Summary

In the lead-up to Draco’s election as Minister, Dark Lord Harry Potter broods. Only he can’t do that all the time, even with most of Britain terrified of him now. So he has to find something else to occupy his time. And being a Benevolently Snarky Dark Lord is it.

Notes

The sequel to Easy as Falling and Black Phoenix, but still prequel to “Charming When He Needs to Be.” This will be a shorter story than the others, mostly tying up the loose ends of Draco as Minister and Harry as Dark Lord, and the last story in the series.
“Sometimes I think Hogwarts outweighs even the Manor in luxury.”

Harry snorted and lowered himself into the bath alongside Draco. The Prefects’ Bath was large anyway, but it had extended itself obligingly a few more inches, so Harry didn’t have to go down along the rim to get in. “You only think that because Hogwarts does whatever it can to make me happy, and your Manor is only an object.”

Draco opened one eye. “And that’s not a good reason for thinking so?” He sounded honestly puzzled.

Harry laughed and picked up one of the pieces of pumice stone that Hogwarts had supplied the instant it felt them came into the Bath. “Are you going to turn around so that I can scrub your feet, or not?”

“What if I like the calluses on my feet?” Draco asked, even as he thrashed his arms in the superbly warm water and drifted around so that his feet were floating near Harry’s face. He couldn’t hold onto his mulish expression, though, and burst out laughing at the sight of Harry’s neatly raised eyebrow. Then he sighed and rested his head on the rim of the Bath, watching through half-closed eyelids as Harry scrubbed at his feet. “This is nice.”

Harry nodded, but didn’t say anything. It was nice, a bit of domestic privacy shared with his lover. That Harry was the Dark Lord of Hogwarts and Draco was the most probable next Minister of Magic didn’t matter right now.

“She would want you to be happy.”

Draco was extending one hand that couldn’t quite touch Harry. Harry shifted nearer so that it could rest on his shoulder, and went on rubbing at Draco’s feet with the pumice. “She wouldn’t,” he said. “Not if she was her real self. She would screech in my ear and litter my pillow with dead animals because I wasn’t giving her my complete attention anymore.”

Draco grinned and tipped his head back again. “You’re right.”

Harry sighed, but this time, unlike most of the times he had sighed in the past few days, it was in contentment. Yes, he could brood about Persephone, his lost dark phoenix, as much as he liked. She had been his companion, the closest one he could imagine, formed out of fire and magic when a Death Eater’s spell had tried to turn his own power against him. She had held part of his soul. But she’d had some of the same problems with holding a part of his soul that a Horcrux did, and one of them was that she couldn’t last forever without affecting him. Harry had learned that she was really more like an extended piece of himself than a living, breathing soul of her own, and he had unmade her during her burning day.

He’d unmade a lot of other things that day, too, including his reputation as someone who ultimately wanted peace and Edgar Gorenson, as he’d known a man who leaped through the Ministry from Department to Department, switching identities, and had made targeting Harry his business. Harry didn’t know for sure if the time that Gorenson had held him and Persephone captive had changed anything fundamental about Persephone that made Harry unable to rescue her,
but he thought the Ministry attacking on her burning day was a bit too much of a coincidence.

Gorenson had paid for it. So had Harry, but with Draco here beside him, bringing reports that not all of Britain had immediately turned against Harry, it was hard, at the moment, to care.

“You’ll have a few new people coming to interview at your court, soon,” Draco murmured, his voice lazy. “People who told me that they wanted to vote for me, but thought it was too dangerous after Tillipop stepped down.”

“After Tillipop stepped down?” Harry shook his head. It was true that one of the worst attacks on Draco had happened then, but he’d had one before it, too.

“Yes, because they’re afraid of that council they have in the Ministry right now in a way they were never afraid of Tillipop.” Draco popped open a stern eye to regard him. “Now, can I tell you my news? And in the meantime, you can wash my legs.”

Harry smiled, dropped the pumice back onto the edge of the Bath, and conjured a cloth. When he reached out to the nearest tap, foamy, bubbling, sweet-smelling soap poured out of it. “Sorry. You were saying?”

Draco waited until Harry actually covered the cloth with the soap and began to stroke down his legs before he shut his eyes and went haughtily on. “They said that they didn’t think the council would respect their votes being secret, and they want some protection. So they’re coming to you.”

“Coming to the Slaughter Lord for protection,” Harry murmured. It was one of the many titles that the Daily Prophet had given him in the past few days, although given the number of identities that Gorenson had maintained, they often chose one of his other names to vary the headline. Harry thought "Murderer of Manfried" was his favorite so far.

“Yes,” said Draco. “If they fear the Ministry, they’re hardly going to believe what the Ministry says of you, are they?” He reached out and flicked a harsh finger against Harry’s wet shoulder. “You need to stop thinking that everyone thinks of you the way you think of yourself.”

