco blinked and wiped a hand across his eyes, shifting in the chair he sat in to spare his weak leg. As usual, once they had finished brewing a cauldron of the Desire potion, a strong magical connection existed between them, caused by the tradeoff of power as they worked together. A few modifications to the brewing process had lessened that connection, so Draco no longer wanted to turn and pounce Harry, but nothing could make it cease to exist.

And, at the moment, it seemed stronger than normal.

Draco cast a sideways glance at Harry, who was frowning into the cauldron and counting the ingredients as if he thought they had forgotten something. Draco knew they hadn't. This was a perfect brew, better than any they'd ever achieved. Trusting each other in the wake of the destruction of the apothecary had been a wise decision, Draco thought. He could rely on Harry's calm strength.

He'd just like to be able to rely on *all* of Harry.

As if he'd heard Draco's thoughts, Harry looked up. He gave something that might have been meant as a smile, but looked more like a grimace to Draco. "Something's off," he said quietly. "Do you feel it?"

"Yeah." Draco clasped his hands together. He didn't want to kiss Harry. He *did* want to run a hand up and down his arm, just to make sure he was there. It wouldn't take much to satisfy the magical bond, but they really shouldn't have been feeling this at all. "Are you sure that you cast the spells with a normal level of strength?" Harry had a tendency to fling himself headlong into the brewing process and use more magic than he really needed, especially because his estimation of his control over his power was usually bad.

"Yes." Harry gave him a mildly offended glance, then frowned and sucked in his breath through his nostrils.

"What?" Draco demanded.

"It's like—it's like something I felt, briefly, the night your shop fell down." Harry examined his fingernails as if that would speed along his recovery of the memory. "I—didn't notice it at the time, but I went through the wards on your stairs *way* too easily. And I really shouldn't have been able to stop the Local Earthquake Spell that much." He met Draco's eyes, his own flickering with several emotions, none of which lasted long. *Of course not,* Draco thought. "I should at least have bruises from falling blocks with as long as it took me to wake you. I don't."

Draco shrugged. "You're a powerful wizard. I've always known—"

"It's more than that," Harry actually interrupted, causing Draco to blink and fall silent. Harry let people finish saying their piece most of the time, as if he didn't really think his words were that important. "It's like my magic came to my call faster. Or I found the strength I really needed to help you, even though I shouldn't have had it." He glanced at Draco. "I've *never* had the power to alter the laws of magic around me, no matter how much I wanted to."

"Could your control over your magic be thinning further?" Draco shifted a bit in his chair, trying not to show his own discomfort. Harry would become impossible to brew with if he *really* couldn't use his magic.

"I don't think so. It didn't feel like that. In fact, I think I had better control of it than I usually do." Harry cocked his head. "Didn't you notice that about the brewing?"

Draco nodded reluctantly. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, Harry had seemed to have a finer touch with Draco's magic this time, and he had handed his own magic off to Draco more firmly.

"It's not coming more fiercely," Harry muttered. "It's coming *faster*. I wish I understood what the fuck that was all about."

Draco reached out to touch his shoulder, but likely they were too distant for Harry to notice the gesture, and it was probably only the magical bond making him reach out anyway. He coughed and used the hand to scratch the side of his face instead. "If you think it's dangerous, a spell Diggory and Nott used, maybe—"

"I don't know any spell that does anything like this." Harry gnawed his lip. "But I can ask Hermione—no, wait, I can look myself." He chuckled grimly. "Hermione has enough to do right now, I think."

"I didn't force her to track down the person who destroyed my shop."

"I know that." Harry shook his head quickly and smoothed his fingers in a running motion down the side of his face, which told Draco how worried he was about the change in his magic. "But I still should get used to acting on my own." He gave Draco a wan smile and offered a hand. "Do you need help to get back to my bed?"

"I'll try staying out of bed for a few more hours." Draco needed to rest before he brewed the next potion, the first of the love philters he hoped would get his shop back on its feet, but he wanted to rest sitting up. "I think we should talk about something else."

"The architectural spells?" Harry looked embarrassed. "I'm still willing to help you rebuild your shop if I can, but with my magic changing, I don't know—"

Luckily for them both, Draco had never had any problem interrupting people. "Not that. What I said about wanting you off the potion before I started dating you." He raised an eyebrow when Harry blanched. "Yes, I might never have said it if not for the pain potions, but I'm not sorry I did. Have you thought about this at *all*?"

Harry had tried to *avoid* thinking about it, really.

It was just—nothing would change any time soon. He couldn't stop taking the potion, partially because he still didn't trust himself without it and partially because it would make Ginny more afraid of him. That meant Draco wouldn't date him.

And he couldn't allow the fact that Draco wasn't afraid of him to change his life. Lots of people weren't afraid of him. Hermione, for example.

Being confronted with something he'd effectively pushed out of his head meant he flushed and stammered like a schoolboy. But he did his best to overcome that. He was a mature adult now, thanks in part to the potion. He lifted his head and met Draco eye to eye. "I don't see what there is to talk about," he said. "You've made your decision. I've made mine."

"I don't think yours is permanent," Draco said.

Harry suffered a serious spasm of irritation. How did Draco *do* that? Just by countering someone else's opinion, he managed to make it seem as if that person's opinion was the height of self-deluding stupidity.

Funny, said an acid voice in the back of his head that he hadn't heard in a very long time. It was the voice of temptation that had sometimes plagued him when he was first developing his own potion, telling him that his actions were too extreme and unneeded. *Hermione doesn't take his counterarguments that way.*

"And why not?" Harry forced himself to lean casually on the table next to the cauldron of Desire potion. Then he had to move as the cauldron wobbled, and, all right, maybe that hadn't been the

best decision. But that didn't mean *all* his choices were wrong. "I've been taking this potion for six years now. You're a relatively recent addition to my life. What makes you sure you'll stay?"

Draco froze, eyes glittering, and only then did Harry realize how hurtful his words were. He winced. "Damn," he said. "I just—I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me." His emotions sometimes seemed to go through brief periods when they made him feel like a child being bounced in the middle of a blanket. "Of course you'll stay as a friend, even if we never date."

Draco eyed him for a few moments more, then nodded and continued in a bland voice. "I don't think it's permanent because you *want* me. You were the one moving towards a romance whilst I still resisted it."

"And now that I know you don't want it, I won't move in that direction again," Harry said quickly.

"You can stop desiring me." Draco didn't even make it a question, just a flat, impossible statement.

"I can stop making you uncomfortable," Harry said. "I can stop demanding more of you than you're willing to give. I have a lot of practice at controlling myself, incredible though that might appear." He grinned sheepishly, hoping Draco would pick up on that tone in the conversation.

Draco didn't. "And if you do just one thing that I want, you can have something else you long for." His words were soft, like the slide of scales along Harry's body. "Is it such a great sacrifice, Harry? Or do you really value your potion-induced calm more than you value me?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. He hadn't become this age, with his fame, without being able to recognize when someone tried to manipulate him. "That's an unfair question."

"I don't see why." Draco shifted around to brace his weight more comfortably on his elbow. *He* looked elegant when he leaned on something, of course, Harry thought in envy. "You prize yourself as the person you've become. That's obvious. I just wonder if you could value yourself even more if you won me."

"Without the potion, you *know* what I'd become," Harry said, drawn into the discussion despite himself. "You can claim that you like dangerous, jealous lovers, but I'd be too much even for you."

Draco closed his eyes and hummed. "I think you underestimate my experience."

"Maybe." Harry folded his arms, and tried not to shake as the memory of the Incident reared over him like a dragon's shadow once more. "I'm still not doing it."

"Hmm. For now, no, you're not." Draco smiled at him, and then began to count ingredients off on his fingers. "I need to brew a love philter next. Please bring me the small white pebble with a

hole in the middle, the white rose petals, the red rose petals, and that vial of green liquid that smells like honey."

Harry blinked, thrown off by the rapid change of subject, and then reflected that Draco had probably *meant* him to be thrown off. He would show he was better than that. He rose and retreated into the next room to fetch the ingredients, making sure Draco could see how stiff with dignity his back was.

He won't win. He might think he will, but he won't.

He paused when he reached the drawing room. Someone stood just outside his wards, not pressing against them but hovering there. Anxiously? Fearfully? Harry couldn't read that much from this distance. He did know the magical signature was unfamiliar.

Quietly, he cast one of the spells that activated the tiny wizarding camera planted in the corner where his doorway joined the wall of the corridor. It used a kind of film Harry had invented but never tried to market, because the pictures always returned to the inventor of the film. The camera snapped without a flash, and a moment later, the photograph materialized in front of him.

Harry frowned as he scanned the picture. The witch revealed was very young, and wore flowery pink robes that no one over sixteen would be caught dead in. That was probably her age, in fact. She had brilliant blue eyes, scraggly brown hair, and a face flushed with giggling. She kept edging up to his wards, peering at them, and then edging away again, one hand clapped over his mouth.

Harry sighed. *A fan. Probably figured out where I live from all the reporting the* Prophet's *been doing about the Desire situation. Or maybe one of Diggory's people at the Ministry "accidentally" leaked the location.*

Luckily, it probably wouldn't take much to shoo her away. Perhaps a sight of his face would be enough to make her run screaming with delight and terror; that had happened several times before Harry took this relatively unobtrusive flat in a Muggle area. Or he could offer her an autograph, or a smile, or a photo—

But then his caution caught up with him. He hadn't *read* a newspaper article that revealed the location of his home. And launching fans after him would be a relatively pathetic angle even for Diggory. *Irritating* Harry wouldn't be enough to make him change his goal of supporting Draco, after all, no matter how satisfactory it might be for Diggory personally.

They did have enemies, including enemies who might use a seemingly harmless disguise to creep up on them.

The giggling witch was coming back again; Harry could feel her just at the edges of his wards. He shook his head and decided he didn't like her remaining there. She could study the strength of his wards if he let her stay too long, and if this was, say, Draco's Legilimens enemy, or the person

who had knocked his shop down, she might find a way through his defenses.

Harry waved his wand and poured magical strength into his wards. The normally invisible lines grew brilliant and flashed; the normally silent weight of his power coagulated and dripped like cold blood onto the witch's face. She fell back a step, the sound of her giggles suddenly ceasing. And then Harry felt the minute shiver of difference in her magic that meant she'd drawn her wand.

Harry used the wizarding camera to snap another photo of her, and then growled under his breath. He would have to hurt her soon, or at least do something that the Muggles living around him would find it hard to dismiss. He *hated* feeling helpless like this, as if he could barely protect Draco, as if his choices for helping his friends were restricted by things outside himself.

His magic suddenly poured into him, a flood, a whirlwind. Harry gasped aloud and reached out, acting as he must, *using* that magic instead of allowing it to build up inside him. He briefly imagined the witch discouraged into leaving, and the magic answered, seeming to choose its own form as it went.

An incredibly targeted beam of power seized the witch's heart and made it labor faster than normal. She wouldn't be able to tell anything was unnaturally wrong with her—though she might suspect it—but Harry heard her gasp and felt her stagger in an uneven pattern away from the wards.

A moment later, she laughed, and then ran away lightly, though her heart was probably still laboring.

Harry leaned on the door and shut his eyes. The more powerful magic still jumped around inside him, exulting, as pleased with itself as a Muggle child who'd won one of those pathetic contests that had been popular in Harry's primary school. Then it lay down again when Harry felt a burst of irritation.

It obeyed him, he thought in wonder and dread. But he didn't understand *why* it obeyed him, or exactly why he was digging up pieces of his magical strength that seemed to have been buried until then.

He glanced down at the second photograph of the witch that had materialized in front of him, picked it up, and stuffed it into his back pocket. Draco was calling, and Harry needed to bring him the ingredients for his love philter. Then he needed to go off by himself and think for a while.

It seemed that his life was once again altering, whether or not he wanted it to.

Draco didn't miss Harry's jumpiness when he brought the ingredients to him, but he ignored it for the nonce. He had to concentrate on brewing this potion; though he remembered the ingredients and the procedure perfectly, it had been years since he made it, and there was always the

possibility of something going wrong.

Cauldron up, fire blazing beneath it, white rose petals tossed in first. A thin layer of conjured water, then the white stone. He had no stirring rod near at hand and had forgotten to send Harry for one, but he could cast a spell that would stir the water counterclockwise seven times, as every apothecary worth the title could, and the properties of a stirring rod were not essential to this potion. He chanted the spell quietly, letting the words fall in between pauses in his breath, and smiled when the water began to bubble and boil as the spell finished.

The symbols of purity and virginity were used first in this potion because it would be used mostly on people who *were* virgins. The water between the petals and the stone, and the hole in the stone, symbolized the passage from one state to another—from true innocence to reluctant sexual awareness. Draco conjured another layer of water above the stone and stirred it again, five times clockwise, twice counter.

Then the red rose petals followed, to symbolize the passion and lust the potion would awaken. Draco's wrist curved in a perfect arch to toss the petals in; he could have used his wand, but he preferred doing this part by hand, for the sheer joy in the gestures. Then came a third layer of water, this one not allowed to slop down into the cauldron and blend with the others but suspended a few inches above the petals, revolving like a flat liquid disk. Three times counterclockwise, four times clockwise, and the potion turned red with a strong puff of smoke and began to smell like a rose garden. Draco experienced a moment's wistfulness that his parents never visited his shop. They would have loved the smell of some of the potions. Narcissa had always complained that her rose gardens never smelled quite right again after the war and the occupation of the manor house by the Death Eaters.

Draco cast a spell that would stabilize the third layer of water and make it continue to rotate, then waved his wand in an imperious motion. The vial of honey-smelling green liquid came to him. Draco placed it against his nose and inhaled with a sigh. This was water from a mountain pool in which a phoenix had dipped its tail feathers. The hardest ingredient to get, it was also the only one Draco had not dared to substitute anything for. This one was not a symbol like the stone and the flower petals; this was powerfully magical, inheriting some of the wondrous nature of the phoenix and mixing it with the purity of the high waters.

He opened the vial and waved his wand, because he couldn't rise from the chair yet and he didn't want to tug the cauldron towards him and risk upsetting the thing. A spray of green liquid rose from the vial and settled comfortably into the cauldron. *This* hovered above the spinning layer of water and began to spin itself, in the opposite direction. And once again Draco stirred it seven revolutions with his spell, this time clockwise.

He felt the moment when the separate strands of magic throbbing through the potion joined together in one great knot. He gasped and threw his head back; it was like a sexual punch in the stomach, worlds away from the horrid things Daphne had done to him. The potion sent up another puff of smoke, this one small and clear, turning to red, turning to green. The final ingredient induced a mild jealousy so that the drinker of the love philter would try to hold on to

the person who had given it to them.

And the potion was done. Draco settled back triumphantly in his chair. Yes, he still had the delicate touch of artistry in his hands and wand.

Harry exhaled hard and wiped at his eyes. It had been some time since he'd seen Draco brewing a potion Harry didn't know every step of—and, come to think of it, Harry didn't think he'd *ever* seen him brewing alone.

The consummate mastery of the movements, how he obviously knew just how the steps fit together, how he chanted that one spell as if it were a prayer…

Harry felt a surge of admiration. Joining it a moment later was a surge of envy so strong that he had to catch himself with his hand on the table.

No, no, the potion is supposed to take care of my jealousy!

The emotion was ebbing already, which made him swallow in relief, but he didn't know why he'd felt the envy in the first place—until his eyes went back to Draco and the way he turned his face slowly upwards, the relaxed glow of cooling happiness on his cheeks, and how satisfied he seemed to be with himself.

I wish I could have that passion.

Harry shifted uneasily. This was the *last* thing he needed to be worrying about, with his magic changing and Hermione in danger and a visit from one of their enemies. And yet, it was the thing he worried about. He could barely keep himself from reaching out and touching Draco's cheek just to be close to the remains of that passion.

I want it back. I want to act like that. I want to share something like that with him, because he looks so happy with it and because I want to be close to him—

But it was impossible. He had already told Draco that his decision to take the potion was permanent.

He swallowed and went back to solving problems, which he *was* good at. Tugging the photos out, he prepared to show them to Draco.

And to try to forget what he had seen, because, really, what else could he do?

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Chapter: 14

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fourteen—Close on the Trail

Draco scowled at the photos of the young witch that Harry had shown him. If he had to guess, he would say it was Daphne playacting. But she had enough people working for her that it *could* be someone in her pay.

And he couldn't express any of that to Harry without taking a chance on choking or losing control of his heart.

He lifted his eyes to Harry's concerned face and gave a tight little nod, hoping Harry would understand that, maybe by aid of the potion, without his having to speak it aloud. Harry nodded back and said, "I'm glad I didn't open the door to her." He gave the photos one more searching look, then tucked them into the pocket of his robes. "I'll look around, see what I can learn about her."

How? Draco wanted to ask. *She probably doesn't exist.* But his heart gave a little lurch just at thinking the words. Draco sighed and settled back in the chair. "Now, if you could bring me the watercress and the vial of lemon juice," he said, "I'll start on brewing the next love potion."

Harry wrinkled his nose. Draco realized he found the gesture charming, and condemned himself as hopeless. Even wounded and still on mild pain potions, he should not be so Hufflepuff. "What kind of love potion could use watercress and *lemon* juice?"

"You wouldn't taste the lemon juice in the final potion, you know," Draco muttered, "any more than you taste the dragon scale in ours."

A strange expression crossed Harry's face at the word *ours.* Draco wondered why, and then realized he would probably never know if he didn't ask. Harry was simply too used to keeping things to himself, especially emotions that he assumed would distress another person. "Does it make you uncomfortable to hear the Desire potion called ours?" he asked.

"No," Harry whispered, and Draco was startled to realize from the huskiness of his voice that he was fighting some powerful feeling. "I—like it. It makes it seem as if I can be part of the brewing process, even though I just saw you don't *need* a partner." He grinned at Draco, ducking his head so his fringe covered his eyes.