"I don't think of myself as mad and violent," Harry protested, and moved up so he could scrub Draco's back. "That's the popular perception we're encouraging, not the truth. I know that."

"But you blame yourself for Gorenson's death anyway." Draco had turned to the side, and his eyes were half-closed in pleasure, but they were clear. "You think that you could have handled it differently. When you were magically exhausted and grieving for your phoenix. You could have done something else." He held out one hand, palm up. "If it makes the Unspeakables stop going after you, and some of the others in the Ministry at least hesitate, I count it violence well-spent."

Harry frowned some more. "I don't grieve for Persephone," he said. "I was the one who chose to unmake her."

The Bath shivered and contracted around them so that the stone could support Harry's back at the same moment as Draco snorted hard enough to make soapsuds fly off his chin. "Right," he said. "So the brooding and the moping and the sighing and looking at ceilings is all a trick of my imagination, is it?"

Harry took a deep breath. "I grieve that I didn't think about it more earlier, how a phoenix who was supposedly her own independent creature too often did exactly the opposite of what I intended her
to do. That was just too perfect a coincidence. I should have thought it through. I shouldn't have made her in the first place."

"I'm not one of your Gryffindor friends," Draco said, turning around and wrapping his arms about Harry's waist. "I'll listen to you and try to make things better, but I won't listen to you condemn yourself for no reason and say nothing just because you're right according to abstract moral principles. I say that you're grieving, and you have the right to grieve. I thought you agreed with me, or you would have flung yourself back into the business of your court already."

Harry hesitated one more time, and then brought his chin down on the top of Draco's head and wrapped his arms around him. "Fine, yes, I agree," he said. "But it's hard to think that her death and making in the first place are all the result of my own mistake."

"It doesn't seem hard for you to say, considering how you were going on about it a minute ago."
Draco had his eyes closed, but his voice was sharp enough for anyone who really listened to it. "What you need to do is to stop looking at it from a self-blaming perspective. That's going to be the real chore."

Harry opened his mouth to argue with that, then sighed and let his head fall back against the side of the Bath. "Yes, I suppose so."

"He agrees with me, and I barely needed to argue!" Draco sat up and smiled around at an imaginary audience, bowing and extending his hands. "I won an easy victory over his tendency to scold himself! That really shows I'm fit to be Minister!"

Harry snorted and cuffed him. He would have used a little pinch of magic before, but his magic was still recovering from how much he'd used it over the last few days. "Prat."

"Better than some of the things you could have called me." Draco leaned back in his arms and gave him what was probably supposed to be a calculating look, but it was ruined by the gleam of fun in his eyes. "Now. Your prat would like to be made love to."

"Here?" Harry glanced around at the water.

"Unless you know some other place more suitable." And Draco opened his mouth and wagged his tongue at Harry.

Harry had to lean in and kiss him then; it was absolutely a requirement. And Draco went with it, laughing in delight as Harry steered him backwards in the water and arranged a comfortable cushion of bubbles that wasn't going anywhere for them to rest on.

Sometimes Harry thought of all the many, many things he could have done better since he had become a Dark Lord, the ways he could have handled situations better. He thought someone with as much power as he possessed had to do that, or things would get dangerously out of hand.

But sometimes, he was as allowed to make love and feel joy as the next person.

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Draco woke with a start what had to be several hours later, from the coldness of the water and the sinking of the cushion of bubbles under him. He shook his head slightly and gripped the side of the Bath, heaving himself out of the water. There was no way that being immersed that long in a
magical bath would hurt him, but he wanted to get warm and dry off.

The door of the Prefects' Bath creaked open. Draco looked up sharply. Harry had expressly forbidden any students to come into it while they were here, and most of them ought to have obeyed. They weren't terrified of Harry, whatever Harry thought, but they did have a healthy respect for him.

But it was Briseis who stood there, Harry's adviser. She only raised an eyebrow at his nakedness, and then turned and gestured with her chin at the corridor. Draco hastened to wrap himself in a large towel and follow her out.

Briseis stood there with her back turned to him, pacing slowly back and forth. She spoke without turning around. "He needs something to distract him from his brooding. I know that. But I don't have to like this."

She turned around and held out the Daily Prophet to Draco. Draco stifled a sigh as he looked at it. Harry's reaction to the paper was never predictable. Sometimes he laughed it off like the nonsense it was, sometimes he seemed to think that it was an accurate record of what the British wizarding world wanted.

A glance at the front page told Draco that this was likely to be one of those latter times. The photograph on the front page was split in two: on one side, him, leaning on Rosenthal's arm as she escorted him, tired and burned, into Malfoy Manor after Gorenson's attack; on the other, Harry standing with his hand upraised in front of the pile of charred bones that had been Gorenson.