Ah. Well, Harry wouldn't be the first lover he'd impressed with his artistry as he brewed, but it was the first time it had happened without Draco making a conscious effort. He concealed his delight with a faint smile. "I will always need a partner for the Desire potion," he said. "It's the kind of thing I just can't do myself."

Harry shot him a quick glance, as if to check whether he resented that. Draco kept his face as open as possible. If the pain potions helped with that, well, all right. At least it was something to think about other than whether it had been Daphne herself or a minion at the door.

"Yes, I knew that," Harry said. His voice had turned uncertain again, his eyes guarded.

Draco narrowed his eyes a little as memory returned to him. As enjoyable as flirting with Harry was, that caution reminded him Harry was still on *his* potion. And Draco saw no reason to give himself to someone who was less than a whole person.

"See that you remember it," he said. "And think of the other ways we can be stronger together, rather than apart, no matter what we may *think* is the source of our strength." He held Harry's eyes for long moments, until Harry audibly swallowed and stepped away from him.

"Watercress and the vial of lemon juice," he muttered. "Got it." And he fled the room.

Draco leaned back in his chair and shook his head, half-amused, half-rueful. It sure was a lot of work luring a lover who didn't trust himself, and who trusted Draco's intentions everywhere but as they related to the one thing keeping them apart.

Closing in. Hermione.
Harry crumpled the parchment in his fist and suffered a momentary spasm of irritation. Just *why* could Hermione take the time to send owls to him, and yet couldn't take the time to say clearly if she was all right and what had happened?

The irritation drained quickly, of course. In a way, the owls themselves let him know she was all right. And Hermione was sensible enough to stop the chase if she was badly wounded.

Well.

Harry *thought* so, at least. He was so used to thinking of Hermione as the clever and cautious one that it sometimes startled him to remember she'd been in Gryffindor House.

Draco was brewing again, this time with the third set of ingredients Harry had brought him, which would make the potion that clouded memories and kept war veterans from suffering too much trauma. Harry had been baffled as to how moonstone, scrapings from mooncalf hooves, feathers from a winged serpent, and honey from a hawthorn flower could make such a potion. He'd longed to stay and have it explained to him. But he didn't think that would be the wisest thing right now, either for him or Draco.

What I want is you. Not some inferior, potion-altered version of you.

He couldn't stop thinking of those words. It was like the dreams he used to have of aliens taking him away when he lay under the stairs at the Dursleys, Harry thought crossly. He knew the fantasy was stupid even as he had it, but it provided him with so much stolen comfort he kept

entertaining it.

He'd been stolen away, all right, but not to a paradise, and not without a price.

The problem was, the only version of him Draco *knew* was the one on the potion. *That* was the version that had attracted him. What would happen if he came to know Harry off the potion—the "real" Harry, as Harry was sure he would call it—and he didn't like that person?

Harry didn't like that person, and he'd *been* him. The moments in the last few years when he'd forgotten to take the potion, as had happened in his worry over Hermione, had subjected him to a clashing storm of emotions that he could hardly believe he'd experienced before and survived. How had he got through his fifth year, for example, when he'd been angry at everyone all the time?

It was better, safer, not to go back to that. The man he was now stood a much better chance of wooing and winning Draco.

Except Draco had declared he wouldn't ever have him.

Harry swore softly. In search of something to distract himself, he pulled the photos of the young witch out of his pocket and stared at them again, using reason to figure out as many particulars as he could.

The witch obviously couldn't be Draco's enemy *herself.* She was too young. But she could be in the pay of someone who was, or even Polyjuiced to look like someone else whilst the enemy spied on Harry's wards. She could even have been in the pay of Diggory and Nott, though the way Draco's face had briefly worn an expression of true fear when he looked at the photos made Harry think not. Draco seemed to be more annoyed by Diggory and Nott than afraid of them.

The memory of that fear made Harry surge with the remnants of his rage, just for a moment. He wanted to protect Draco against anyone who could make him look like that. He wanted to banish the people responsible from the face of the earth. He wanted to inflict the broken bones Draco had suffered on *her*—

No! No, I don't, damn it!

Harry leaned back and shut his eyes, breathing shallowly, until the rage was gone. Then he opened his eyes and studied the witch carefully once again.

Her face wouldn't help him track her down; it was too ordinary, and probably not her real face anyway. The robes were likewise too common to be worth remembering. If he went in and asked in Madam Malkin's or at Gladrags, Harry was sure he would hear stories of two dozen robes like that sold. Her wand—

Harry sat bolt upright. *Her wand.*

Ollivander had gone into seclusion for a year after the war, probably healing from the injuries he'd sustained in Malfoy Manor, but his shop had opened again, and he still sold wands to hopeful children on their way to Hogwarts and adults looking for a replacement—though from a wheelchair now, Harry had heard. His memory for the wands that passed through his hands was still legendary.

Harry stared hard at the wand in the photo and hoped he would be able to extract enough of a description to beg Ollivander's help.

Draco narrowed his eyes. Harry was a good liar, it seemed, to people who didn't know him. Witness the way he'd lied about the reason he took his potion to the committee at the Ministry, and done it without batting an eye.
But to Draco, it was now obvious he was hiding something.

He had given Draco a sickly smile when Draco walked into the kitchen for breakfast, even though logically he should have been thrilled to see Draco moving on his own. Then he had jumped when Draco asked him how he was. Then he had scrambled after the bacon beginning to burn on the Muggle oven, muttering that he hadn't remembered *that* was there.

Draco put up with enough of that behavior to get his bacon and pumpkin juice in front of him, since he really *was* hungry. Then he took three bites and laid the fork down. Harry looked at him with a darting sideways little motion of his head no one who was innocent would have used.

"What is it?" Draco asked. "Threats against my life? Someone trying to break through the wards? I think I have a right to know, since I'm sharing the same risks you are."

Harry paused and closed his eyes. If he had been a religious sort of man, Draco would have said he was praying for strength. Then he sighed, and stood, and fetched a folded paper from the far side of the room.

It was the *Daily Prophet*. Of course it was, Draco thought as he turned it over so that he could read the lead article; Harry, perhaps in one last effort to prevent Draco from learning what it was, had handed it to him upside down. Good old *Prophet*, first reporter of calamity.

In this case, the calamity was a picture of Charlemagne Diggory, waving to a crowd who had probably gathered to hear him and looking rather sad and stern. The headline said: MOST POPULAR CANDIDATE CLAIMS DESIRE POTION EXPLOSIVE.

Draco rolled his eyes, then read quickly through the article. Diggory was, of course, claiming that the destruction of Draco's shop had been caused by the accumulated stocks of Desire potion there. He'd found, or probably bought, a brewer somewhere to give an "alchemical" explanation of how the ingredients in the Desire potion could have reacted with frequent use of powerful magic, like wards, to cause the "explosion." The brewer as much as hinted that the same thing could happen to the stomachs of wizards taking the potion who used spells above a certain level.

"Never mind that the potion is digested quickly and its magic spent in ameliorating whatever they most loathe about themselves," Draco muttered as he scanned the article. "Never *mind* that we couldn't have finished the brewing at all if the ingredients disagreed with power."

"You're all right, then?"

Draco looked up with one brow lifted at Harry. He was startled to find the other man's eyes wide with worry and fixed on him.

"Strange as it may seem to you, Harry," he said, folding the paper again and handing it back, "words like this cannot *actually* jump out of their native article and break my leg and ribs again."

"I know that," Harry said, squirming in his seat as though Draco had done something worse than reprove him. Draco firmly squashed the thoughts of what the "something worse" might have been. "It's just—I thought you might be discouraged from facing Diggory and Nott again right away, and that's the last thing someone who's healing needs. You have enough to worry about, with the loss of your shop and the stocks of Desire potion."

"The cauldron we brewed the other day is ready," Draco said, deciding the best thing to do was ignore most of the words Harry actually *said.* The intent behind them was clear. Draco was touched by the concern, but not by the intimation that one new obstacle would send him to bed in a fit of nervous prostration. "We can start sending vials out soon. And already people have contacted me and asked for a second dose."

Harry licked his lips. "Will selling it from my flat, by owl, fit with the new regulations the Ministry has proposed for us?"

Draco nodded. "All the people who contacted me are those who've already bought at least one vial. We've tested them, and they fit in under the new guidelines. New customers won't. We'll have to dedicate another building to that and sell the Desire from there to satisfy the regulations. But there's no reason we shouldn't do what we can right now."

Harry said, "All right. If you're sure."

"I *did* read the guidelines over carefully," Draco said, "occupied as I was at the time with my enemy." And there was his throat closing up again. He sat still and breathed until the tightening stopped. "I'm certain of what they say, and if you don't trust me, then you can fetch the letter you sent me and have a look for yourself."

"No," Harry said, sounding distressed. "Of course I trust you. I just *really* don't want to get in trouble with the Ministry again."

"Harry, what's wrong with you?" Sometimes bluntness worked, as Draco had learned to his profit in the last few days. He waved his wand to warm his bacon and then leaned forwards. "There's

more to this than just wanting to make sure we don't run afoul of the laws, or concern about me. Has something *else* happened? A threatening letter? That young witch returning to the door?" As he had suspected, speaking of the visitor as "the young witch" caused nothing to happen. He was both relieved and disappointed. A reaction by one of the spells on him to those words would have proven once and for it was Daphne who had dropped by to study Harry's wards.

"Nothing like that." Harry tore himself out of his seat and began to pace restlessly back and forth. Draco watched him, eating bacon and sipping pumpkin juice. He wondered idly if he could persuade Harry to make him some chicken soup. Or perhaps he could call for Patty from the Manor, though he was not entirely certain he should. She might not approve of the way Harry was caring for Draco at all.

"For some reason," Harry finally said in a low voice, facing the wall, "things are—*changing*—inside me. When I wanted that young witch to go away, I knew I had to make her do so without opening the door or attracting attention from my Muggle neighbors. And my magic focused and slid out of me, and attacked her heart. It was enough to make her run. But my magic doesn't normally respond like that. My control might be fragile, but it's there. I have to *consciously* will what I want my magic to do. Except, this time, I didn't."

Draco ate a piece of bacon and hummed encouragingly.

"I don't understand it," Harry whispered. "In the past day, my emotions have gone mad as well. I'm having thoughts I believed were gone. I went—well, almost into a rage at the thought of someone hurting you, and the rage took longer to subside than normal." He turned around to watch Draco with frightened eyes. "What do you think this means? Could I be building up a tolerance to the potion?"

Draco laid down the bacon and stared at Harry. *What kind of stupid question is that?*

Then he remembered that Harry, whilst being able to brew his own potion very well, mostly did it by following a particular recipe. He knew almost nothing about alchemy and brewing in general, so he wouldn't know *why* it was a stupid question in this case. Draco shook his head and kept his voice as patient as he could. "Not with a potion that's attuned to you, Harry. If you had been taking the general Desire potion for six years, then there might be a chance, yes. But even then, the chance is small. A potion that you designed for yourself will always flow with you. If something began to change inside you—your building up a tolerance to it, for example—it would change in concert with you, becoming more powerful, less powerful, more acidic, more magical, as you needed it to."

"Then I don't understand." Harry stared at his hands, looking both relieved and ashamed. "What do you *think* it is?"

"I really don't know." Draco did know that it made him hopeful, not frightened. He might actually get to meet the real Harry, not his shadow-brother. He waited until Harry sat down at the table again and leaned across it to clasp his hand. "But I won't worry about it until I see your

magic doing something harmful to one of us. So far, it's helped you protect me and probably save my life the night my shop collapsed. Does that *sound* worrisome?"

"I would have hated it if something had happened to you," Harry whispered. "Hated it *so much.* I wanted to save you so badly."

Damn it, why does he keep saying so many romantic things when he's still on the potion? Draco was tempted to break his own promise and reach out to comfort Harry with a kiss. But for now, friendship would have to do.

"Thank you," he said lightly, squeezed once, and dropped Harry's hand. He nodded to the newspaper when he looked up three minutes later and found Harry still staring at him broodingly. "Don't worry about it," he said. "Things will work out."

Harry crossed his arms and looked unconvinced.

Harry squinted at the wand in the second photo and leaned down, muttering to himself as he scribbled a letter to Ollivander. He thought the wood had to be ebony, to be that dark, but perhaps he was guessing wrong and it was ash or elder or dark polished chestnut.
No. He had to trust both his sight and the wizarding camera he had fastened above the door, since he couldn't ask Draco about the photos without something bad happening to him.

Draco was in the bedroom, brewing yet another love philter. Harry had had to talk himself out of watching. Whenever he watched Draco, the strange emotions seemed to grow stronger, and so did the impulse to blurt out unwise things he didn't mean—like a promise to get off the potion. Draco wouldn't value that promise even if Harry spoke it He would want assurance that Harry would really get rid of the potion and not simply yell the words in the heat of the moment.

Heat of the moment?

Draco's brewing did seem to constitute a heat of the moment, for him. Harry shook his head in wonder. He had had two girlfriends who were artists in a minor way: Susan painted, Victoria had taken singing lessons since she was ten although she never intended to pursue music professionally. Was it just the unexpected aspect of someone he was interested in living by his art that intrigued him? He couldn't remember getting excited listening to Victoria's voice, though, even when it had the power to send shivers up and down his spine.

Harry abruptly sat up. That was the problem! *Excitement.* Not only had the rage he'd felt earlier slithered out of the potion's tight grip, but it was raw excitement he felt when watching Draco, a brilliant feeling that shimmered up and down the edge of lust.

He shivered now, but out of cold, not warmth. What would happen if rage and lust got out of control at the same time? He could only pray that jealousy didn't join them.

But what would happen if it *did*? Harry *knew* he could no longer count on the potion to restrain

the others; it was foolish to hope that his jealousy would lie quiescent. And despite what Draco had said about the potion responding to his needs and desires, Harry doubted that his most powerful and aggressive emotions would simply lie down and go back to sleep. Otherwise, why had they been disturbed at all? His longing to restrain them hadn't changed.

No, something different was going on, something magical. Harry very nearly went to fetch his own copy of the potion recipe, so he could look over it and try to decipher how a curse cast by one of their enemies would interact with the brewing process.

Or could Draco have cast a spell of some sort, because he wanted Harry off the potion so badly? It certainly wasn't the type of thing he'd admit to.

But Harry had a great enough trust in Draco to reject the thought even as he conceived it. No. Draco would want Harry to give the potion up—

Become dangerous and reckless again.

-of his own free will. Otherwise, the prize he won, the "real" Harry, would be worth less to him. And Harry knew by now how much value Draco placed on knowing the exact worth of things around him.

He closed his eyes and sat still, breathing deeply, steadily. Right now, he had a letter to Ollivander to finish. *Then* he would look at the potions recipe and see if he could learn how a spell might interact with the ingredients. At least he would make a list of ideas and present it to Draco, who knew so much more about brewing than he did.

Perhaps I should tell him how much concentration my potion gives me, Harry mused as he bent over the letter again. *That might convince him I should stay on it so I can make him a good, thorough lover. Certainly none of the girls ever complained.*

Abruptly, someone pounded on the door. Harry shot to his feet, hand gripping his wand, heart leaping in his throat. His magic lashed up in him like a great serpent, and he had a hard time seizing the reins.

But then Hermione said, "For God's sake, Harry, let me in!" at the same moment as he recognized her magical signature. Harry hurried to let down the wards and permit her passage inside.

Correction. He had to let her *and* someone else inside.

When he opened the door, Hermione staggered in. She was splattered with blood literally from head to toe and limping on her left leg, but also grinning like a madwoman. She threw the cloaked, bound figure she was dragging with her on the floor and stood back. "*There's* the person who knocked down Malfoy's shop," she said. "Now I'm going to go clean myself up." She vanished into the loo.

Harry tore the cloak away from the slumped man, and stared. He was looking into the face of Theodore Nott.

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Chapter: 15

Thank you again for all the reviews!

Chapter Fifteen—Theodore Nott's Story

Nott woke whilst Hermione was still in the loo, and just a moment before Draco limped out of Harry's bedroom to see what was going on. Harry, watching Nott's face, saw his eyelids flutter, and then he went very still and tightened his fingers around the ropes, as if he thought he could break out of them without a wand.

"I wouldn't try that," Harry said conversationally. "Given the wards you're behind and the wizards looking at you."

It took an extraordinary effort for him to speak calmly. His fingers were clamped shut, so he wouldn't grab his wand and jab it into Nott's throat and demand to know what he had been doing, *right now.* The rage that had hovered under the surface of his mind when Draco's shop was destroyed had no chance to transform into concern now, because he knew Draco was alive and well. It clogged his throat and made his eyes hot and itchy.

"I did have good reasons, you know," Nott whispered. "You could even say that I was helping you, if you—"

He stopped, because Harry was laughing.

Harry himself barely recognized it as laughter. The noise tore out of his throat and hovered in the air of the room like a harpy. Harry bent over with his hands on his knees and concentrated on making the sound, because it soothed the tight band of fury across the middle of his stomach, and it was better than launching out with one foot and trying to cave Nott's ribs in.

"Yes," Harry said at last, straightening, "of course you were."

Nott flinched and looked at the floor.

Draco's hand came to rest on Harry's shoulder. Harry gritted his teeth. He hadn't ever liked people touching him when he was angry; he wanted to make violent, abrupt movements to

soothe himself, and he couldn't if someone was holding him back.

But you don't really get angry anymore, remember? And anyway, you have to calm down, even if the potion has stopped working altogether.

Harry clamped his lips between his teeth and told Draco, "He's the one Hermione brought back. She was all over blood, so she went into the loo to clean up."

Draco stared at him for long moments. Then he shook his head and said, "That doesn't really explain anything, you know."

"It explains enough," Harry said roughly, and turned away. His rage was not subsiding, even when he breathed through his nose and rubbed his hands together in the way that had often calmed him before. He didn't want to hurt Draco by accident.

He wanted to lash out. He wanted to hurt. He wanted to—

He felt his magic stirring, and that frightened him enough to chase the rage away. He wanted to kill, yes, but the last thing he could do was concentrate too hard on that wish, lest his magic took it as a literal invitation.