The headline said, POTTER'S PROPHECY: 'CHALLENGE ME AND YOU DIE'

Harry hadn't said anything like that, of course; he had promised Draco, in veiled ways, that they would have a continuing relationship, but he had couched it as threatening Draco. Skeeter and the other reporters present had understood it in their own terms.

Of course they did. That was part of the plan, to make sure that no one but them and people they could trust would ever know the exact nature of their relationship. But Draco thought Harry would probably focus on the negative side of the photographs and the way he imagined people reacting, with fear and distrust, whether or not they actually reacted that way.

"I don't have to like the way that he looks at you, either," said Briseis.

Draco looked up rapidly. This wasn't something he had thought he would have to confront. Both Briseis and Rosenthal disapproved of him and Harry being together to a certain extent, but he had thought it was because they believed he and Harry would distract each other from their work. This sounded like something else.

"What do you mean?" he asked, when he saw that Briseis, like a true Slytherin, wasn't about to explain what she meant until explicitly asked.

"I mean that he looks at you as though you're the center of his universe," Briseis replied, her voice shading with distrust. "And that should be Hogwarts."

"I don't know exactly how he looks at me," Draco murmured, although he felt a tug deep in his belly at the notion that Harry might value him as highly as Draco suspected he valued Harry. "I can't discourage him from doing it if I don't really understand what he's doing."
Briseis clucked her tongue and flung the paper at him. "You know that he values you second only to nothing," she said. "I thought that Persephone, when she still existed, would keep him focused on his task, but now she's gone, and we're left with you." Her gaze swept him up and down, and now she was no longer bothering to conceal her dislike. "I don't know what will happen if he starts focusing on you more than his court."

Draco wanted to shout at her, to tell her that it was ridiculous to think that Harry would prioritize his relationship with Draco above his court, but he paused. He couldn't make Briseis see matters from the inside, as he did, and he wouldn't want to if he could. What mattered was what he shared with Harry, and he didn't want to explain that to anyone. He would prefer to be the only one who really understood Harry and what they shared.

But she needed some kind of reassurance. She was powerful in Harry's court, and could hurt him either with her efforts to push him in a deeper direction or with her leaving, if she grew too disgusted to remain.

"I doubt that will ever happen," Draco said, and made the rapid decision to share something with her that he didn't think Harry would mind her knowing. Or he might have told her already and she hadn't paid attention. "Didn't you know what he did when he realized that Persephone couldn't exist outside him?"

Briseis frowned at him. "I know what he did. He unmade her, and took the magic and used it to come back to life. He had intended to burn with her as a phoenix, but he knew he couldn't do that after she died."

"Where did he send that magic, though?" Draco asked, and when she shook her head, told her. "*Into the bond with Hogwarts.* He realized that his bond with Hogwarts was the most important relationship he had in the living world. He didn't live for me, he lived for Hogwarts and the people he'd made promises to here."

That might be stretching it a little, since Draco thought he had played some part in calling Harry back to the world, but Briseis's face was slowly clearing, and that made it worth the possible lie.

"You're sure that he sent it there?" Briseis looked around as though searching for some confirmation written in the stones of the walls. "I thought he would have needed all the magic to come back to life."

"You haven't noticed the wards strengthening in the past few days?" Draco asked. "The castle cradling its children even more closely? Those walls of light appearing on top of the castle's walls?" That had been what he noticed when he first saw Hogwarts from the outside after Harry's unmaking of Persephone, the shimmering ramparts of pure magic that rose on top of all the towers.

Briseis slowly nodded. "I saw them. I felt them." She hesitated. "As long as you're sure that you won't demand more of his focus than he can give."

Draco rolled his eyes. "I intend to be independent of him, you know, a real Minister, not his little pet. And he has to be independent of me, too, if my independence is going to happen."

Briseis eyed him, then smiled sourly. "Trust a Slytherin's ambition to be the heart of them."

Draco only gave her a slightly distant nod. The heart of him, he thought, was *both* his
ambition and his love for Harry, but that was another of those things he couldn't expect anyone outside of him or Harry to understand. And really, it was for the best if they didn't understand. He and Harry had their private, shared rituals that couldn't possibly be important to anyone else, and they had to deceive the public. If that sometimes included deceiving their advisers as well, that was what had to happen.

"Thank you for informing me of your concerns," he said, taking the paper. "I'll explain the article to Harry."

And he vanished back into the Prefects' Bath, into the private world that he and Harry shared, where his Lord yet lay asleep on bubbles. Draco spelled the water warm again and slipped in beside him.

Reality could wait.
Harry strode into the Great Hall, nodding to the professors and students he passed along the way, as well as the people he had interviewed and welcomed into his court. There were fewer of them than there had been before he burned Persephone and Gorenson, he noticed.

Still, he wasn’t going to count absolute numbers. He had interviewed a few people today, and he might welcome one or two of them. He wouldn’t despair until he had some sign that everyone except maybe Draco and his best friends feared him.

He glanced up and caught Briseis’s eye where she sat at the high table. She gave him a stern look. No mistaking the meaning behind that one. Harry had spent the time in the interviews that he had promised he would spend with her, signing documents and listening to more advice. He gave her an apologetic shrug and started to climb the steps.

He saw a piece of bread arching towards him out of the corner of his eye. It had come from the Ravenclaw table.

Harry reached out and snatched it easily from the air, as easily as he would have caught a Golden Snitch speeding past him. It was still warm and had butter on it. He brought it to his mouth and took a long, satisfying bite. He had got so caught up in the interviews that he had forgotten to arrange a break for lunch.

“Yum,” he said, licking the butter off his lips and smiling at the student who had thrown it at him. “Thank you. But do you still have enough for yourself?”

The student, a tall, dark boy with spectacles who stared at him in stunned surprise for a few seconds, sat back in his seat and said, “Y-yes, sir. I mean—” He hesitated. Harry had refused to claim the title of Headmaster, and they all knew that he didn’t like being addressed as “My Lord,” although some people like Briseis could get away with it.

Harry waved his hand. “You can call me sir, the way you would a professor, and I think that’s enough for now,” he said. “I’ve taught a few classes, after all.” He took another bite of the bread and climbed the final steps up to his seat.

“Well done, my Lord,” Briseis said under her breath as she slid a document for him to sign across the table. Harry studied it, saw that it was a message to the centaurs offering them additional help in securing the Forbidden Forest against unwanted wizards wandering in, and groped for a quill.

“They had to try some form of rebellion,” Harry murmured back to her. “And one that the castle wouldn’t immediately stop. Although I’m surprised it was the Ravenclaws instead of the Gryffindors.” Then he paused and glanced at the Gryffindor table, and saw the way they were huddled together, furiously whispering. “Oh, right. It’ll be pranks with them. Probably be a tripwire near the entrance to my rooms.”

“I think the Gryffindors respect you too much for that.”

Harry glanced sideways at Hermione, who was sitting next to him. Her back was straight and her gaze fixed ahead on the tables. Harry rolled his eyes a bit. He had told her and Ron about losing Persephone and killing Gorenson, and she had been fine with that. Honestly, Harry thought she had
found Gorenson so irritating that she was only a few steps away from figuring out how to kill him herself.

But since she had discovered how Harry was spreading his reputation of being a Dark and insane Lord abroad, and why, she had treated him with coolness. Harry didn’t think she was about to run out on him again; that had been unusual even for Hermione, and she wouldn’t have any reason for it. But she didn’t think it was the right thing.

Harry twitched his hand, and the stones in front of the High Table shimmered. There were now wards on them that would prevent anyone more than a seat away from him from hearing. Since Ron was on his right and Hermione on his left, that was all he needed. He saw Briseis frown as she was excluded, but she had been calmer since her conversation with Draco the other day.

“What would you suggest for hiding my relationship with Draco?” Harry asked Hermione directly, leaning over to her. “Since even you expressed concerns that I might be influencing him unduly before you came back to my side?”

Hermione sucked in a breath and arranged her cutlery in a little dance in front of her, then shook her head. “I just don’t think that encouraging people to fear you is the right solution,” she said.

Harry took another bite of the bread in his hand, and showed it to her. “Fearing me doesn’t keep some people from trying to see how I’ll react. I don’t think I’ve cowed them into the kind of crushed oppression that you’re worrying about.”

“Of course you haven’t.” Ron interrupted with a snort. “There’s no reason to think they’d just shut up and go along with anything you’re doing. When have people here or elsewhere in the wizarding world ever done that? Everyone has to have an opinion. People were afraid of you when they thought you were the Heir of Slytherin and an evil Parselmouth, but they still insulted you and flinched away from you and gossiped about you. They didn’t shut up and scurry along with their eyes on the floor.”

Harry smiled at him. That comparison wouldn’t have occurred to him—well, not without some more time—but it was a good one now. “Thanks, Ron. That’s exactly it.”

Hermione shook her head at Ron. “But how can you rule with care and compassion if you’re encouraging people to be afraid of you, Harry? That’s what I thought you were going to do, and I just don’t understand how making sure they’re afraid of you contributes to that.”

“Because the people who live here, or who decide that they want to try moving here, or who come to me for help because they’re magical creatures and the Ministry isn’t treating them fairly, aren’t going to care about that,” Harry said, and let his eyes touch on the Veela sitting at some of the House tables, and two centaurs who had come in that morning to speak to him about something later. Ombershade and Greenbush, two of the werewolves who had taken up semi-permanent residency at Hogwarts, were having a low-voiced argument off to the side. “They’re going to take the risk and come anyway. Staying where they are would be worse. And there are people I’ll never convince. I really did think that Rita Skeeter was on my side for a while, with the stories we were feeding her about Gorenson, but she turned on me as soon as she saw a more exciting story. It doesn’t matter what I tell some of them, Hermione, they’ll always think I’m horrible and evil. I might as well stop caring about them and frighten them just enough that they’ll leave me alone.”