He locked his hands around his elbows, a position uncomfortable and awkward enough that he had to think about it instead of thinking about what he wanted to do to Nott.

Draco stared at Harry's turned back, for the moment more astonished by his behavior than by the fact that Theo had had the nerve to do something permanent to his shop with the Local Earthquake Spell. He had seen that particular flush of Harry's cheeks and the violent spark in his green eyes only once before: the day Harry had forgotten to take his potion.

But no, that hadn't even happened the *day* Harry had forgotten to take his potion. It had happened several days afterwards, giving the potion some time to work out of his system.

And now Harry was facing his anger again, exactly as if the potion had never existed, and Draco's hands shook with the urge to turn him back around, make Harry explain, and then start kissing him as a way to help him deal with the rage.

But the door of the loo opened then, and Granger came out, flinging a strand of wet hair over her shoulder. She was scrubbed clean, not just charmed clean. Considering what *Scourgify* usually did to the skin, Draco couldn't blame her. And blood was harder to get out of clothes and off the person with a spell than something like water.

Granger gave them all a bright, leonine smile, and then turned back to Theo and drew her wand.

Theo immediately began to babble like the coward he was. "I'll tell you without any coercion!

You don't have to—you don't have to threaten me! Please, please don't cast—" And he moaned out some incantation that Draco couldn't understand, precisely because his voice was a moan.

"I won't cast that one again," said Granger, and made several sharp passes with her wand, which resembled poking someone in the chest. Draco blinked, impressed when a white glow took hold around Theo's body. It was a charm that mimicked the effects of Veritaserum, but he'd never seen that particular set of movements before. He suspected it probably strengthened the effects of the magic.

"What does that do?" Theo hiccoughed, staring at her in terror.

"Just makes sure you're telling the truth," said Granger, and smiled like a jackal. "And hurts you if you don't."

Draco blinked. The ordinary spell didn't give the victim pain. Yes, this *was* a variation of a spell.

"All right, all right," Theo whispered. "Fine. I'll tell you."

"The entire story of why you went after Malfoy's shop, mind." Granger was pacing in front of Theo, in the position that Draco would usually have taken automatically, because no one who had been in Gryffindor knew how to threaten. But Granger seemed to have learned. "Leave anything out and—" She raised her wand.

Theo closed his eyes and gave a fully-body shiver. Draco nearly stopped his recitation by demanding to know the story of what Granger had *done* to him, instead.

But Theo began mumbling hoarsely. Granger cast a second spell that would raise his voice to normal, understandable levels and leaned on the wall, staring critically at him.

"I know Cordelia, you see," Theo said. "I know that she would never stop once she set her sights on the destruction of an enemy." He half-opened one eye and sneaked a glance at Draco. "She tried to destroy you with your debts and bad publicity for the Desire potion. When that didn't work, she decided that she would have to do something more permanent and effective. What it is, I don't know, but she's been planning it for a long time."

"And she sent you to destroy my shop because of that reason?" Draco demanded. That didn't sound like something that would take a lot of planning.

Theo licked his lips. "No," he said. "I—that was my idea."

"Why?" Granger leaned forwards, tapping her wand on her knee. Draco thought she hardly needed the word; Theo was already babbling out the answer.

"I was a foot soldier in her war, but even a foot soldier can see what's coming. She would just go on using me, and putting me in more and more dangerous positions. I didn't want to find myself

trying to murder someone, or act in accordance with those subtle long-range plans that I don't even *comprehend!*" And that was a wail, Draco thought, amused even in the midst of his furious analysis of Theo's words. "She would use me. She would never let me go. I knew that. And I knew I couldn't persuade her to leave me out of it. I'm a blood relative, and I've borrowed money from her. That makes me lawful prey.

"But if I destroyed your shop, then that would take *you* out of the game, and that might mean Cordelia could stop concentrating on you so much. I know it's just her pride making her pay you that attention. She should be concentrating on other things, like Charlemagne's campaign. Get rid of the shop, and she would think about those other things."

"And stop using you," Draco said, keeping his voice flat to disguise his emotions. It was *not* flattering to be told that he had lost his home and investments not because of a clever enemy's hatred, but because of a lackey's stupid fear of being used.

Theo nodded so hard he strained the ropes binding him. "Yes! So I took one big risk, and it seemed to have worked. She's thinking about other things now." He shifted enough to toss a nervous glance at Granger. "And then she caught me," he whispered.

Draco turned to Granger. "Do tell us how you managed that, if you would," he said.

"Yes, do," Harry said, unexpectedly turning around again. His cheeks were hectic with color, but the fury had faded from his eyes. Draco found himself disappointed.

Harry was very glad he hadn't been looking at Nott whilst he told his story. The impulse to attack him for estimating Draco's life and livelihood as worth less than his own convenience was overwhelming.

I want *to hurt him. I want to hurt him so badly.*

But he couldn't, especially with Hermione in the room. On the other hand, she had come in covered in blood, and that might have meant she had hurt Nott. Maybe the pain she had caused him would be enough to satisfy Harry.

By sheer will, he managed to force the rage under control enough to risk turning around again. "Yes, do," he told Hermione, and saw her regarding him wisely for a moment, her eyes narrowed. He swallowed. Explaining to her that his potion appeared not to be working any more was not a conversation he looked forwards to.

But Hermione obviously enjoyed the chance to tell her story too much to question Harry right now. She fluffed her hair and stood up a little straighter.

"It was the use of logic that did it," she began. "After all, who has been involved in attacking you so far? Diggory, Cordelia Nott, and Theodore Nott." She had the sense not to mention Draco's

mysterious Legilimens enemy in front of their captive, Harry noted with approval. "This didn't seem like the kind of tactic that Diggory and Cordelia Nott would have used; they prefer to work subtly and use political methods. And of course they would prefer not to leave evidence that linked them to the fall of Malfoy's shop.

"But *Theodore* Nott…"

Hermione drew out the words. Nott gave a quiet whimper. Harry cast him a fierce glance, and he shut up immediately.

"It was easy enough to discover, through some contacts in the Ministry, that he was under his big sister's thumb," Hermione continued. Her voice was soft and merciless. "And that he wasn't happy about being there. No love lost in *that* family. He wouldn't act against her, but he might try to serve her ends in a way that was safer for himself and exposed him least to danger. So I set about tracking him down.

"And he tried to run away from me the moment he saw me. That rather confirmed it, wouldn't you say?" Hermione gave them a smug look.

Draco shook his head and whistled softly. Harry was pleased to see unqualified admiration on his face for the first time. "It sounds so simple when you explain it," he said. "I don't know why I didn't see it."

Hermione shrugged modestly. "Most wizards don't use logic that way, I told you," she said. "And you had other things to occupy you.

"He ran from me. I cornered him briefly in the Ministry and we dueled—that's where I got so much blood on me, from an Explosive Cut Curse—before he managed to escape through a Floo. I went to the Ministry files and requested a complete list of the habitations of the Nott family, along with Apparition coordinates. Then I started Apparating from place to place, and casting a spell that would lead me to him."

"How?" Draco demanded. "Did you actually have the time to place a Tracking Charm on him?"

"Let's say that I adapted a tactic our enemies have used in the past," Hermione said, and made a subtle gesture at her sleeve. Harry remembered the Flutter-Ear that Nott and Diggory had attached to her robe. He wondered for a moment, nervously, if she was wearing it now, but he doubted Hermione would have been so stupid. She had probably discarded it the moment she started seriously hunting Cordelia's brother.

Again Draco was nodding, though this time the expression on his face was more judicious. Harry was sure he was trying to figure out all the ways Hermione could have tracked Nott, and how he could better them. "And what happened when you caught up with him again?"

"Oh, that was when I had to cast the Gallbladder Curse," Hermione said cheerfully.

"*Hermione*," Harry said, shocked in spite of himself. Hermione had made up the Gallbladder Curse when she was studying for her N.E.W.T.'s, and threatened to use it on anyone who interrupted her attempt to recall three hundred Potions ingredients in alphabetical order. She never*had* used it, so far as Harry knew, but the description of it had been awful enough to convince Ron to leave her alone for three whole days.

"He deserved it," Hermione said lightly. "Trying to cast the Unforgivables at me. I ask you."

"What is the Gallbladder Curse?" Draco demanded, with so much petulance in his voice that Harry looked sideways at him. Draco's lip was curled. Harry hid a smile, glad to feel some of his returned rage leaving him alone. Draco apparently *hated* not knowing things.

"A curse that fills your entire body with bile," Hermione said cheerfully. "Your mouth has the taste of it. Then it starts pushing against your organs. And then your *actual* gallbladder starts to ache, and feel as if it'll burst. Extremely unpleasant, I'm told."

Draco blinked, and tried to prevent himself from doing so, but he looked impressed. Nott whimpered softly from the floor to add credence to Hermione's testimony.

"He got in one more curse that hit my leg," Hermione said, slapping her knee, "but he fell down after that. So I incapacitated him, made sure no one had heard the fight—we'd run into a Muggle area—and then came here."

"So now what do we do with him?" Harry asked, glad to feel he could make a contribution to the conversation.

Draco turned and stared at Nott with a tremendously unpleasant expression. "How much do you know about your sister's plans?" he asked.

Nott squeaked and shook his head. "Not that much, really!" he said. "Just that she was looking into other brewers' operations and offering them money. I think she was trying to bribe them not to carry the Desire potion."

"Hmmm." Draco narrowed his eyes like a cat offered a chunk of liver and glanced at Hermione. "What do you think, Granger? Your spell ensures that he tells the truth, but it doesn't tell us how best to use him against his sister."

Hermione nodded. Harry fell back a step and hid another grin. It *was* fun to watch Hermione and Draco working together to play Good Auror, Bad Auror.

"Family sentiment isn't very strong among the Notts, that's true," Hermione said, spinning her wand idly over in her hand. Nott stared at it in dread. Harry decided then and there that he never wanted to experience the Gallbladder Curse. "All my sources agreed on that."

"That means that Cordelia is unlikely to want to pay to rescue her brother," Draco said thoughtfully. "Or to care very much about what we do to him." He brightened. "I could take my revenge on him, then. There are some experimental potions whose effects I never got to observe because I couldn't find someone to volunteer to test them, and of course I wasn't about to take them myself."

"Well, that's a good plan, but I think we can think of something else," Hermione said, above Nott squealing in dread. She knelt down so that she was looking into the bound man's eyes. "Unless, of course, he doesn't know anything *else,* not about his sister's plans right now but about his sister in general, that would mean she'd pay to rescue him."

Nott's face looked stricken and indecisive for just a moment. Hermione held her wand towards his throat in a casual manner.

"All right, all right!" Nott cried, cowering. Harry wrinkled his nose. He hoped he was imagining the scent that seemed to indicate Nott had wet his pants. "There's—I know why she's associating so much with Diggory. Would that be enough? Will you treat me kindly, and then let me go?" Tears were streaking down his face by the end of his sentence. He really was a coward, Harry thought in wonderment.

"That would be very good," said Hermione, turning the wand over thoughtfully. "As to whether it's *enough*, tell us, and we'll decide."

Draco dropped into a crouch beside her, looking fierce. Nott shot him a glance, but continued to keep most of his attention on Hermione. In his place, Harry thought, he would have done the same.

"All right." Nott cleared his throat and still had to swallow before he started talking. "Charlemagne tried to woo her once. She usually draws young men in when they're doing that and destroys them—drains away their money in buying her presents or makes them despair and just give up on life. They usually commit suicide."

Harry felt himself stiffen. At the moment, he hardly liked Cordelia Nott better than he liked Draco's mysterious enemy.

"I knew that," Draco said, softly enough to make Nott hurry into the next part of his story.

"But Diggory found out—he found out that she'd done something to get the money from our aunt," Nott whispered. "I don't know where he got the evidence. But I think she put Imperius on our aunt and had her leave the legacy to Cordelia like that. And after that, she worked with him."

Draco made a snorting sound. "I've seen the way they work together. Diggory isn't just blackmailing her."

"No," Nott said, and licked his lips. "I think she likes him for being smart enough to figure her

out."

Harry rolled his eyes. There were some things about Slytherins he would never understand.

"How certain are you of this?" Draco asked, his voice as cold and precise as the sting of hail in the first storm of winter. "If you are making more of a rumor than should be made—"

Harry wondered if either Nott or Hermione knew Draco well enough to notice the rising hope in his voice. He really did think there might be something to this new story, and he was striving to hold himself back from leaping to conclusions and basing too much on it.

"I'm certain," Nott whispered. "I overheard enough conversations when Cordelia was keeping me to cool my heels in her big house." A flash of bitterness there, Harry thought; Nott probably didn't mind betraying his sister that much, though he was afraid of her. "And of course she would quiet him with a laugh whenever he brought it up, but it was the laugh that meant she was listening to something near her heart."

Draco glanced up and caught Hermione's eye. A moment later, Hermione waved her wand, and Nott slumped into sleep, his mouth hanging open unattractively. Hermione cast one more binding charm to ensure the unconscious man couldn't get out of his ropes, and then they moved into Harry's bedroom and shut the door. The lingering stink of whatever potion Draco had been brewing last still hung on the air. Hermione sniffed, and Harry thought she would ask awkward questions, but instead she folded her arms.

"We have the basis for a strategy against Diggory and Nott now," she said. "The question is, what do we want to do with it?"

Draco told himself not to put too much stock in the hope Theo had offered. He could have misunderstood something, and even if Cordelia hadn't bothered to restrict what he overheard because she thought her brother was too scared to betray her, it seemed incredible to Draco that she would leave a spot open on her flank like this.

And he couldn't put too much hope in the way Harry's eyes passed tenderly over him and flashed, either. The potion might start working again at any moment. It had changed in unaccountable ways so far. Draco would have said that it was altering to follow Harry's priorities because what he hated most about himself had changed, but Harry too obviously feared the freedom of his magic and his rage. What could have replaced his intense desire to keep them stifled?

"I doubt we could bring down Diggory with this," Draco said. "He will have hidden the evidence he found too well. And he's too popular at the moment. What we *can* do is try to pry Diggory and Nott apart. They're a very strong force together. Without her money to support him and her presence at his side, he would be more vulnerable."

"Could we trust her to keep any bargain she made?" Harry asked skeptically.

Draco chuckled. "There are ways." His efforts at keeping himself calm were of no use. His hope was soaring upwards. "Unbreakable Vows are at one end of a very long continuum. There are other things pure-bloods use, curses that would ensure we kept our silence about her casting the Imperius Curse and she ceased to act against us."

"Keep our *silence*?" Granger sounded horrified.

Ah. No matter how much a master of rather fearful strategy she is, she's still a Gryffindor. Draco gave her an indulgent glance. "Of course. Do you really think forcing this into the open courts would be any use? The trial would take longer than Diggory's campaign. And with him firmly seated as Minister, he would be able to influence the judge to decide for her in any case. No, Granger, this is something to be the subject of a quiet bargain. And of course we'll have to do something about Theo, too, since he's been so useful to us."

"I don't think this is the right thing." Granger folded her arms.

"Is bringing Theo here instead of to Azkaban the right thing, when he used Unforgivable Curses against you?" Draco asked her. "I know that the Ministry requires any use of Imperius, at least, to be reported to them at once—even any *suspected* use. You disobeyed that. And I can't imagine the Gallbladder Curse isn't Dark magic."

Granger opened her mouth, then slumped into silence with a scowl.

"I'm willing to follow Draco's plan," Harry said firmly. "If we don't strike a bargain with Cordelia, she'll just fight us harder. She'll have no choice, if we even hint we know about what she did to her aunt. And taking her out of the game will be easier than taking Diggory.*She's* not the one running for Minister."

Draco took a moment to peek at Harry, and was startled to see those green eyes resting on him in turn. The shine of the devotion in them made Draco want to preen, or pant.

"Two against one, Granger," he said instead, turning back to face the woman. "Just as it was when we brewed the Desire potion."

Granger huffed and folded her arms. Then she gave a short nod. "If it will keep Harry safe," she said, "and you with him, Malfoy."

Draco winked at her. "Starting to care? That sounded dangerously like it."

"I care about you because Harry so obviously does," Granger snapped.

Draco looked at Harry again, who was flushing. But at least he didn't stammer a denial, which would have been tiresome. In fact, he looked at Draco again, and there was something extremely

like lust in his eyes for just a moment.

Feeling as if he could have cleared Harry's building at a bound, Draco said, "So this is the way it's going to work."

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Chapter: 16

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Sixteen—Two Traps

"And you're sure that this will work?" Hermione didn't bother concealing the skeptical look she was giving Draco even as her quill scribbled away on the parchment. They had decided that Hermione should be the one to write the letter, as Cordelia would probably be more suspicious of either Harry's or Draco's hand, but Draco was dictating.

"Cordelia was a Slytherin," Draco retorted. He was pacing back and forth in the middle of the bedroom, his head lifted and his hands making tense little gestures at his sides. Harry noticed that his formerly broken leg still wasn't functioning quite as well as it should, meaning he limped slightly, but even with that he looked beautiful.

He was apparently prone to noticing Draco's looks now. Harry thought it better to accept his weakness than try to deny it and end up distracted at an inappropriate time.

"That means she'll be looking for codes, hidden letters, anagrams, any clue of what we *really* mean," Draco was telling Hermione. Harry blinked, and mentally scolded himself for drifting off like that. No matter how hard it was, he had to pay *some* attention to the here and now. "The code I'm using is a simple one. It spells out Theo's first and last names, and then *captive."*

"Hmm." Hermione looked back at the parchment in front of her. "And do you think she'll take the words about coming alone literally?"

Draco stopped and laughed softly, clasping his hands behind his neck so that he could rest his head on them. Harry thought he looked supremely confident, handsome and proud and utterly in control of the situation. "Oh, yes. The way they're positioned after the code shows her they're meant as stated, rather than part of the hidden message she should be trying to decipher."