Hermione was somber-faced but silent for a few minutes after that, eating her meal. Harry lowered the silence ward and spoke to Briseis about some more documents. They passed them back and
forth over Ron’s head. Ron just rolled his eyes and went on eating.

“Harry.”

That was Hermione’s hand on his arm. Harry nodded to Briseis and turned to Hermione. “Yes?”

“I believe you,” said Hermione, and sighed and stared at her plate. “I just didn’t want to because it’s so depressing. You can save the world and not attack anyone who wasn’t attack you already, and people will still distrust you.”

Harry squeezed her hand gently. “I know, but like I said, I’m learning not to care about them. I care about Hogwarts, and my court, and my friends, like you and Ron, and Draco. I’ll live with what I can’t change, and change what I can inside my own four walls.” He grinned as he thought of his first sight of Hogwarts from the outside, all those years ago. “Or more than four.”

“That’s something the centaurs have come to talk to you about, my Lord,” Briseis intervened smoothly, and gestured to the centaurs, who had edged along the wall up to the high table. “They say that they would like sanctuary for some of their kind inside Hogwarts, the vulnerable foals.”

Harry sat up at once. He had made an alliance with the centaurs, but he had thought it was for him to guarantee that their territories in the Forbidden Forest wouldn’t be interfered with. “Is someone hunting them?”

Briseis nodded, no more than that, but Harry saw the thick tension in the cords in her neck. “Apparently someone has spread the word that young centaur hooves, mixed into some aphrodisiac potions, provide a cure for impotence.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, and his magic snapped briefly into view around him, a coruscating image of white fire. He saw people gaping at him, but the centaurs nodded quietly at each other, as if reassured.

“Tell them I’ll speak to them at once,” he said, and stood up from the table. Briseis nodded and walked away to speak to the centaurs.

“At least take some food with you, mate,” Ron muttered, sounding vaguely horrified as he started shoveling bread and cheese onto a plate. “You can’t just walk away from meals and eat nothing. I don’t care if they’re chopping up centaur foals right on the spot.”

“Ron,” Hermione hissed, but Harry doubted that the centaurs had heard. He accepted the plate of food with a grateful smile and started down the steps towards the centaurs, already revolving his response in his head.

*Find out who’s responsible for these rumors, set up wards around the Forest if they want them, confront whoever is responsible for those rumors if it’s an identifiable person…*

The possibilities were enormous, along with the duties. Harry ripped into the hunk of bread with his teeth as he accompanied the centaurs between the House tables, and maybe because of that, no one tried to throw bread at him this time.

*“You must realize that you are our only viable candidate now.”*
Draco took a long sip of his tea, prepared to his satisfaction by his most loyal house-elves, and watched Lucy Lenneal across the top of the cup. She had come as a representative of the Ministry officials Draco had been dealing with up until now, the ones who had been disenchanted with Tillipop’s possibilities as a puppet early on, and now with the council that had set themselves up in the Minister’s place until the election. But Draco had never dealt with her directly, and was a little unsure what to think of her.

Lenneal was a long, calm woman with a braid of thick black hair that coiled down the back of her neck and around her throat. Draco didn’t know whether her hair flowed like that naturally or if she had to do a lot of work to get it to do so. He supposed the answer would tell him something more about her if he could know, but he could hardly ask, and he was content to listen to her low voice instead, and watch the motion of her fingers, just as long and with a flash of a gemstone in a grey ring on her left hand.

“I don’t know about that,” Draco said, when enough time had passed that Lenneal had leaned forwards, and he knew that she required some sort of answer from him. “I think you could easily choose one of the other candidates who haven’t announced their retirement from the race yet, if a puppet is what you want.” He met her straightforward gaze and smiled a little. He was forcing her to the speaking of things usually kept silent, but after the chaos of the race so far and the attacks by Gorenson, Draco was done going with the implicit goodwill of the people who wanted to make some political use of him.

“Not easily,” said Lenneal, and her mouth worked for a moment, before she set down the cup of tea and nodded to him. “And let’s face it, ease is almost as much of a requirement as intelligence at this point.”

“How?” Draco held out his cup, and his elf appeared to fill it again. He didn’t let his gaze stray from Lenneal’s face, but neither did he allow himself to sound interested.

Lenneal nodded again. “The forces that depended on Tillipop are gone now. Or they’ve switched allegiance. He was becoming more difficult to work with, and someone would have probably arranged to force him out even if he won the election. They want someone they can depend on.”