"I will never understand the way Slytherins think," Hermione muttered, but she had already finished writing the last words. She turned and Summoned an envelope from Harry's small stack on the bedside table, then rose to her feet. "I'll need to find an owl to post this. Don't do anything

without me."

Harry swallowed a little as Hermione's gaze crossed his. She had questions that she wanted to ask him, her eyes said, and just because she had let them go for a little while didn't mean he should expect a long reprieve.

Harry was relieved when she ducked out the door of the flat, and for more than one reason. He could put off her interrogation a bit longer, but he also could be alone for a complicated task that Hermione's presence would only render harder.

"I wonder what Cordelia's face will look like when she receives that note," Draco said dreamily. He was rocking back and forth on his heels now, his hands still clasped behind his head, his breath coming faster and faster with excitement. "And when she arrives to find her dear brother really captive and her enemies in possession of some knowledge they shouldn't have."

"On the first one, we can only speculate," Harry said, and smiled. "As for the second, Hermione and I will be sure to tell you all about it."

Draco continued rocking for a moment longer, but Harry knew he had heard him. Draco was just trying to find, from the rigid shifting of his body, the proper response to deal with the words. He could have all the time he liked, Harry thought. Even with Hermione getting out of sight of his Muggle neighbors and Apparating, it would still take her a little while to find the nearest available owl post office.

"I'm sorry," Draco said at last, his voice still cheerful, relaxed. "I thought you just implied that I wouldn't be going with you."

"That's right," Harry replied.

Draco spun around to face him. His eyes and his cheeks were both brilliant with anger, and Harry shivered. It was a hard thing not to simply melt right there and let Draco do whatever he wanted. But if Harry could no longer control his emotions, at least he had learned to recognize their effects. This was lust speaking, not anything deeper.

"And why not?" Draco whispered. "Whose plan was it to lure her in? Who told you what spells to cast? Who gave you the estimate of Cordelia's character necessary to predict what she'd do, and told you when and how to reveal the information about her aunt?"

"You did," Harry said. "You did all of it, and I think you've played a large part in our endeavor. That should be enough for you."

Draco's features dulled somewhat when he was truly outraged, Harry found, but not his tongue, and not his wit. "I won't be left behind her like a child," he said. "Or like—like some damsel from those romance novels Pansy was so fond of. I'm going to *do* something to help myself, too, Harry. I don't need to be rescued all the time." His voice turned sly. "Besides, wouldn't you feel

better if I was right with you, so you could keep an eye on me?"

"I don't think you need to be rescued all the time," Harry said quietly. "It was a coincidence that Nott decided to bring down your shop at the very moment when you were lying in bed dosed up on pain potions. Nonetheless, I am going to leave you here, behind strong, secure wards, exactly where I know I can trust you to be safe."

"There is not a single rational reason for leaving me behind—" Draco began, taking a long step forwards.

And then what had to be fate intervened, though Harry would not have been above using a little spell himself to speed things along. Draco's weak leg collapsed beneath him, and he fell to the floor, cursing. Or at least he fell part of the way to the floor. Harry caught him before he could hit, and cradled him close, murmuring into his ear, as he helped him stand again.

"There's your rational reason right there. I don't want you caught in the middle of the spell battle that you think Cordelia is likely to instigate. I know that you'd try, but your leg might go out beneath you at an odd moment. At best, Cordelia could wound you more easily than normal. At worst, she might kill you or take you as a hostage." Harry paused. Draco was still rigid with anger in his arms. Harry swallowed a little, and decided that he might as well make trial of his courage and Draco's feelings for him in the same moment. "How do you think I would react, if anything happened to you?"

Draco lifted his head and stared at him. "Well," he said, looking flustered, "badly. But you could control yourself. The potion—"

"It's letting my rage through again." Harry brushed his lips against Draco's hair, because he could not, absolutely could not, resist the temptation to do so. "Not to mention my lust." He laughed shortly. "And I'm finding them overwhelming to deal with. Whether because they actually are or because I've lived for six years without a hint of their touching me, I don't know. Either way, they're all focused on you right now. Do you really believe that I could go into battle with more than half my heart, unless I knew you were safe?"

Draco reached out and put a hand on Harry's chest, dizzied in spite of himself. And the near fall had nothing to do with it.

Well, only a bit.

He had hoped that Harry would be the one to pursue him, to make it clear that he wanted a relationship with Draco so badly he was willing to give up his potion. That would symbolize giving up his misguided fear of himself, too, along with the need for absolute emotional control at all times. But Draco had envisioned it happening across a span of weeks or months.

Even if it was the potion doing something strange on its own, not because of any major change in

Harry, Draco had to admit that he was extraordinarily happy to have it happen now.

But it was a matter of pride not to admit defeat so easily.

"Granger gets to go," he said. "And you know that she was limping when she came in here and dropped Theo on the floor."

"That was a minor curse," Harry whispered into his ear, stirring the delicate hairs around Draco's lobe in the most delicious way. "And she was already walking straight by the time she left to find a post owl, did you notice? Easy enough to heal. You had a *broken* leg, Draco." Harry shifted, arms tightening around him possessively, yet not enough to aggravate his recently broken rib. "Be upset with me all you like," Harry added suddenly. "God knows it isn't fair that you're being left behind because I can't control myself. But this should be the only time something like this *ever* has to happen. I expect you to take better care of yourself in the future, so that I don't have to act without you." His tone deepened into seriousness again. "I'm only going to do this at all because Hermione's well enough to go with me. If she weren't, I wouldn't confront Cordelia until you'd fully healed."

Draco swallowed. He hadn't expected any confessions, and now they were falling on him like rain on a parched field. He shifted his own arms so that he was holding Harry back and not simply being held.

"I don't like staying here," he said. "Just because I might agree with you that it needs to happen doesn't mean I'm happy about it."

Harry laughed, a sound so joyous Draco shivered. "If you were happy, I'd start to wonder what in the world was wrong with you," he said, and leaned forwards enough to kiss Draco's nose. "Thank you for behaving reasonably. Or for forgiving me my stupidity, whichever you think comes closest to the truth. I know how important truth is to you." He smiled at Draco.

He doesn't appear to notice that he kissed me, Draco thought. His experience of Harry included both the passionate side and the potion-controlled side, but he had not realized until this moment how different they were from one another. He was very sure that the potion-controlled Harry would never have kissed him, or at least would have done so after long and serious consideration. It seemed to come as a spontaneous gesture to *this* Harry.

"You'll owe me for this, Potter," he did manage to say, and drew back his arms to fold them in front of his chest.

"Haven't you had enough of debts and creditors?" Harry winked at him and assisted him to the chair by the bed. Draco would have said he could walk on his own, but he wasn't fool enough to drive away the other man just as he was getting what he wanted. "I don't know how long it'll take to get a response out of Cordelia. In the meantime, let me make you some tea."

He slipped from the room, and Draco had to bow his head and put it in his hands. It spun as

violently as he thought Harry's emotional state must be doing at the moment.

Is this real? I don't suddenly get something I've wanted for months.

But when he pinched the soft inner skin of his elbow, he jumped, and decided that yes, it was real. Perhaps, for once, the universe had decided that he'd suffered enough, and it owed him one, too.

Harry shut the door of the bedroom softly behind him and stood for a moment staring at the limp form of Theodore Nott. He was breathing fast, though he had managed to keep that outward sign of his agitation somewhat stilled in front of Draco. The last thing he needed was Draco worrying about *him*, and deciding that Harry wasn't competent enough to go after Cordelia after all.

He thought he could be. He thought the storms of emotion sweeping through him at the moment might even be an advantage. He could face Cordelia with the kind of grim determination that had driven him during the quest for the Horcruxes.

But at the moment, the rage was uppermost in his mind again, thick hot liquid like constant volcanoes erupting. And what Harry really wanted to do was hurt the man who had hurt Draco so badly, who had taken away something that Harry knew Draco valued almost as much as his life.

Who had inflicted an enormous wound on Draco's pride, just after his enemy had inflicted injuries so large on his body.

Harry trembled and clenched his hand around his wand. Draco wasn't expecting him back for a few minutes. Hermione wouldn't return for longer than that. Nott simply wasn't about to wake up, grab a wand, and stop him. The next few minutes belonged to Harry and his conscience and his storming anger.

He really *wasn't* used to controlling it anymore, he noted dimly. The notion of subduing his temper seemed faint and far away. His vision was congealing with red, the bloody color curling inwards, slowly advancing. Every sense seemed alert for the weaknesses on Nott's body, and curses he'd read about in books and never tried to use seethed in his brain like electricity.

He blinked, and realized he'd moved a few steps closer to Nott, of his own volition. His wand was in his hand, half-raised. Not quite pointed at a helpless captive, Harry thought, clinging to his sanity, but not quite hanging loose and relaxed at his side, either.

He tried to calm himself down by imagining what Draco's reaction would be, and then snorted a weak laugh. Draco was very likely to *approve* of this sort of vengeance, since they would be handing Nott back to his sister so soon. That didn't help calm Harry's eagerness to hurt and rend and tear.

Finally, he imagined what Hermione would think if she walked through the door and found him

holding Nott under Cruciatus, and that managed to snap the spell. He turned and marched stiffly to the kitchen, where he started the pot of tea that he had promised to Draco brewing. He raked his fingers through his hair, nearly poking himself in the eye with his wand, and relaxed himself with five or six deep breaths.

A marrow-deep longing for the potion raced through him. If he could take it and calm himself down—

But no. That would never happen again. Draco had said the potion would change as Harry changed, which could only mean that Harry had changed his priorities and wanted something else now. What?

What's the thing you want more than anything else?

And Harry didn't have to think about the answer, given the long argument he'd had with Draco over this very thing.

Draco safe.

And then Harry faltered and gripped the edge of his kitchen table, because it made *sense,* didn't it? His priorities had changed from keeping his own magic and darker emotions under control to making sure that Draco could survive no matter what. And it only made sense that his magic was increasing in the swiftness of its response to him, because his magic was the best tool he had for protecting Draco. The potion was taking away his weakness, his helplessness, the most loathed part of himself at the moment.

And with the potion changed, then the emotions were slithering out of control again. Harry still feared them, still feared what might happen if he saw Draco in a situation like the one Ginny had placed herself in—willingly kissing a romantic rival—but apparently not as much as he feared the thought of Draco losing his life.

Harry swallowed and stared into the stillness of the kitchen, terror rising up in him for the first time since he'd seen the shop collapsing on top of Draco's head. Even that emotion felt sharper, keener, than it should have.

Could he *remember* what it was like to live without the potion, and adopt a normal rhythm of thinking and feeling again?

Could he keep Ginny's friendship, once she realized that he was no longer taking the potion? And of course he would have to tell her.

And could he convince his priorities to change back again, once Draco was safe beyond a doubt, once Diggory and Nott were taken care of and Draco's mysterious enemy identified and stopped?

Did he *want* to? Draco would surely refuse a romantic relationship with him again if he thought

Harry was becoming what he saw as a person who couldn't really feel passion for him.

The kettle was dangerously near boiling over. Harry reached out a shaking hand to retrieve it.

At that moment, Hermione stepped into the kitchen, her hand clutching a letter. "I didn't have long to wait, after all," she chuckled. "Cordelia must have been at the Ministry, and I Apparated nearly there before I found an open post owl office. We have her response already, accepting our choice of location."

She paused then, and stared Harry straight in the eye. "I'm willing to leave you alone for right now," she said, "but when we've dealt with Nott, I expect to hear the full story of what's happened to you. Understand?"

Harry gave her a weak smile and nod, and turned to find a cup for Draco. His heart beat frantically against ribs that felt as weak as the shell of an egg.

So soon. I didn't know I would have to leave him—so soon.

Harry and Hermione stood side-by-side in a small alley not far from the Ministry. Someone had covered the walls with graffiti displaying what looked like a gutted cat. Harry shuddered a little. Though he had been raised among Muggles, there were times they seemed more alien to him than the most Slytherin pure-bloods.

At their feet lay Nott, still unconscious and bound. Every few minutes, either Harry or Hermione stooped to make sure he stayed that way, whilst the other covered them with their wand and careful eyes on the alley entrance.

Harry was glad to find that his wildly swinging emotions had calmed almost the moment they left the flat. He knew Draco was behind wards as strong as he could make them; he knew Hermione was at his side with knowledge of more magic than Cordelia could have studied. His rage retreated, and he was able to focus on the demeanor that Draco had told them they would need to maintain with Cordelia: coolly mocking, wryly knowing.

Besides, the fact that they could remove one of their three most powerful and dangerous enemies from the board if this gambit succeeded rendered Harry both determined and cheerful.

Hermione's elbow touched his side a moment before a shadow crossed the alley entrance. Hermione was already waving her wand in the motions of a nonverbal spell that would detect any unseen human companions Cordelia had brought with her.

But she stepped into the alley alone. Harry studied her in silence. He couldn't really see the beauty that Draco had talked about and which apparently had snared many young men other than Diggory, if her brother spoke the truth. Of course, the coldness of her eyes might have something to do with that.

"I am here," Cordelia said, her voice flat. "You said that you had my brother to give me, that he had been indiscreet and careless. He certainly has." The glance she gave Nott then made Harry feel almost sorry for him. "Give him to me, and I shall see that he doesn't trouble you again."

"Oh," Hermione said, voice the epitome of restrained amusement, "I don't think the bargain should be so simple. Not when you've already caused trouble for us in multiple ways, and not when your brother was so willing to tell us about more about you than simply his value as a hostage."

Cordelia's eyes widened the tiniest bit. "Theo is a babbler," she said, with a lithe shrug. She wore fairly ordinary robes, Harry saw, but across her shoulders lay a beautiful purple shawl; it scarcely trembled with the movement. "He would say anything to save his life, and anything to ensure that you knew about the relationship between us. Why should you believe what he might have come up with?"

"Because it seems true," Harry said, taking a step forwards both to draw Cordelia's attention to him—Hermione was quietly preparing defensive spells—and to take the lead in the conversation. "I mean, it *did* sound odd, when Draco described it to me, the way you had suddenly inherited a large sum of money from an aunt that no one else in your family had ever heard from or kept in contact with."

This time, the slight movement Cordelia gave was born of rage, and Harry knew it. He smirked at her, and if the expression wasn't quite up to the standard that Draco would have used, it was still lazy, and knowing, and Cordelia bristled at the sight of it.

"I suppose you're here to take me to Azkaban, good Gryffindors that you are," she said in a bored tone, one hand fussing with the edge of her shawl.

"Actually, no," Harry said. "Given that one person involved in the case is dead, and the other could become a major trial to us in the courts, forgive my simple pun, we thought a bargain would be the better thing to make." He nodded to Theo. "You'll have him, and you'll have our word that we'll never tell anyone about your putting your aunt under Imperius in order to win her money."

Hermione hissed a little at him, because revealing their knowledge so openly could have been disastrous if Nott had been wrong about the details of Cordelia's inheriting her aunt's money. But it had evidently happened. Cordelia's nostrils flared, and she said, "And what do you get?"

"An Unbreakable Vow," Hermione said, voice hard. "You'll stop supporting Diggory both politically and financially, and you won't seek vengeance against any of us. In return, we'll swear the Vow that we won't reveal what we know about you and your illegal activities."

Cordelia laughed a little. "You would consent to use such powerful and such Dark magic?"

Hermione looked at Cordelia, unflinching. "I would."

Harry saw the other woman study Hermione in silence for some time. Then she sighed.

"I should have listened to Charlemagne when he told me that the cost was too high, even for Theo's life," she said.

And then her hand moved, flinging the shawl straight towards them. It became a web as it flew, and a pair of enormous spiders sprang out. Harry recognized them in a heartbeat: half-grown Acromantulas.

In the next heartbeat, he and Hermione were fighting for their lives.

Draco wandered around the flat, sighing. Now and then his leg gave out beneath him, forcing him to sit down. He bent over and massaged it gently, and fancied he felt the muscles slowly twitching their way back to strength.

Harry was probably right to say I should stay behind.

He was just slipping into a pleasant daydream of other things Harry might be right about when his eyes flew open and he sat straight up. Something was wrong. He listened, and heard nothing, save for the slight laughter of some of Harry's Muggle neighbors going down the corridor.

Except that he shouldn't be able to hear that. Normally, the wards kept out such unimportant noises.

The wards had fallen, and been taken down with extreme skill and extreme speed. Draco reached for his wand.

And then the door simply dissolved into smoke and particles of wood, and the young witch Harry had shown him two photos of stepped through, smiling. She aimed her wand at him, and invisible hands grabbed Draco and held him in place, digging painfully into his skin, constricting his throat so he couldn't even grunt in pain.

The witch's face melted and flowed like molten silver, and Daphne's face was revealed in its stead.

"Hello, Draco," she said. "I missed you, so I decided to come find you."

The unseen fingers held Draco's eyes open, so he didn't even have the satisfaction of closing them in dread.

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Chapter: 17

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Seventeen—All the Power in the World

Hermione cried out as the first Acromantula leaped at her. Harry swiveled towards her, but the next Acromantula was already on *him*, and half-grown or not, it was still immensely swift and strong.

He turned fast enough to cut off one of his attacker's legs and rip a hole in its abdomen with a Slicing Hex. But it still didn't die. It landed on the ground in a puddle of mushy green slime, made a shrill burbling sound, and rushed at him, clacking its mandibles. It was taller than he was, and for a moment he was occupied with the thought of how in the world it could have fit into the small shawl Cordelia had flung at them.

Stop thinking like Hermione! Even she isn't thinking like that right now! he scolded himself, and whirled out of the way of the mandibles. *At least, I really hope she's not.*

The spider skidded to a stop and turned around to face him again, throwing out two legs to make a cage to hold him in place. Harry found himself smiling grimly, his newly released anger surging. No, Draco wasn't here, and therefore he didn't feel half the terrifying rage that he had when he was looking at Theodore Nott. But he could still use his anger to fuel his spells; he wasn't acting out of the calm, cool dispassion that he normally would have brought to a fight like this.

And he had to admit, it felt wonderful.