Draco shrugged a little. “They can’t depend on me if they’re thinking of double-crossing me or only using me as a stepping-stone to power. I hope you’ll tell them that.”

“I plan to.” Lenneal had managed to close her mouth on whatever she might have added to that, and only paused for a small amount of time before adding, “Does this mean that you’ll consider our petition seriously?”

“I’m always serious about taking power in the Ministry,” Draco said, and smiled at her. “It’s my choice of allies that might cause anxiety.”

Lenneal sat up. “If you’re talking about Dark Lord Potter, I’m not one of those fools who thinks we can’t work with him. I know we can. I know his reputation as an Auror in the Ministry, and now, but it’s my observation that he never attacked unless he was attacked first. Unless you count his original takeover of Hogwarts.”

Draco raised his eyebrows. His estimation of Lenneal’s intelligence had gone up a few notches. “Very well. But the fear that he engenders might make him hard to work with, and you just said…”
“We would work with him through an intermediary.” Lenneal’s gaze rested heavily on him. “I think that might most profitably be you.”

Draco turned his head to the side, a little coquettishly. “Despite the threat he gave me that was reported in the Daily Prophet?”

“I always assume that a third of what’s reported there is exaggeration.” Lenneal’s hands had folded themselves quietly in her lap. “And although he did threaten you, he didn’t destroy you, as he did Gorenson. Attacking him directly won’t work. And we need to deal with him somehow.” She made a distressed little moue. “Or the international community is likely to think we’re even weaker than they already perceive us, for being convulsed by internal wars twice in a generation.”

“As long as I’m not required to attack him, or smuggle poison into him, or something,” Draco said, “I’m your Minister.”

Lenneal considered him for a second. “Is there any support we can give him that might make him more likely to consider leaving the Ministry alone?”

“You just pointed out that he’s mostly a defender,” Draco said. “If you leave him alone most of the time, that should be all that’s required.”

“But there are factions in the Ministry that won’t do that,” Lenneal said quietly. “I want to make sure that he can see different factions in the Ministry, ones who might act sensibly. Is a favor to you required, to have you speak favorably of us? Or to him?”

Draco took a long, dizzying breath. It felt as though his lungs had grown bigger, to fill his chest, permitting in all that extra air. He felt as if he had grown wings and could use them soar above the earth, instead of a broom.

This was power. This was what he had been dreaming of when he first began to run for Minister, and what he would have.

But along with power came choices, and Draco wanted to benefit Harry as well as himself. “Someone poisoned a batch of the Wolfsbane that is brewed in the Dark Lord’s court.” he said now, “and made it impossible to use. The assumption was that Gorenson was behind that, but there was no definitive proof. If you could investigate it and whether anyone in the Ministry is willing to brag about it or claim credit for it, then I could show him that certain people in the Ministry want to help him. The ingredients came from outside the court.”

Lenneal cocked her head. “I don’t suppose you have more information than that? I would be willing to help. I have some contacts in Knockturn Alley who both supply Wolfsbane ingredients and would know where to obtain information about poisons. But what you’ve given me is little to go on.”

Draco met her eyes, and smiled. Lenneal had given him some power over her in acknowledging that she had those contacts, but from the prim way she sat in her chair, she thought the exchange worth it.

Draco tossed her a bone. “Lord Potter’s potions brewer in this case was Hermione Granger. I think she might be willing to set up a private correspondence with you, with her Lord’s permission of course.”
Lenneal’s relief at not having to deal with Harry directly was so great that Draco held back a snicker. Laughing at people for their reasonable fears—or fears he had to pretend were reasonable—was not the way to build a rapport with them.

In the meantime…

He nodded and said, “Yes, I think we might come, easily, to a reasonably satisfying accord. More tea?”
“How recent are the rumors?” Harry thought he did a good job of sounding calm. Then he realized that the bookshelves in the corners of the library were rattling, and that two serpents of stone had risen out of the floor behind him and crowded either side of his chair, flickering their tongues out at regular intervals.

Sometimes, Hogwarts was a bit too responsive to his emotions and thoughts.

“They seem to be very recent.” One of the centaurs who had come to visit him was a sorrel stallion called Reuben, his tail curled tightly around his flanks instead of lashing the way Harry had thought it would be. Then again, that tightness revealed tension, too. “We only heard of them the other day, when we caught an intruder in the Forest who had drawn near the foals’ playground.”

“Did he tell you who was spreading them?” The next thing Harry needed to worry about, and the one that was currently choking him like a bone in the back of his throat. He was going to find out who was spreading them, all right, and he was going to make them choke.

“No,” said Reuben, and settled back on his haunches with a sigh. One of the things Harry had had difficulty in getting used to was that the horse part of centaurs’ bodies didn’t move exactly like horses; they could perform tricks with their legs and knees that would be difficult or dangerous for horses. Reuben was practically sitting now, one hand clasped in front of him, near a wide belt that was draped around his waist. “But he did show us this.” He opened a pouch on the belt and took out an odd little sculpture that he handed over to Harry.

Harry took it and turned it over, staring at it. It looked like it was made of clear yellow crystal, maybe with some sunlight trapped inside it. It was shaped like nothing in particular, although it had a central ring and some sharp horns projecting out to the side. It was a little bigger than the center of Harry’s palm, which would make it hard to carry comfortably.

Harry started to shake his head and say that he had never seen anything like it, but just then, the crystal flared, light reaching out from within it to touch the walls of Hogwarts. Harry drew in a sharp breath and ducked his head. That light was hot and magical, and it was pulling at—

It was pulling at his bond with Hogwarts.

His temper flaring incandescently again before he could consider whether it was a good idea, Harry brought his hand down, fingers spread. The magic of Hogwarts surged up around him, the stones shimmering and the floor heating up. It pushed back against the alien power of the crystal, forcing it into the outer edges of the sculpture. Then Harry tossed the thing into his desk drawer and shut it. That cut off its reaching out to the bond altogether.

Harry hissed and looked up at Reuben, who was nodding. “That is the reason the wizard was able to come so far into our territory without us sensing him,” he said. “And without you sensing him either, Lord Potter. He bypassed the wards and the enchantments. He bypassed the protections of the stars.” He set his chin on his fingers and stared broodingly at the desk. “We did not know what to do about it. It is wizard magic, but nothing we have seen before. So we bring it to you.”

Harry glanced at the other centaur, a black mare who had introduced herself as Niamh. Her breasts bouncing about had been rather distracting at first, but he had got used to it. She was watching him
with calm, cool eyes.

“You said that you were a wardkeeper?” Harry asked. He hardly knew what that was, but he could guess from the name and Niamh’s presence here.

“Yes, Lord Potter.” Niamh’s voice was even more precise and correct than Reuben’s. “I am the one who keeps the herd’s wards and ensures that they are functioning correctly. I stumbled upon the wizard when I was going to investigate them.”

“Because of a disturbance?” Harry sat up. At least that might indicate that the sculpture didn’t work well.

“No,” said Niamh. “As part of routine maintenance only. I saw that the wizard was creeping along, holding the crystal close above the ground. I saw it pass through the line of one of the wards without disrupting it. I do not know how it works, however. The wizard prepared to defend himself the moment he saw me, so I did not get a chance to examine it further.”

“I suppose I can’t question the wizard?” Harry looked back and forth between the two centaurs. He didn’t really know if they would let even him into the heart of their territory where they must be holding the prisoner.

Niamh bowed her head. Reuben cleared his throat as the burden of the conversation shifted back to him and said, “Alas. We extracted the information on the rumors and his purpose from him, but the questioning was…vigorous. He did not even give his name before he departed into the realm that wizards inhabit among the stars.”

Harry sighed. “He’s dead?” Probably, but you never knew with centaurs.

Reuben nodded. “But I doubt that the death will cause you any political complications. If he did not even give us his name, you can hardly expect grieving relatives or his employers to be knocking on your door.”

Harry had to admit that was true, but, as usual with centaurs, scraped past the main part of the problem. “But that doesn’t prevent other people from trying to use these things to get close to your foals.”

“I will be more vigilant in my wardkeeping,” said Niamh, and scraped a hoof so hard over the floor that Harry felt the pain from the stones of Hogwarts. He reached down to touch them, and Niamh inclined her head. “And I will report any more violations or breaking of the boundaries to you at once, so that you may come and question the wizards.”

“I don’t know if you’ll sense the violations, if you didn’t sense this one,” Harry said, as kindly as he could. Implying that their wardkeepers wouldn’t find their enemies could hurt his diplomatic relations with the centaur herd in the Forest. “I think I should keep this thing and analyze it, instead. Post sentries along the Forbidden Forest for a few days. I can send some of my trusted people at the court if you think it would help.”

Niamh touched her own side, where a scar curved; Reuben lowered his chin. “We would prefer to guard our own land, Lord Potter.”

Harry just nodded. He couldn’t blame most centaurs for being distrustful of humans. One like Firenze was definitely unusual. And this new rumor wouldn’t help the cause. “All right. I’ll let you
know the minute I have something on the crystal.”

Neither Niamh nor Reuben wanted to stay after that. Harry didn’t blame them. They would be uneasy inside stone walls with so many wizards, even if they trusted Harry enough to report this to him.

Harry slowly opened his drawer and took out the crystal sculpture again when they were gone. This time, it didn’t try to stab at his bond with Hogwarts. It just lay there, quiescent, and Harry knew that he would have passed it off as something harmless if he was looking at it in a different context. Maybe the kind of peculiar knickknack that some wizards liked to decorate their houses with. You couldn’t even feel anything magical about it, if you were just holding it in your hands.