Harry stepped forwards and let the Acromantula have it, right in its ugly face.

Two of its clusters of staring eyes ruptured, and Harry had to duck as white goo flew at him. He slipped in something—probably the spider's trailing guts—and fell, then rolled out of the way just in time as one of the strong legs came down, wickedly fast. Or, at least, it was almost just in time. He felt a flaying, flicking pain from his left arm, and thought the leg must have sliced off a sliver of skin.

Back on his feet again, kicking himself up with the speed that he'd used on a broom chasing the Snitch or when he was fighting Death Eaters in that last year, and you really never *did* forget how to do this, did you, Potter? he asked himself, aiming a Blasting Curse into the bloated belly right above him.

The curse turned out to be more powerful even than he knew. Some of the spider flew

backwards; some stayed in place, and bits and pieces rained down on him. Harry dodged, a hand over his face, spitting out a thick coating of black liquid that fell on his tongue—it tasted like spoiled meat—and rolled over to see how Hermione was doing.

He nearly laughed aloud when he saw her. She had sewed the Acromantula up in some strong netting that looked like its own web, but toughened so it couldn't get out, and she was calmly cutting off its legs where they dangled over the tops of the net and writhed in furious struggles.

And then a spell cut into Harry from behind, and he reminded himself that it never did to turn your back on an enemy, especially one like Cordelia Nott.

He let himself fall whilst his legs tingled and went numb, trying to analyze the nature of the spell. Then licking pain, like being caught with a dragon's tongue and a blast of fire at the same moment, traveled up his shoulder blades towards his head, and he decided he didn't have time.

Harry yelled a charm that Hermione had taught him to preserve a wound as it formed. Normally it was meant for healing, to staunch the flow of blood, but Harry hoped it would work as well to stop a curse in progress.

It seemed to; at least, the pain dropped to a tolerable level. Harry scrambled up to his knees and turned around, aware of Hermione glancing anxiously at him. But her Acromantula set up a ferocious kicking, and Harry heard a sound like rotten cloth ripping; it was probably managing to find a way out of the silk bag Hermione had confined it in. He knew he would have to handle Cordelia alone.

She advanced now with a very faint smile on her face. Strangely, Harry saw more of her beauty now than he had before. The smile wasn't amused; it was grim, utterly determined to ensure that he was wiped from the face of the earth.

She snarled something low and angry at the same moment as Harry invoked the Shield Charm. A shimmering silvery field spread before him, and Cordelia's thick purple spell splashed into the middle of it and flew back at her. She spun away, swearing.

Harry still went to his knees behind the shield, though—something his knees were beginning to complain about. Cordelia was no lightweight where magic was concerned.

Cordelia had begun a long, complex incantation Harry didn't recognize by the time he climbed back to his feet. He didn't know what it did and didn't want to pause long enough to find out. So he yelled, "*Levicorpus!*" and grinned a little as the spell snatched her into the air by one ankle and hung her there. She didn't drop her wand, as he'd hoped for, but at least it interrupted whatever dangerous spell she had been about to put into motion.

Harry flung a quick glance at Hermione, but was confident she had the Acromantula under control after that glance, though she was still too busy to help him. He looked back at Cordelia, who was writhing in silence as she tried to fight the magic holding her. A simple *Finite*

Incantatem wasn't working, Harry noticed; it rarely did on any of Snape's invented spells, at least when the spellcaster was trying to aim her wand upside down and backwards.

"*Expelliarmus!*" he called.

Cordelia scrambled and flicked her fingers, but she was already at an awkward angle and more focused on undoing the magic that held her captive than retaining her wand to do the magic *with*. Harry held his palm up, and a moment later, a solid length of chestnut smacked into it. He gripped the wand firmly and performed a Sticking Charm with his own, to ensure it stayed. Then he backed up and turned to Hermione.

She had just cut off the Acromantula's last leg, and now she exploded the body. Harry flinched instinctively, but the silken bag of netting contained the explosion and didn't let the parts rain onto them. The bag sagged and then turned green from a liquid dripping into it, but that was so much better than what could have happened that Harry relaxed.

"*Accio* shawl," Hermione said.

The purple piece of cloth flew from a corner of the alley into Hermione's hands. She held it up and peered at it critically, then nodded, apparently to herself. "Acromantula eggs sewn into the lining," she explained to Harry. "With quick-aging spells and curses that inspire hostility towards anyone but the shawl's owner implanted. A clever thing. Either she came up with it herself or she paid good money for it."

"Maybe the money," Harry muttered, turning to stare up at Cordelia. After what he had experienced of her spellwork, he wasn't ready to think that she was such a very good witch.

"The bargain remains the same, you know," he told Cordelia casually. "You swear an Unbreakable Vow to withdraw from supporting Diggory and to stop seeking vengeance on us, and we give you your brother back and swear to keep our mouths shut about your money."

Cordelia said nothing for long minutes. Her hanging skirts covered her head, so Harry wasn't sure what she was thinking. When she finally spoke, her voice was light, amused. "You realize that it's a rather Slytherin thing, to negotiate so gently with the woman who almost killed you?"

"You *attacked* us," Harry said. "You didn't almost kill us. To me, that makes a difference."

Hermione snorted into her hand, but didn't say anything. Harry was relieved. He had half-feared that she would start insisting they take Cordelia to Azkaban again, this time for using illegal quick-aging spells.

"Hmm," said Cordelia. "It is not often I encounter people who can appreciate such a fine distinction and are not politicians. Do you plan to enter the race for Minister yourself, Mr. Potter, and oppose Charlemagne? I know that is his ultimate nightmare, though he would not admit as much to me."

"Good God, *no!*" Harry said. "He knows what I'm like. If he thinks I want to be Minister, he's stupider than I imagined. Why didn't I take it after the war, when I had the enter wizarding world eating out of my hand?"

"Charlemagne finally convinced himself you didn't want it for that reason," Cordelia said, "but he could never get over the suspicion completely."

"This doesn't have much to do with the subject of the Unbreakable Vows," Hermione said crisply. "Do you swear it, or do we turn both you and your brother over to the Minister, and break open the story of what you've done?"

For a moment, the vision of that tempted Harry. Surely Minister Shacklebolt would have to understand how corrupt Diggory was, if he was letting a family like the Notts support him—

And then Harry pulled himself up short. Veritaserum was still voluntary, and without that, it was his, Hermione's, and Draco's word against Cordelia's and Diggory's. Cordelia probably had enough money to bribe key people in the Ministry hierarchy, people whose names Harry didn't even know. Diggory would deny any involvement with her if he had to, and he had the time and cunning to cover up his tracks. And then they would become entangled in the long, drawn-out battle in the courts, their time consumed with giving testimony and arguing over evidence with recalcitrant judges. Even if the trial went to the Wizengamot, there was no reason to think that Cordelia couldn't bribe people there, too.

No. Draco had been right. The Unbreakable Vows were their best solution after all, and the only way to absolutely ensure that Cordelia's money would no longer be at Diggory's disposal.

"I'll swear the Vows," said Cordelia, sounding a little angry, a little tired, and a little amused. "You're certainly more formidable opponents than I thought. And during the war, there were *three* of you, imagine. I would have hated to face you. Of course, I was well out of the country by then, keeping myself clear of Father's idiotic errors in judgment."

"You should still be wary," Hermione hissed at her as Harry waved his wand and lowered her to the floor of the alley. "We are three now."

Harry whipped around to stare at her, lifted to heights he had not imagined he could attain by that simple statement. Hermione blinked and stared at him, looking unnerved, and then her cheeks turned pink.

"I didn't mean that we were three all the time," she said hastily. "Not like—not like Ron." She spoke his name with only a faint catch in her voice, Harry noticed. "Just that it was Malfoy's plan that got us this far."

Harry grinned at her.

"I *didn't* mean that," Hermione said, folding her arms. "Malfoy is still a conceited bigot and a pompous arsehole and I have every right to dislike him."

"Oh, yes," Harry said, and then knelt and held out his hand to Cordelia. She joined him, not seeming at all reluctant. Indeed, she had almost a cheerful air, the way that Draco had told Harry she probably would have if they could get her to agree to the Vows. She knew when to give up and admit that an enemy had outwitted her. "Hermione, will you be the Bonder for the Vows?"

Hermione nodded sternly and stepped forwards. Her expression told Harry she would insist on feeding him the wording of the Vows, too, which was perfectly fine. He would hate to lose their chance to take Cordelia out of the game because of a stupid slip of the tongue.

So Cordelia took the Unbreakable Vows with them, and then Harry and Hermione gave her their Unbreakable Vow back, swearing not to tell her secrets. Cordelia stood, stretched, and shook her head.

"Well," she said, "dear Charlemagne will be disappointed, but I *did* tell him that he would probably regret not making me fall in love with him someday. Relationships started on blackmail rarely end well." She extended her hand and snapped her fingers, and reluctantly, Hermione dropped the purple shawl into her hand. Cordelia swung it around her shoulders and looked at Harry. He blinked, then realized she was waiting for her wand.

He handed it over carefully, his own wand held at the ready. Cordelia rolled her eyes. "You don't need to worry about my attacking you when I would *die* over doing so," she said. "I am not really that stupid."

"You seem to be taking this awfully calmly," Harry said, scowling at her. No matter what Draco had said about that being likely, he didn't like the sense that something was off somewhere, that there had been something their careful Vows and preparation had been unable to cover.

"Why shouldn't I?" Cordelia lifted an eyebrow. "There are other ways to play the political game—and there are methods of indirect revenge that I can experiment with. I haven't hitched my cart to Charlemagne's star so closely that I'll suffer if he loses the election. The wasted time and money are irritants, but no more. You really do not comprehend how rich I am."

And she turned and sauntered out of the alley, Theodore floating bound and unconscious behind her, after a small nod at both Harry and Hermione, as though to congratulate them for a good chess game well-played. Hermione blinked and shook her head.

"Even if we *are* three," she said, her glare at Harry daring him to make more of the words than she'd meant by them, "I highly doubt I'll ever understand how their minds work."

"Hogwarts was a long time ago, Hermione," Harry said, echoing words she'd spoken often before Ron's death, usually when Ron complained about some sneaky Slytherin player on an opposing team. "Don't you think you should look for ways to classify people *beyond* House affiliation?"

She scowled at him, and took his arm for the Side-Along Apparition. Harry grinned at her again and took them both back home, already anticipating how he would casually mention her words in conversation before Draco.

Draco opened his eyes slowly. The first thing he became conscious of was a terrible, hurtful pounding in his head. He'd felt it before. It meant he'd been hanging upside-down for a long period of time, and probably only a spell had returned him to consciousness.

He tried to move his arms and legs instinctively, and discovered they were bound tightly to his body. By the pain that cut into his skin when he struggled, he thought it was probably wire tying him. He winced and closed his eyes, remembering the things Daphne had done with wire when they'd first been together. He still bore some of the scars, though he had insisted they be in less noticeable places on his body.

That had been long ago, when he still had some control over what she did to him.

"Well, Draco," Daphne's voice said, and the next moment she stepped up in front of him, upside-down, but still recognizable, with her blonde hair bound tightly to her neck and her green eyes shining like summer. Well, and she was naked. That helped too, Draco thought, slightly crazed with blood and despair. "Alone together at last. I had not thought that I would have the chance, when I saw you vanish into Potter's flat. He destroyed all my lovely uncertainties." She sounded as if she was pouting, but Draco's vision was coming in flashes again and he couldn't be sure.

Daphne sighed and moved her wand. A flash exploded behind Draco's eyelids in the front of his skull, and he jerked back to awareness. Yes, it had definitely been that spell that awakened him when he shouldn't have been able to open his eyes.

"I made a mistake before," Daphne said. "I let you go. I thought it would be more exciting if you lived as the passive victim under my spells, about to be killed at any moment—or *able* to be killed at any moment, never knowing what random word or action might trigger one of the invisible curses."

Draco swallowed, and realized that he had almost stopped living like that in the past few days, as he recovered from the wounds that Daphne inflicted on him and brewed his potions. Harry had made him forget. Of course there were still the times something hinted at Daphne and Draco panicked, but life had become almost ordinary. Certainly, Daphne had not been as present in his mind as she wished to be.

"What?" Daphne asked, in a tone of gentle, girlish dismay.

Draco flinched. She was a Legilimens, of course, and she had just read the thoughts that preoccupied him off the surface of his mind. Perhaps she had even summoned them in the first

place. Draco had never been good enough at Legilimency to feel the subtle probe of someone entering his mind, one reason that his mother had been wild with fear for him when he began to serve the Dark Lord.

"I didn't know Potter did *that*," Daphne said, sounding perturbed now. "I'm so glad I brought you out of that nasty flat, and into a place where we can be alone and play together." She stepped up and laid her wand along Draco's cheek. "You like to play, don't you, Draco?'

And as if that phrase had been the key unlocking a hidden door, memories suddenly tumbled into Draco's mind, clicking into place. He flinched as he remembered, all at once, the things he had done with Daphne in the past few weeks, and trembled, and was sick, and wanted to faint.

The flash exploded in front of his eyes again, bringing him gasping awake.

"You really are very fragile," Daphne said. Draco saw her smile, upside-down and looking all the wider and more devouring for that. "I like that in a toy."

Harry put up his arm to bar Hermione's way the moment they stepped into the corridor where his flat was located. He could feel something wrong, a tingle of magic lost or abandoned that made every single hair on his neck rise.

"Harry?" Hermione asked tentatively from behind him.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, and whatever she saw on his face made her fall into a battle stance. Harry drew his own wand, uncaring for once if any of his Muggle neighbors were looking curiously out, and carefully walked towards his door.

It was magic lost, he realized, when he stepped onto a certain patch of floor that should have brought his wards crowding round him, welcoming and caressing. Someone had completely destroyed the defenses on his home, removed them like someone removing the skin from a banana, and thrown them as contemptuously away.

"Harry?" Hermione asked again, but in the sharp whisper that meant she'd used a spell to project her voice towards him without moving from her position.

Harry shook his head and didn't turn around. He thought he knew what he would find, but he nudged his door open cautiously and cast a Shield Charm in front of him anyway as he stepped inside.

His flat was empty. Hauntingly empty. Draco's potions ingredients might still be there, and maybe even his wand, but his magic and his presence had left it.

Harry closed his eyes as he remembered the broken leg and ribs Draco's enemy had left him with, and a scream rose up his throat. He didn't let it out. He leaned on the door instead and

rhythmically pounded his fist into the wood a few times until he felt better.

He had thought leaving Draco behind was the right thing to do, the safest thing. He had never thought someone could get through his wards.

But of course the witch who had come to his door the other day was a scout, a spy, either the enemy herself or someone in her pay. And of course he should have known that someone *Draco* feared was clever, and would find a way around the defenses to her prey sooner or later.

I shouldn't have left him alone.

Hermione didn't immediately enter, though Harry expected her to, given the way he'd hit the door. Instead, perhaps three minutes later, she rested her hand on his shoulder. Harry looked back at her, knowing his eyes were large and moist. He didn't care.

"I found this," Hermione said quietly, and held up a coil of silver wire. "I can *feel* the magic on it, though I've never seen anything like this before." She shook her head slightly, baffled. "Basically, whoever left this here must have created a spell that does the impossible—unravel wards—and then attached it to the wire. Then she dropped it in the corridor, and just let it work on the wards, hollowing them out. By the time she came back, she probably had to do almost no work to remove them."

"Then why didn't I feel the wards losing strength?" Harry whispered, his throat thick and tight as fever. *Draco.*

Hermione gave him a sad smile and turned the wire over. A rune was etched on the bottom. Harry frowned at it, but couldn't tell what it meant.

"The rune for invisibility," Hermione said softly. "Anyone who was closely connected to the wards—which meant you, me, and Draco—wouldn't have noticed a thing. A stranger who came in from outside would have, but she probably noticed that few people visit you. I think she was willing to take the risk."

"I should have known," Harry whispered, fighting the urge to beat the door again. "The wards around Draco's shop—they were weak, enough that Theodore Nott could just slip right through. I thought he'd done it, but he was just taking advantage of an opportunity, wasn't he? I should have *known*—"

"Harry." Hermione shook him. "The important thing right now is to find Draco and stop this enemy from hurting him further, not to wish for impossible chances."

Harry nodded dully. "But we don't have a clue who she is, yet. Two names, but either one of them could be the one, and we'll be wasting time searching for someone who—"

A sharp tap sounded at the window. Harry rushed towards it, nearly tripping over a stool on his

way. He opened the window hastily and extended his arm to the owl who waited there, half-convinced it would be a ransom demand or a taunting invitation from Draco's enemy. Maybe Hermione could work out who it was if she had handwriting to perform a spell on it. Hermione could do *anything.*

The owl that landed on his arm didn't look particularly evil, though, and the envelope that Harry pulled out bore simply his name, without any wicked slant to the letters. He tore it open anyway. *Sometimes evil hides behind good.*

It was from Ollivander. Harry blinked, and stared. The letter he had written him about the young witch's wand seemed a million years gone by.

Dear Mr. Potter:

The wand you describe, and the circumstances you have placed it in, make it very likely that you encountered Daphne Greengrass. I gave her just such a wand when she came to visit me seventeen years ago: ebony, with a unicorn hair core. I hope this was helpful.

Harry let the letter flutter to the floor, where Hermione snatched it. His head was full of pounding blood, which washed over him and transformed into something so strong he barely recognized it at first.

Then he did.

A swell of rage.

Daphne Greengrass. I will annihilate you.

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Chapter: 18

Thanks again for all the reviews

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Chapter Eighteen—Against the Barriers

Draco came gasping out of the latest experience that had flowed over him like bloody water. Or was it a dream? Or a combination of one of the memories Daphne had returned to him and something she had been doing to his body at the same time? She had a previously unsuspected talent for using Legilimency at the same time as she deployed a whip, a scallop shell, or a

sharp-toothed comb, causing Draco to lose his hold on reality and tumble into *her* reality.

He was still bound with the wire, he found when he tried to move, and his ribs had a tender soreness about them that made him suspect he was at least bruised there. But this time, instead of hanging upside-down, he was bound to a chair. He was naked, and when he looked down, he could see a glittering curl of wire uncomfortably close to his groin. He shuddered.

"Ah. You're awake."

Daphne stepped in front of him. Draco blinked and stared. There were bleeding crescent moons on her belly, the mark of scrabbling nails, and a sharp bite on her right breast that looked human. Had *he* done that? If so, he retained no memories of it from their latest encounter.

Then he reminded himself of how clever Daphne was. She could have given the marks to herself and displayed them on purpose to confuse his sense of time. Draco lifted his chin and glared at her, not choosing to speak.

Daphne held out her wand, still smiling. Draco jumped and cried out, the bonds tightening and cutting into his flesh. His hipbone had suddenly rotated in its socket, causing a sparking, blinding pain that reminded him of nothing so much as his body turning *against* him.

"Watch it, Draco," Daphne murmured. "I wouldn't like it if you somehow thought you had *authority* here." She turned slightly away from him, and for the first time, Draco noticed a mirror hanging on the opposite wall. They were in a bedroom, but it didn't look like the ones his scattered memories had returned to him, chambers buried deeply inside her fortress-like home where they often fucked. Daphne pointed her wand at the mirror, and an image blurred and flickered to life.

He had to swallow to keep his resolution of not speaking. The image showed Harry and Granger leaving the Ministry entrance by the broken phone box. Granger was consulting what looked like a map, her mouth set in a grim line and her fingers moving from place to place on the parchment with astonishing rapidity.

And Harry…

A combination of pleasure and distress sent a long shiver down Draco's spine. Harry's face was pale and quiet. He showed no sign of anger outwardly, the way Granger did. He had no expression at all, in fact, and might have been passed by people in the street as someone having an ordinary day.

But Draco had never seen his eyes glow like that, not even the first time they had brewed the Desire potion together and Harry had so far forgotten himself as to lick Draco's hand. It was rage, and not pleasure, that made Harry so pale. And Draco could imagine the magic and power brewing beneath that still surface, ready to explode on the nearest available target.

Merlin, let it be Daphne.

A snap of Daphne's wrist, and the image in the mirror vanished. Draco looked up as she turned to regard him again, tapping her wand on her arm. She looked thoughtful, assessing, the way she might if she were buying a fine house or investing half her money in a chancy business. Draco knew what that expression meant, and he didn't like it.

But what would he gain from cowering and acting afraid? His task right now was to stay alive until Harry found him. Annoying Daphne was not the way to do so, but giving her what she wanted would only afford her more reasons to torture him, so as to inspire more fear. He stuck his most neutral mask on his face and waited for her to complete her appraisal.

"I have had many lovers," Daphne said. "And most of them have come, in turn, to love me, or at least feel some degree of liking for me."

Draco kept his bewilderment at the change of subject off his face. *Stay alive. The more strange things she says to you, the less time she spends hurting you. And there might be a clue in one of these statements.*

"Even in cases where they were unwilling to indulge my—*particular* preferences, we have come to an understanding," Daphne continued, her voice soft and lulling. "An arrangement." Her green eyes shone, and though they really weren't that different in color from Harry's, just a little less intense, Draco could only marvel at the difference in effect on him. "They gave me what I wanted. I gave them what they wanted. We parted mutually satisfied.

"And yet, I find myself unable to do so with you. The disadvantage of using Legilimency in the ways I have trained myself to do is that any lover subjected to it reacts with a restricted range of emotions. Uncertainty, doubt, fear—one may adore them and yet grow tired of them with time. Whereas someone who knows what I have done with him feels reluctant pleasure, disquiet, disgust with himself, perhaps some weariness as we near the end of the arrangement."

She cocked her head and began to pace around him. Draco hated it when she passed behind him, then paused and pressed her wand into the back of his neck. But he held himself still and didn't react except in the ways he couldn't help, half-closing his eyes and letting out a single tense breath.

"I see no other way than to tame you with these unknown spells and with Legilimency, however," Daphne continued. "The first time we met, you bargained from too great a position of self-respect to bow to what I wanted of you. And this time, your own shame preoccupied you, and then the fear caused by my spells. To earn *anything* from you, I need to accept that I will not get everything I desire."

Draco blinked. He wasn't sitting directly in front of the mirror, but he was sure it would have reflected his bewildered expression if he was.

"But now there is something new involved," Daphne said. "Something that was not in your eyes when you first came to me, shivering with desperation to have forty thousand Galleons." An odd contempt touched her voice for a moment, and then vanished as she continued. Draco would have snorted if he dared. She had some nerve scorning him for whoring himself out for money, considering the crimes she had committed, both moral and sexual. "And that new thing makes me less certain than ever that I will get what I want, even if I kill you."

Draco judged it might be time to respond when the pressure of the wand on his neck increased with his continued silence. He cleared his throat. "What is this thing?" he asked. "You may be sure that I would have tried to conceal it if I knew about it. Any strength unknown to its possessor is a weakness."

Daphne laughed a little, and the wand eased up. Draco felt free to breathe again. She stepped in front of him and studied him thoughtfully.

"You are considering commitment, and not to me," she said. "I know that look in the eyes of a lover. When someone who shares my bed begins to dream of other flesh, to see that body imprinted before his waking eyes, to feel the shape of shoulders and a chest not my own molding to him, I always know."

Draco frowned, not understanding. He had already been attracted to Harry when he came to Daphne, after all, and he could not believe she would not have sensed that, particularly when she could read it out of his head. "I am not in love with anyone," he said.

"There are other forms of commitment than love," Daphne said. "Indeed, love is chancier than most people think it, when it can veer and change as infatuation often does, and when it is subject to such deep wounds in case of betrayal. But loyalty, friendship, the desire to trust and to *stay* trusting, instead of the desire to stop when one feels oneself getting too involved—that is what you are feeling that you did not before. That is what other lovers of mine have felt in the past, when they were ready to pair with someone who was not me. And often I have had no choice but to let them go, because I would never derive as much satisfaction from them again, and I knew it."

Draco caught his breath. Could Daphne have kidnapped him and given him back his memories simply because she intended to surrender him when Harry arrived? It would be strange, but Slytherins had done stranger things for excitement, and she might like the notion that his life and his chance of happiness with Harry were gifts from her hands.

Daphne leaned forwards. "Your thoughts are so plain on your face," she said softly, "I do not even need Legilimency to read them."

Perhaps not, then. Draco drew into himself and tried to look as if he were a wary man of the world, ready for anything.

"With you," Daphne said, "so hard to tame, and so intent on settling for someone else even

before you came to me, there is only one thing I may do to gain the satisfaction I desire." She turned her wand over twice in her hands, then looked up and into his face.

"I will let this Harry Potter you are so fond of come before me," she said, "though I will test his magical strength with a few trials beforehand, of course. And then I will kill him."

Draco ducked his head, but it was too late. She had seen the way his face changed. She chuckled.

"No, that is not *quite* the expression I want," she said, "but for now it will do."

"And you are certain this is it?" Harry stared at the enormous house in front of them with his hands clenching around the stalks of the tall bushes that hid him and Hermione. The house itself looked fairly ordinary, not even as imposing as Malfoy Manor had looked when they "visited" it during the war. The façade had beautiful Classical columns, but the gardens surrounding it were shaggy with dark green bushes, and the house itself was neat and self-contained, made of brick, without spreading wings to either side.

"This is the address Daphne Greengrass has on record with the Ministry," Hermione said. She had been nearly as tense as Harry ever since they had acquired the map to Greengrass's house. She shadowed his every movement, clearly not intent on letting him charge into danger alone. Now she looked down at the map as if checking it, though Harry knew well enough it didn't show individual buildings—he had memorized it before he would let Hermione touch it—and nodded. "The Ministry *does* require some knowledge of where people live, you know, so it can tax them appropriately."

"She might have a hidden lair," Harry breathed. He found it hard to think, but as long as he concentrated on the goal immediately in front of them, he could maintain a calm eye in the center of the rising storm of rage in his head. Right now, he had to work out where Draco was, so that was the overriding determination.

"Really, Harry, she's not an Acromantula," Hermione snapped. Then she paused, as if reminded by her words of the battle with Cordelia, and moved behind him. Harry glanced over his shoulder at her as she waved her wand and murmured a soft spell. A moment later, he yelped as his back flared with light. Luckily, Hermione had already cast a concealment spell to cover the light, or Harry would have cast one himself and then yelled at her. This way, he could proceed straight to the yelling.

"*Hermione!* What—"

"You didn't heal that wound that Cordelia gave you when we fought her," Hermione interrupted in some disgust. "You just stopped the progress of the curse. The stasis spell might have worn off whilst we were fighting Greengrass, and what would you have done *then*, I wonder?" She clucked under her breath and shoved him forwards, so Harry had to hang on to two stalks of the bushes in front of him in order to keep his balance. "Hold still so I can heal it."

Harry rolled his eyes, but didn't protest. Hermione was right; the curse could indeed have become a problem when they went into the house to fight Greengrass.

And he wanted absolutely nothing to distract him from finding Draco.

The rage roared through him at that, as red and fast and large as the Hogwarts Express. Harry closed his eyes and welcomed it, luxuriating in the way it made his muscles lock and tremble and the adrenaline pound up and down in his head. He should be *doing* things.

The rage gave him the strength to do them.

He had to admit now that Draco was right, that giving up this emotion had been like locking a piece of himself away. Of course, it was a piece he had managed to do very well without for six years; he could *live* without getting tumultuously angry over minor things every five minutes.

But that he had forgotten what it was like to hurl curses in battle, to want to hurt someone for hurting someone else he loved…

That is not moral and you know it, Harry, his conscience said, and presented him with the image of his casting the Cruciatus Curse in retaliation for Carrow spitting on McGonagall during the war. That had not been justified. McGonagall had been in no pain, simply insulted, and the Cruciatus was a means of *causing* pain, unendurable enough when Harry had experienced it in the graveyard that he would not have wished it on any other human being.

At the time, anyway.

But he had changed enormously between the end of his fourth year and the end of his quest for the Horcruxes, and part of him had deepened and ripened into an appreciation of hatred for his enemies. Dumbledore had been quite wrong to think that Harry was capable only of love. The very desire for vengeance he'd felt when he considered how Voldemort murdered his parents was an indication of *that.* But Harry had never confronted that desire in himself because he'd been too young and callow, and when it called attention to itself, he panicked and imprisoned it.

Now he would have to take his thirst for revenge in hand if he was to have a hope of rescuing Draco. Daphne Greengrass was subtle, skilled in Legilimency and in magic that Harry had never heard of before, as well as the creation of *new* spells. What Harry had against that was brute strength and the slight added advantage of his potion enhancing his magic.

And the rage.

Harry licked his lips, glad at that moment he'd never told Draco exactly what his magic had done to Ginny so that Greengrass wouldn't have a chance to read it out of Draco's mind and anticipate his actions, and raised his eyes as Hermione finished removing the curse from his back. The house looked back at him, calm and ordinary on the surface. Hermione had told him that

Greengrass had probably used wizardspace inside, however, so that she could have more rooms, and more luxurious ones, than the house would otherwise let her contain. They might have to find their way through a maze before they reached Draco, or they might have to fight cunning and elaborate traps.

Harry didn't care.

The force of his indifference to the danger struck him like a bracing wind, and stole his breath away in the same manner. He didn't *care.* Greengrass could have imprisoned Draco on top of a volcano crowded with dangerous magical creatures maddened with a clever Imperius curse, and Harry's only fear would have been that she would drop Draco into the volcano before Harry could reach her.

He would tear her limb from limb if that was what was required. Or he would bind her hand and foot and meekly deliver her up to the Aurors. There was nothing he would not do to ensure Draco's safety.

Harry shivered. He wondered at how long it had taken him to recognize the manner in which the potion had changed, or, for that matter, his own feelings for Draco. Even though his potion suppressed his sexual jealousy, it didn't suppress love; it had never changed the way he felt about Ron and Hermione, and only time had altered the gentler emotions he felt for Ginny.

I suppose I became so used to lying to myself about my emotions that I automatically concealed them when something changed.

Well, no more. Harry would do anything required to reach Greengrass, and anything required to make sure Draco was happy and safe after that—court him, give him up to some other lover, visit him with flowers every day, help him brew two dozen cauldrons of the Desire potion. That was what he *wanted* to do, and if his own will and his own potion couldn't keep him from doing it, who did Daphne Greengrass think she was to try?

"There," Hermione said abruptly, and Harry jumped a little. "That's every wound from the last battle healed. I of course didn't need any healing magic myself, since I fought them *rationally.*" She stepped up to Harry and stared into his face for a moment. "Be careful."

"I know that," Harry said. The rage roared through him like a dragon again, and he trembled with eagerness.

"You don't look like you know it," Hermione muttered, and then sighed. "Malfoy's going to be a permanent part of our lives if we get him back, isn't he?" she asked the air.

"Glad to see you recognize that," Harry said, and then cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself and started walking towards the house, leaving Hermione, grumbling, to follow.

Nothing happened until they had crossed the porch and come in among those Classical columns. Harry couldn't even feel wards. Of course, that meant they were there and he just couldn't sense them. He *was* tense and ready, despite what Hermione might think, to move in a moment if anything coiled around his legs or tried to strike at his back.

But the first strike, it turned out, came from above. Stone shifted, and then small gargoyles that had crouched out of sight on the pediments of the columns came swooping down at Harry and Hermione, shrill screeches tearing out of their throats.

Harry turned to the side, so that the first gargoyle swooped over him, and lifted his wand. He hadn't seen the point of putting it away from the moment they'd stepped out of the bushes. "*Reducto!*" he shouted, and the force of the spell caught the gargoyle in the chest and smashed it to the steps.

Cracks radiated through the stone with such quickness and force that Harry was surprised. He understood, though, when each fragment grew wings, a head, and taloned hands, and then there were two gargoyles where there had been one. They both sprang at him, one rushing his knees, one diving at his head.

Hermione, from the sound of it, was using the same spell she had on the Acromantula, gathering up her attackers into one silken net. Harry favored different tactics, and he had the chance to think about which one he might use; for some reason, the gargoyles seemed to come at him in slow motion.

He laughed aloud, and the magic moved without his directing it, the way it had when the young witch came to the door of his flat.

Ice covered the gargoyle attacking from above, and it fell heavily to the steps. This time, though, when it tried to crack and divide, the ice wrapped itself more firmly around the stone, thickening and holding on like permafrost. Harry leaped the gargoyle that tried to grab his knees, receiving no more than a nick from its claws in passing.

The gargoyle turned around to come back, and then his magic took over. A glittering ball of ice crystals simply *appeared* around it; no matter how fast Harry looked at it, he knew he couldn't have caught the ice in the process of formation. And the magic gave the gargoyle no chance to land on the steps at all. It hovered in midair, bulging and rippling with odd blue shadows as its prisoner struggled futilely to break free. Harry laughed again and looked about for more gargoyles, eager to see how his magic would unite with his will this time.

Hermione was just Summoning the last one into her silken bag, which she wove extra tight with another wave of her wand. Then she looked at him sternly. It was obvious she found either his laughter or his wandless magic entirely inappropriate.

"Is it best to show her all our advantages before we even enter the house?" she snapped at him.

It would be his wandless magic, then. Harry tried to calm the joy flooding through him, but he seemed to have utterly lost his ability to build dams in front of his emotions. At least thinking of the possible danger Draco could be in allowed him to channel them. It was more important to press forwards and try to find Draco than to stand about looking for things to hit.

"I'm ready," he said, and smiled at Hermione, and cast a spell that should detect traps on the door. Nothing. Then he cast a spell to detect wards. Nothing again. At last he opened the door from a distance with a charm that worked like an invisible hand pushing on it. It opened on darkness. Greengrass would not have been obliging enough to have lit rooms she wasn't occupying, and of course she wouldn't have Draco on the ground floor of her house; that would be too easy.

Let's find out where she has him, then.

Harry stepped forwards.

"Interesting," Daphne said, and swirled her wand at the mirror, making it change its image from the porch of the manor house to the front room, a dim, shaded place. Draco could just barely make out heavy furniture covered with cloth in the darkness. Harry was taking the lead, of course, whilst Granger scuttled along behind him and cast detection spells. "I did not expect them to defeat the gargoyles so easily. However…" Daphne moved her wand sideways and whispered a spell.

Draco tightened his hands inside the wire, and said nothing. Because she wanted a reaction from him so much, he would not give her one. And that might occupy her more with trying to get a rise out of him than with hurting Harry.

Harry heard the rattling a few steps past the door, at the same moment as Hermione called out sharply, "Harry!"

But both warnings were too late; the manticore had already sprung and jabbed its scorpion-like tail into Harry's shoulder, and he could feel the warmth of the poison flowing into his veins.

Gritting his teeth, Harry turned to deal with the latest threat. He had to remember this was just another obstacle on the path to Draco, to be dealt with and thrown out of the way accordingly.

Ignore the pain. Draco's the important thing.

The manticore roared at him and reached out with one paw as if to rip his face off.

Harry attacked.

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Chapter: 19

Thanks again for all the reviews!

Chapter Nineteen—On the Way to Daphne

Hermione cried in alarm from the side. Probably she thought he should be rolling away from the manticore instead of attacking it, Harry thought. She would think he was wounded and should attend to the wound first, or at least to the poison snaking through his veins.

She didn't understand him—at least not right in this moment, when Harry could feel his rage as hot and as loud as his heartbeat in his head. He had had enough of running, pretending that certain things didn't exist.

He certainly couldn't do it now, when this beast was only one of many obstacles that he would need to face to get Draco back.

By the time he'd completed those thoughts, his wand had shot out, directing a Stinging Hex directly into the manticore's face. He'd remembered reading in Care of Magical Creatures that the over-large nose and jaw were particularly sensitive. And sure enough, the manticore fell back, screaming and roaring and lifting a paw to stroke mindlessly along its human features, adding scratches to the stinging welts it had received. Its scorpion tail lashed wildly from side to side.

Harry hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should check on his poisoned wound, but he couldn't bring himself to, when his magic was up like his temper. He directed a Blasting Curse at the manticore's tail, and it separated from the lion-like body and clashed against the wall. The stream of blood that followed it was most impressive.

Harry's vision abruptly clouded and he staggered. He scowled. *Stupid poison, ruining my aim.* His second Blasting Curse had broken apart a piece of furniture instead of smashing the manticore's limbs.

Hermione finished a chant of a lengthy, powerful spell from the side, and the manticore's flesh began to peel away from its bones and liquefy. Harry stared, fascinated, as the creature dissolved into a pile of quivering goo. It was colored like blood and flesh, but if someone had asked Harry without his seeing the manticore, he wouldn't have said it had ever been alive.

Then his legs collapsed beneath him, and he fell to the ground, choking. Hermione hurried over to bend down, cursing breathlessly. Harry could barely tell when the curses merged into the chanting of a healing spell. He only knew that the clutch of his throat eased a little, and he could gulp in stale, slightly dusty air that was still the best he'd ever breathed in his life.

Hermione held her wand to the wound on his shoulder and finished casting whatever charms she needed to cast. Harry felt the heat and the swelling go down. He shifted to the side, trying to stand, but Hermione caught his arm and shook her head.

"No, you have to stay still for right now," she said. "The victim's efforts to get away just exaggerate the effects of the venom." She shuddered and closed her eyes. "A few more minutes and you would have been dead," she whispered. "*Why* didn't you draw back from the fight and cast a Shield Charm, Harry?"

"Because I knew I could kill the manticore if I just kept on," Harry said. "And because I want to be with Draco again, and a few more minutes is an awful delay." He looked down at his shoulder, though because of the angle at which the tail had stung him, he wasn't able to see the injury very well. "How much longer before I can move again?"

"Who was the one who killed the manticore in the end?" Hermione snapped at him. "And it'll be at least ten minutes, I think."

"*Hermione.*"

Her face flushed, and Harry had been close enough to her for enough years to recognize the anger and worry combined in the way she stared at him. "You're no use to Draco dead, idiot," she said. "And I hardly think that he'd be content with your killing yourself on the *way* to him. Do what's sensible as well as brave for once in your life." She clasped his good shoulder and shook him to relieve her feelings. Harry's head actually rolled on his neck.

"I thought I wasn't supposed to move?" he asked, when he'd recovered.

"*Impossible,*" Hermione said darkly, and then stepped into a position where she could watch both doors, the one they'd come through and the one on the far side of the dim room, with her wand at the ready.

Harry lowered himself to rest and lie obediently still. He really couldn't prevent a fond smile from collecting on his lips. He hoped Hermione would understand if she glanced over at him and thought he was making fun of her concern.

"How sweet," Daphne murmured, studying the mirror. "Your little paramour is willing to kill himself on the way to you." She glanced over her shoulder at Draco. "And yet I know that you've never even shared a bed."

At the moment, Draco was *glad* that he'd never slept with Harry. It would have been another private experience for Daphne to tear out of his head with her Legilimency and try to corrupt. So he simply lifted his chin and looked back in silence, and after an instant, Daphne seemed to find the mirror more interesting.

Draco tightened his hands together in the wire. Daphne had cast the spell that allowed them both to hear what Harry and Granger were saying so she could listen in on the plans of her enemies, he knew, not for his sake. But still, hearing Harry's words had made shock and wonder tingle up his spine like a lightning bolt, followed by an emotion he hadn't felt in so long it took him a few moments to recognize it. Delight.

And because I want to be with Draco again, and a few more minutes is an awful delay.

Draco ducked his head to make it harder for Daphne to see his smile if she happened to look towards him.

This time, Hermione went in front, casting detection spells in a loud voice that Harry thought was partially intended to warn any enemies they were coming. He went behind her, fretting but trying to convince himself that being impatient did no good. Ultimately, if he got wounded again and had to wait whilst Hermione cast healing spells, he would be prevented from taking his place at Draco's side for a longer time yet. And God forbid he end up in St. Mungo's through stupid heroics.

He wouldn't mind if *Draco* had to be taken to St. Mungo's, of course. It was likely, when Daphne had had him for as many hours as she had. Harry would visit him every day, and find love poetry to print on cards and embarrass him, and order flowers delivered anonymously—if that was what Draco wanted, of course.

Sometimes Harry thought he had started feeling affection for Draco without understanding the *man.* Yes, he had seen flashes of wit, intelligence, artistry in his Potions making, independence, pride, and passion that made him long to imitate it, and to be a worthy lover of its possessor. But he barely knew anything about Draco's past other than what he'd managed to observe in Hogwarts. He didn't even know why Draco couldn't reconcile with his parents; when Harry had shown him Lucius's letter, Draco had simply tightened his lips and turned his head away.

If we rescue him, then there will be time to find those details out, Harry reassured himself, and then raced forwards as Hermione let out a loud shriek.

They were traversing yet another dim room, the light of the *Lumos* charms on their wands barely pushing back the shadows. Harry had seen more blocky furniture draped with thick cloths, more odd corners that showed where wizardspace pushed against the real walls of the house, and more shining patinas of gray dust. So far, though, he had thought this room would be less dangerous than the other. Something like a manticore would have charged them at once, after all.

But evidently Daphne had decided to stock *this* room with traps that waited until you passed them. The curved banister of a useless staircase—trailing off in mid-air, as though the architect had forgotten to finish it—had grabbed Hermione's arm. And though she'd already lit the wood on fire, the flames danced harmlessly over the banister, which was using the railings that connected it to the steps to reach out to Hermione like a spider.

Harry used a Blasting Curse, but it bounced back at him exactly as if the staircase were under a Shield Charm; he barely ducked in time. Hermione was still fighting, until one of the rails managed to knock her wand away. Harry Summoned it at once, then turned to confront the problem in front of him.

His magic was no help; the potion had strengthened it, Harry thought, only in respect to protecting Draco, and since neither Harry nor Draco was in direct danger at the moment, Harry didn't think he could command it to get rid of the staircase. Besides, Greengrass was probably watching, and he really should keep his most powerful weapon in reserve if he could.

So he stared hard at the staircase instead, remembering one of the most useful lessons he had learned in Defense Against the Dark Arts: *If something seems invulnerable, it's got a clever disguise on.*

And sure enough, he made out the slight flicker of green shoots within the "railings" of the staircase dragging Hermione inexorably towards the steps, and smiled. This was some kind of plant, not a piece of animated furniture at all. That saved him trying useless charms to remove the spell that guided it. And though the tough woody casing around it seemed resistant to common offensive magic as well as fire, Harry doubted it had any protection against the spell he'd just chosen.

"*Saxum!*" he shouted, the spell that Neville had once told Harry he used on anything in his garden which grew wilder and more ferocious than he liked it.

The magic traveled out as a rippling wave of purple light that engulfed the staircase, but not Hermione; she wasn't actually part of the plant, the sole target of Harry's spell. He felt a sudden blow like something striking his chest from the inside. Startled, he wondered if his magic had responded to his will after all in some special way; it could at least tell that he didn't mean to transform Hermione.

The wood became stone, polished gray granite, and in the alteration from organic matter to non-organic matter lost the terrible life that had made it strong. Hermione hissed and flexed her hands, and Harry broke the grip of the stone tendrils with another flick of his wand. This time, they shattered harmlessly. He helped her stand up and gave her her wand back.

"Yet another thing to check for," Hermione muttered as she healed the bruises on her arms. Harry wanted to say that those probably wouldn't slow down her spellwork even if they met more enemies, but said nothing. She would snap at him in the mood she was in, and he wanted her to save her rage for Greengrass. "I was checking for traps, wards, magical creatures, poisons, and half a dozen other things, but I didn't think to cast a spell for *plants*."

"How careless of you," Harry said mildly.

She gave him a harsh look, directed primarily at the wound on his shoulder, and then turned and

stamped towards the door on the eastern side of the room. Harry followed her, grinning. That had been a nice relief from the rage he could feel building up beneath his skin again, making his eyes itch.

"Hmmm." Daphne sounded disappointed. "I didn't expect them to discover the counterspell to that staircase so soon."

Draco just breathed. He doubted she expected any answer, and he wouldn't have had one to give even if she did. He could barely take his eyes from the mirror. He had never seen the Harry who walked there now, glancing calmly and alertly from side to side, thrumming with power. If he had, he probably would have jumped him long ago.

And maybe then something of this could have been avoided, he thought sourly, remembering the way that he had been so anxious for Harry not to find out about Daphne, so that he wouldn't feel disgusted by Draco. *I should have found some other way to placate her, or some other way to pay the debts I owed to Cordelia.*

Daphne abruptly spun around to face him, so suddenly that Draco felt his back go up despite himself. Daphne examined his expression and laughed a little, shaking her head. "Relax, Draco," she said. "I don't mean to torture you yet. But I want you to tell me. I wasn't there when he defeated the Dark Lord, if you will remember."

Draco nodded stiffly. Daphne had already fled the school with the rest of the good little Slytherins. It was only his own foolishness that had made him stay behind, certain he could capture Potter and regain his family's favor with the Dark Lord.

Harry. I was trying to capture Harry.

For a moment, Draco was consumed by intense dizziness, trying to reconcile the dazzling figure in the mirror he was depending on to rescue him with the Potter he had despised and actually tried to sacrifice to his greatest enemy.

But Daphne was speaking again, and he needed to concentrate on her words. "How much power would you say he has? How much did he use when he defeated the Dark Lord?"

Draco managed, with a very great effort, to keep all his muscles from tensing at once. He would not betray Harry to Daphne like that. He would not make her think that she had to use Legilimency on him to learn the truth.

Looking her in the eye, as sincerely as he could, Draco said, "You must have heard about it. Everyone thought Harry would use the Killing Curse to finish him. But it turned out that the Elder Wand, which the Dark Lord had seized, acknowledged Harry as its master. It had been Dumbledore's wand. I defeated Dumbledore, and then Harry defeated me."

"I did hear about that," Daphne murmured. She wasn't trying to read him; at least, Draco didn't think she was. She stood with her eyes focused past his face, on the far wall. But he had never been able to tell for certain when she was probing into his memories, so he could only try to keep both his hope and his dread very far under the surface of his mind. "I thought the reports must have been mistaken, however. Surely Potter flung a Killing Curse too fast to be noticed."

Draco shook his head. "The Dark Lord tried one," he said. "But the Elder Wand refused to attack Harry, and he finished the Dark Lord off with his own curse, the same way he had when he was a baby."

"And that was a sacrifice of mother's love," Daphne said, and began to smile. "But against me he has no such protections."

Draco bowed his head. "No, he doesn't," he said. He had only a moment to judge the tone of his voice, to hope that it was just sullen enough not to seem like overacting and make her suspect something. It was the most important performance of his life, and he put everything he had into it.

Daphne's hand descended on his hair. Draco flinched, thinking she might jerk his head up and read the truth out of his eyes. But Daphne only laughed and said, "I told you, no more torture for right now. Not until I have Harry Potter in front of me." Her footsteps sounded a moment later, moving away from him, back towards the mirror.

Draco peered at her through one eye. She was studying the glass, smiling expectantly, impatiently, her wand bouncing up and down in her palm.

I've done what I can to fool her into thinking you're less powerful than you are, Harry. Now get here and save me, goddamn it.

Harry coughed. It seemed the latest room he and Hermione had entered was even fuller of dust than usual. But it had fewer pieces of furniture, and none of Hermione's detection spells had revealed anything unusual. Even better, Harry could see what definitely looked like a staircase and not an oddly-shaped plant on the far side of the room.

He and Hermione had just reached the bottom of it when the thoughts in Harry's head suddenly stopped moving.

It was a *very* odd sensation. He had been constructing a fantasy of what would happen when he rescued Draco from Daphne, and had reached the part where Draco looked at him with shining eyes and said—

And Harry couldn't imagine what he said. He found himself straining as if he were trying to pick up giant metal blocks without his wand. He parted his lips to say something, but only a strangled whine came out.

When he looked at Hermione, he saw an expression on her face as if she had forgotten to return a book to the library on time. She clasped her hands against her temples and pushed hard, inwards. But Harry knew it was doing no good even before he watched her sink to her knees.

Visions of Draco continued to drift in front of his eyes. He tried to come up with ideas about what might have happened to him and Hermione, but he could barely frame the name "Greengrass" in his head. He coughed again.

Hermione didn't—and the rest of the thought was wordless and he could not have spoken it, but he knew what he needed to do.

His wand dangled, heavy and awkward, in his hand. He brought his arm up as if it were on winches, and barely managed to touch the tip of his wand to his throat. And then he couldn't speak the incantation that would clear his lungs no matter how hard he tried.

He imagined, with an effort like swinging chains, what would happen if he delayed too long here and Greengrass managed to torture Draco and drive him out of his mind.

His magic rose in a brimming flood and followed the course of the incantation that hovered behind his lips. Harry's lungs suddenly cleared, and a huge puff of dust, mingled with streamers of a thin yellow gas, flew out of his mouth.

Coughing furiously, Harry turned to Hermione. This time, he didn't have trouble pronouncing the charm that cleared her lungs aloud. Hermione choked, lips moving almost as if she wanted to keep the gas in, and then she made a sharp sound like *haaak* and loosed the yellow streamers. Harry cast a charm to keep the air circulating that Mrs. Weasley had taught him when they cleaned Grimmauld Place and knelt down, putting an arm around her shoulders whilst Hermione trembled as if she might need to vomit.

"You're all right?" Harry whispered, stroking her hair back from her face.

Hermione nodded. Her trembling had already stopped, and she waved her wand, conjuring a glass vial. Harry blinked as she said, "Stop using that charm, I want to capture it," and she used a different kind of air-stirring charm to direct the few tattered clouds of gas remaining into the vial, which she corked.

"What?" she asked, when she saw Harry staring at her. "The Ministry might be able to analyze this gas."

"Would you really show it to anyone when you would have to admit we got it breaking and entering Daphne Greengrass's manor house?" Harry raised his eyebrows.

"Well, then *I* can still analyze it," Hermione said, and tucked the vial away.

"Never waste an opportunity to learn," Harry muttered, in the voice Hermione had used on him and Ron at Hogwarts, and steered her towards the stairs.

"They're overcoming my defenses more *easily* than I thought they would," Daphne murmured. Now her wand was tapping against her lips.

Draco paused for a moment, muscles still flexing and then relaxing in his bonds. He could do something, if he dared, to distract Daphne for a moment and help Harry. Of course, he had no way of knowing how much it *would* help. At any moment, Daphne could read the truth out of his mind, and then what she had done to him so far would look like a love-tap.

But Draco was sick of simply sitting here whilst Harry came closer and closer and Daphne revolved God knew what barbed schemes in that Slytherin brain of hers.

"Of course," he said. "Hermione Granger is with him."

Daphne turned around, the curious motion of her head to the side reminding Draco of what a cobra looked like when it cocked its neck to strike. "What do you mean?"

"Granger was always the brains of that operation," Draco explained, tilting his head back to ease the pain in his neck. The chair Daphne had chosen didn't have the virtue of being a comfortable one. "She was the one who came up most of the spells that kept him one step ahead of the Death Eaters, I heard, and even helped him win the Triwizard Tournament." And he sincerely did believe that, which would lessen the problem if Daphne decided to use her Legilimency. "The same way his mother's love helped him defeat the Dark Lord." He sighed and shook his head a little. "I think Harry Potter has been very lucky in his friends and his parents, but he's less lucky in himself."

"And yet, you're ready to settle with him." Daphne never did anything as girlish as sulking, or Draco might have mistaken that expression on her face for that.

"Well, he's attractive," Draco said, with a little shrug. "And he has personality characteristics that I find enjoyable in a lover. A fierce temper, for example. That doesn't mean he can do *everything* on his own. Breaking into manor houses to rescue me isn't generally a test I impose on my partners."

"You should," Daphne said. "It separates the quality from the chaff." She looked at the mirror again. "And how magically powerful is Hermione Granger?"

"Fairly," Draco admitted. He remembered the Gall Bladder Curse that Granger had designed and used on Theodore Nott, and shuddered. "You would have a hard fight of it, confronting them both at once."

"There's no need for that," said Daphne, and spoke a single word, too high and shrill for Draco's

ears to hear it.

He dropped his head back against the chair and hoped silently that she wouldn't turn and punish him.

Halfway up the stairs, Hermione cried out. Harry swung around on one heel and saw that a cage of energy, wickedly glowing blue light, had sprung up to separate them. He reached back down, but Hermione cried out again when the bars bent inwards, and Harry smelled the scent of singing hair.

When he backed away, ready to hurl himself at it, the bars snapped into their original positions. And Hermione said a word she had once threatened to wash out Ron's mouth with soap for saying.

"What?" Harry demanded anxiously.

"This is the Flexible Cage Spell," Hermione said, sounding more angry than upset. "It holds a prisoner safe as long as no one else tries to touch her, but anyone else coming near—friend or foe—makes the cage hurt her. It was used on prisoners that some of the old Dark Lords wanted to starve to death."

"Maybe if I gather my power, I can—"

"It can only be broken from the inside," Hermione snapped, "and it'll take me a while to remember how to do that. Go on up ahead and face Greengrass." She peered between the gap in the bars when Harry hesitated. "Go *on*," she said more insistently. "Draco probably needs you more than I do right now, and it'll be easier to concentrate if I don't have to watch you dance from foot to foot like a small child needing the loo."

Despite the fear rising in him, Harry managed to smile. He waved and turned away, hearing Hermione begin to mutter as she tried the first of what he knew would be many spells on the recalcitrant cage.

He took the stairs two at a time now, casting a detection spell every other step, heart beating fast. But no one and nothing attacked him, and at the top of the flight was only a single door, standing open.

Harry paused a moment to wipe his hands on his trousers. He saw no point in waiting, since his enemy most likely knew he was here already.

His rage and his magic spreading around him like invisible wings, he stepped through the door.

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Chapter: 20

Thank you again for all the reviews!

This is the last chapter of *An Alchemical Discontent.* There will be a third story in the series, *A More Worldly Man*, which will start being posted in about a week. Thank you to everyone who's read along thus far.

Chapter Twenty—In the Shadow

Draco shivered as he watched Harry step through the door. He actually felt him before he saw him; the air seemed to become thick and clogged, as if he were trying to breathe smoke. He coughed once, then flinched, wondering if that would draw Daphne's attention to him.

But Daphne was entirely focused on the door. She took a single step forwards and then moved her wand in a lazy pattern. Eye-hurting lines of yellow light snapped out from the walls, each the length and sharpness of a large knife. They didn't go near Harry yet, but Draco shuddered at the thought of what they might do.

"So long I've waited for this," Daphne said. "I've had some trouble in understanding what Draco saw in you, but at last, at *last*, it doesn't matter. When you die, that will kill the part of him that tried to resist me."

Harry said nothing. Draco craned his neck to the side, wishing impatiently that Daphne did not stand in the way and would actually allow him to *see*. Harry's power was all very well, but nothing could match the sight of the figure he would make—surely even better than the figure in Draco's mind.

When he finally caught a glimpse of him, Draco felt a small thrill travel through his gut. Harry was standing with his arms folded, his face hard and expressionless, except for his eyes, which were fastened on the wires encircling Draco's limbs.

"Handsome, isn't he?" Daphne murmured, a low tone of laughter in her voice. "And I've gone further than you have with him. I've seen him naked, which you haven't yet. I've searched his mind. There is a great deal of vague yearning there, but nothing specific. Strange. If you really wanted him, do you think you could have waited?"

Harry didn't say anything, and didn't move, either. Draco watched the way his eyes lingered on the places where wires had cut into his flesh, raising ridges of wounds and bringing out lines of blood. Harry's eyes half-lidded, but the look in them was not one of sexual pleasure. Draco wasn't entirely certain *what* it was. It was the only visible change in Harry's face as the power in the room grew thicker, though, so Draco knew it must be important.

"You are less reactive than Draco is," Daphne said under her breath, moving closer and closer to Harry all the while. The jagged points of light projecting from the walls twitched and swayed. Draco imagined them all piercing Harry's body and dragging his guts out through a dozen belly wounds, and had to force himself to stay still. "How strange. Since he is so pale and calm himself, I imagined he would want a passionate lover. But you have been taking a potion that suppresses most of your strong emotions for the last six years. So perhaps you will not be that enjoyable a kill after all. A disappointment." She sighed on the last words.

Harry *still* didn't say anything. Draco licked his lips and tried not to stare in too much anxiety. Had Daphne used some sort of spell on him, one Draco hadn't recognized and hadn't seen her incant? Was she making him into a victim before she killed him, just to make the blow that much crueler for Draco?

Then Draco caught sight of something that reassured him. Harry's fingers were moving slowly in and out of a clenched position, as if he felt the need to scrape them regularly against his palms. And a faint tremor ran through his body.

What will he do? Draco didn't know, but suddenly the magic building up in the room felt like the most delicious—and dangerous—promise.

"No response even now." Daphne bowed her head in mock sorrow, her blonde hair sliding along her neck. Draco could make out an expanse of fair skin, but it was insipid next to Harry's darker complexion. Why had he ever thought her beautiful enough to be attractive, let alone to go to bed with? "Very well. I suppose that I must test the first and simplest of my traps and see what happens."

She flicked her wand. The knives of yellow light left the walls and flew straight towards Harry.

Draco screamed; he knew he did, though his throat seemed to clamp around silence instead of sound. For too long a time, a deadly time, Harry stood there, staring at Draco, and made no effort to defend himself.

Then the invisible smoke cloud of magic in the room drifted lower and gathered more thickly around Draco, until he struggled not to black out. His body felt it would be the only possible surrender to such power, and Draco had to convince it that he didn't *want* to surrender to such power; he wanted to watch Harry survive.

When he could see again, the knives of yellow light had simply vanished. Harry's magic had put them out, or swallowed them. At the least, he had no mark on his skin. Draco began to breathe again, and compose a speech in his head he would use after they got out of here. It concerned the benefits of *not* frightening your boyfriend to death when you were supposed to be rescuing him.

A moment went by in which Daphne stared at Harry with her lips slightly parted and Harry looked back at her—finally at her instead of Draco, which Draco thought was probably an

improvement but resented nonetheless.

"Why," said Daphne, voice as soft and indignant as though someone had lied to her, "you're *unusual.*"

And then Harry *moved*.

The pain inflicted on Draco had been the center of his world for so many moments that he had begun to think he would not be able to move beyond it no matter what happened. He could only stare at the welts Draco was marked with and the blood rising from the cruel manner in which he was bound, and think of the worse he had probably endured. The desires to do conflicting things—fall to his knees and scream about it and rush to Draco to reassure him—warred so strongly in his mind that he could not react.

And then Greengrass set her magic on him, and his attention shifted to her. He dismissed the spells she had used almost without realizing what he was doing. They were simply things which existed and had to die, in the same way that he would have wanted a gnat to stop stinging him.

And then he realized she had been responsible for what Draco had suffered.

And she had spoken of Draco as if—as if they had been intimate in bed like *lovers*, as if this had been something less than rape.

And his soul exploded.

His magic was already flowing free from him. Now his rage joined it, rapidly growing, twining around the magic like a trained vine around a trellis. His wand was in his hand, but he didn't remember drawing it. His breath was rushing in his ears, horrible and harsh and *fast.*

Everything was suddenly happening very fast, at least inwardly. The steps he took across the floor seemed slow, and so did the way that Greengrass's wand rose. He had time for everything in the world.

Even though the only thing he *could* actually do was drown in the maelstrom consuming him.

For a moment, the thought of Ginny flickered across his mind like a prophecy, and then it drowned, too. Harry laughed. He heard himself do it as if someone else had commanded him to under Imperius. He was thick in the midst of his own emotions, and letting them come forth and combine in the way they had only once before was as good as being drugged.

He laughed and said something about Greengrass that he could never remember afterwards, and which he would not ask about. The rage went on increasing, and racing into it was the jealousy combined with the thought of her fucking Draco, of *understanding* Draco better than he did, body and soul. It was not just about her taking him to bed. She had hurt Draco, she had tattered

Draco's memories, she had made part of Draco's life in the last few weeks center on her to the extent that Harry had less of a place in Draco's attention than he might have had. That was *not to be borne.*

He felt something shatter inside him, but was not sure what it was. One of the chains he had been keeping on his darker self, perhaps.

And then there was the fact that Draco was naked—or perhaps not entirely so, he could have been wearing a scrap of small cloth *somewhere*, but Harry had not been in the mood to notice such things and so he did not. He had been bare enough for Harry to make out every single hideous coil of wire cutting into him, at least. That brought the lust out of its long hibernation, roaring like a winter-hungry bear.

The lust, the rage, the jealousy, twined together with the magic, and Harry felt as if he were in the middle of a long, slow volcanic eruption, which would only become real to other people when it hurled flaming rock on them.

Daphne cast a curse. It tore past him and cut a shallow, stinging wound into the side of his cheek. Probably it had been intended to do something much worse, but his magic had stopped it before the spell got that far.

And the eruption arrived.

Harry knew he was screaming, but he could not tell if the sound held any words. It did not matter if it did. He was drowning again, and this time he gave himself up to it joyously.

Every light in the room went out.

Draco went taut in his bonds, then winced as they sliced into him. He had promised himself he wasn't going to tense up, and not only because he didn't want to give Daphne the satisfaction of seeing him affected.

But he really *couldn't see.* The smoke of Harry's magic seemed to have become real after all, and the blinding darkness of it was worse than he could have imagined. Draco shivered. He could feel power pressing against his neck, his cheek, his eyes. He strained his vision into it, trying to make out a glimpse of Harry, nearly ready to call out and perhaps reveal his position to Daphne in doing so.

Then a weird light began to glow along the walls. It was pale blue as the heart of a flame, but colder by far than that; Draco felt a coil of it start by his feet, and flinched from the frost of it. Then he stared harder as he noticed it was his *shadow* burning. A perfect dusky replica of himself lay on the floor and shivered back and forth with the heartbeats of the light; it was edged with the fire that it itself bore.

Draco had never heard of magic like this. That fact alone made his breath come shorter and his head swim with respect and fear. He had studied widely in the Dark Arts as well as in Potions, and this was surely Dark magic. He ought to have recognized what it was akin to if he didn't know the spell that caused it.

But he didn't. And when he lifted his eyes, he saw that Daphne did not know, either. But her expression was fascinated.

She stood by the most distant wall of the room from him, not far from the mirror. Her eyes were on the shadows of the chairs, the mirror, the bed in the corner of the chamber, herself. Wherever she looked, there was something that seemed to catch her attention, her interest. Now she was touching the mirror and making small cooing noises at it, as if cold blue fire on glass were an interesting special effect from Muggle movies and not the sign of a deadly enemy.

But where was Harry?

Draco looked at once in several different directions, but couldn't spot him. He shivered then, remembering what Harry had told him about the power that had consumed him when he scared the she-Weasel, apparently for life. Had it been too much for him? Had it consumed him?

The desolation that washed over him at the thought was stronger than any emotion he had ever felt. Draco closed his eyes so that he would at least not shed tears.

And then he heard a soft sound of surprise from Daphne, and opened his eyes, hoping against hope that it would reveal Harry's presence.

He frowned. The air around Daphne glowed in an irregular but relatively semi-circular pattern that he had learned to recognize. It was her magical aura. In her case, it shone gold and deep green, signs of power and a developed area of magic that bordered on Dark Arts.

The pattern grew brighter and brighter. Daphne regarded it with that same fascinated look in her eyes. Draco squinted, determined to see what was going on even as the light grew too brilliant to comfortably watch through.

And then it flared, and then Daphne *screamed.*

The sound was like someone suddenly being impaled with a meat-hook through the guts, Draco thought, tingling with awe and fear and other emotions that moved too deeply and swiftly, like the rushing current of an icy river, for him to understand. The light of the aura was dimming now. He leaned forwards, ignoring the way that more runnels of blood worked their way down his legs and arms, needing to *see.*

Daphne's magical aura was diminishing, little by little, like a waning moon. And Daphne was screaming all the while, fists pressed to her temples, body writhing, as if she were being eaten alive.

She's not being eaten alive, Draco suddenly realized, as he watched a bite vanish from her aura. *Her magic is.*

Harry's here. He is the darkness itself.

Draco became aware only a moment later that his teeth were chattering hard enough to make him bite his tongue. He squirmed and shivered, fine tremors racing through his body, as they had begun to do through Harry just before he exploded at Daphne. Excitement swept through him, and then terror, and then excitement again.

He had not been lying when he told Harry that he liked powerful, dangerous lovers. He had simply never been in contact with someone who might *eat* him before. Even the Dark Lord, savage though he had been, had not had that power.

And what would happen if Harry couldn't control himself this time, the way that he had with Weasley? What would happen if he turned on Draco as the source of his jealousy? If Harry thought he deserved punishment for letting Daphne touch him?

At that moment, Draco thought he would have surrendered without fuss. The magic in the room, in the dancing blue flames and in the way Daphne writhed and screamed, her torment paying back his in full measure, was too overwhelming. He wanted to be in contact with it more than he wanted to flee.

It was—like nothing had been.

Harry felt a violent *satisfaction* as he ate Greengrass's magic. He had always been starving. He had never known what food could settle him. He consumed, and was happy. There was nothing to life but eating.

She had made him suffer. She had made Draco suffer more. There was a debt to be repaid. That was righteous and good. Sometimes Harry had been uneasy with thoughts of vengeance, but there could be no lack of ease in this. He was *punishing* her, and she had more than earned the punishment.

He pushed. He licked teasingly at her magic before he bit down, and knew that she suffered nearly as much from the teasing as she did from the fierce bites. Down and down and down he pushed, closer to her magical core, trimming away the gristle and the fat that the outer layers of her aura represented, to get closer to the *meat.*

He was *hungry.*

When the hunger and the satisfaction had grown to become more than the whole of his world, he became aware of a vague nagging thought. The power that he swallowed like this would not go

to sustain him. He had not increased in power after he nibbled away a bit of Ginny's. He had simply made it vanish, and the same thing would happen now, no matter how much he wished that he could make Greengrass suffer by seeing her strength made part of him.

Harry pushed forwards, eating, with a shrug that caused the shadows in the room to stir and dance like the lights of a dipped candelabra. That did not signify. He had to make her suffer as he could, and not wish for the impossible.

But as the satisfaction deepened, as he swallowed and swallowed the magic, as he took the worst revenge he could think of—he would leave her a Squib—something else in him shifted and changed. It was as if *she* were swallowing his rage, his lust, his jealousy, the deadly combination that had forced him into this action in the first place. Harry frowned, but went on eating; what else could he do but that? Nothing had occurred to him yet that would make him stop.

And then his conscience awoke.

He had never thought he would keep his promise to annihilate Greengrass. That had been the hasty vow of a moment. And he was a Gryffindor. Still pure of motive when he could be. He would have—should have—still preferred prison for Greengrass, the comforting regularity and mechanical nature of a trial.

Not this. He should not have taken justice into his own hands. He didn't know whose magic he was eating. What if he had harmed Draco? What if he had driven Greengrass mad? What if—

If he had made her a Squib—

The fate that had sounded only just and right a moment before made him want to scream now. Harry flung himself away from Greengrass, away from the maelstrom of power dragging on him. It had not consumed his own magic, but now he felt as if it were consuming his soul.

He was crying. He knew that as he came back to himself and fell to his knees in the middle of a room that suddenly seemed much brighter. When he lifted his head, blinking, he saw Greengrass slumped against the wall next to a mirror, her hands resting in her lap and her head bowed. He concentrated, trying to make out any trace of her magical aura.

None. It was all gone.

Harry folded his arms around his head and whimpered softly. What was worse than the fact that he had done it was his lack of guilt. He knew he should not have consumed her magic, but he could not bring himself to regret it.

But there was one thing worse still.

Shivering, Harry turned and drew his wand to cut Draco's bonds, dreading the sight of his eyes.

Really, Gryffindor morals show up at the most inconvenient times, Draco thought. The wires had fallen off his arms and legs, but he couldn't watch them go, or rejoice in the fact that he was nearly naked in front of Harry for the first time. He had seen the tears in Harry's eyes, the pallor of his face, and the twitching of his throat, as if he were about to sick up.

And Draco knew exactly what was causing it: the punishment of Daphne. The *lovely* punishment of Daphne, which Draco would lie awake many nights of his life thinking about, and which would make him fall asleep with a smile on his face.

But that line of argument would not convince Harry. He would be sure that Draco was afraid of him, or that Draco should be, or that he could have gone too far and hurt Draco, or that he had done something wrong and should be ashamed.

Or, more probably, all of those at once, Draco thought, and came forwards to take the hawthorn wand that Harry offered him. He spelled some clothes onto himself and eased the pain of his wounds, and then knelt down in front of Harry.

Wonderful, exasperating Harry, the man who would become his boyfriend and his lover—but only after a courtship, of course. Draco was ready to be cherished and protected, healed and wooed. It had been a long time since he'd experienced even one of those luxuries, and never with someone whom he trusted as much as he trusted Harry. It would be nice to feel he could *relax* for once in his life, and accept those gestures wholeheartedly.

Surely he could repay Harry in advance by giving him what *he* needed.

"That was almost the same thing you did to Weasley?" he asked softly. "I remember that you told me about the way your magic transformed your shadow."

Harry nodded. "But I didn't eat *her* magic," he whispered. "Greengrass is a Squib now."

"Thank you," Draco said, and put his arms around Harry's neck, and kissed him softly, a chaste press of lips.

Harry stared at him when he drew back from the kiss. He looked stupefied. Draco would have liked to think it was from his excellent seduction skills, but he knew that look. Harry could not believe Draco was not afraid of him.

"Why—"

"Her magic was the thing I feared about her," Draco whispered. "The way she could torture me, the way she could peer into my mind. She'll be helpless to do that now, and I *know* it." He dragged air into his lungs, as if more frightened than he actually was. "That was the only way I could ever feel safe."

And it worked. Draco watched Harry's eyes lighten with relief and eager need to believe what Draco was saying. Draco kept his face as open and unguarded as he could, letting Harry take the truth from it.

He did *not* expect the crushing kiss that followed a moment later, made of colliding teeth and mashing lips and furiously licking tongues. Draco found himself falling backwards for a moment; then Harry caught and supported his head, and continued kissing him with fierce, eager abandonment.

Draco felt delight and relief move through him as powerfully as Harry's magic had moved through the room a few moments before. *He believes it. He can accept what he did, because he knows that I'm not afraid of him, and because he can see it as something he did for me.*

Harry used the kiss to keep proving that simple truth over and over again for long minutes, not that Draco minded. Then he pulled back and turned to look at Greengrass, his eyes hooded.

"We'll have to explain this," he murmured, sounding more like the collected, planning Harry Draco had known for the past few months.

"We will," Draco said, and tightened his hold on Harry's shoulders. The wounds he hadn't been able to heal were making themselves known again, but he had to say this before he went to hospital and a wall of Healers separated him from Harry. "But whatever lies we tell, or truths if that's *really* necessary, we'll do it together. Won't we?" His voice sharpened with anxiety on the last few words, even though he told himself to keep calm.

Harry turned and stared at him. The lack of expression reminded Draco of the way he had looked when he came into the room. Draco waited, dulling his own fear, trying to trust.

And then Harry gave him a slow smile, and pulled Draco forwards enough that their foreheads rested together. If Draco concentrated, he thought he could make out the roughness of Harry's scar pressing sweetly against his own unmarked skin.

"Yes," Harry said, and his unwavering voice made it truth. "We will."

The End.