Harry half-closed his eyes, made sure he was in the chair and his feet were raised from the stones of the floor, and sent a pulse of his magic into the thing.

It was swallowed at once, and then beams of light began to reach out from the crystal again. Harry slammed it back into his desk drawer, and scowled at it. So. It was capable of absorbing magic, both that of centaurs and that of wizards, and it would react with reaching out to any instance of it. That was probably how it had eaten through several of the centaurs’ wards instead of only one. Once it had consumed the first one, it would go on reaching until it had swallowed all it could find. The wizard would only have to put it back in a pouch or sheath to make it stop.

That was going to make it hard to track down the maker of it.

Harry smiled, knowing it was a nasty smile. Luckily for him, he had resources that not that many people did.

* 

“Have you heard anything about the rumor that you can use centaur foal hooves in aphrodisiac potions?”

Draco opened his mouth, then closed it again. He had been about to tell Harry of his progress with Lucy Lenneal and the overtures she had asked him to make, but this question threw him off so badly that the only thing he could do was blink and start again.

“What?” he asked, as he draped his cloak over a chair that sidled up to receive it. “I haven’t heard anything about that.”

“That was all I wanted to know,” Harry said, and stood up from behind his desk to pace back and forth.

Draco watched him, head cocked. He thought of and discarded many remarks, such as the one that Harry spent far too much time on magical creatures and the need to protect them, and far too much time in his office. Draco hadn’t actually been in Harry’s rooms that often, mostly because Harry was never in them. They raised a bed from the stones when they wanted to make love in his office.

Then Draco snorted. They. And that was ridiculous for the same reason that asking Harry to spend less time on magical creature causes was.

“What happened?” Draco asked. “Did you catch someone who wanted to cut up centaur foals to make a potion? What a stupid idea.”
Harry stopped pacing and shot him an intensely gratified look. “I knew I could depend on you to have the right response,” he murmured, walking across the room to him and catching Draco’s lips in a deep kiss. He drew back and continued in a way that made Draco want to banish all talk of centaurs from his head. “You would see that it’s a stupid idea without launching into the kind of fit Hermione did. I thought she was going to faint or something.”

Draco had actually meant it was a stupid idea because it would be calculated to get Harry after you when he had taken on the burden of defending the centaurs, and because he knew several bits of Potions theory that suggested that kind of thing would never work, not because he cared that much about the morality of it. But he knew other things that he shouldn’t say.

And not saying them got him kisses. He locked his hands on Harry’s arms and returned the kiss with interest.

Harry wrestled with his clothes a second, then drew back and made an impatient gesture. Draco’s shirt slid off smoothly over his head and landed on the same chair that held the cloak. A second later, his trousers and pants followed. Draco leaned back against the desk in nothing but his socks, and laughed.

“I suppose you can replace those if they got torn?” he asked.

“Of course I can.” Harry was kneeling on the floor in front of him, and Draco caught his breath with a snap and a gulp. It wasn’t everyone who could say that they’d had the Dark Lord of Great Britain on his knees for them. “Now be quiet.”

Draco probably couldn’t have spoken even if he wanted. He was learning a lot about the virtues of silence today, he reflected, as he spread his legs.

Harry shut his eyes right before he fastened his mouth around Draco’s cock, as if he couldn’t bear to see it coming. Draco knew it wasn’t that, and watched in amused tolerance as Harry took him in completely, swallowing over and over. Draco’s tolerance faded as soon as Harry’s tongue managed to curl around a certain spot on the underside of his cock, and he grabbed onto the desk as he gasped.

Harry sucked him with the same patience and determination that he always showed when he made love to Draco, as if he was so worth spending time on that he blocked out the rest of the world for Harry. Every tangle and twist of his tongue, every sideways movement of his mouth, even the heat from the inside of his cheeks, said that. Draco had to lean forwards and put his hands on Harry’s shoulders for support long before Harry was done, as much as because he could feel how devoted Harry was to this task as because he was losing his balance.

Devoted to this task, and devoted to **him**.

Draco came with his ears ringing and his hands trembling, and sank to the floor the moment Harry let him go, to stretch out and pant. Harry huffed softly and bent over to kiss him. Draco didn’t mind, even if he **was** used to his lovers cleaning their mouths out first.

Harry laughed as if he’d heard the thought, which Draco considered wasn’t impossible, for all that Harry wasn’t good at Legilimency. “Just stay right there, will you?” Harry murmured, rolling above Draco and stretching out so that Draco’s thigh was between his legs. “I want to rub off against you.”
Draco folded his hands behind his head and watched as Harry rubbed, his head tilting back like Draco’s had, his mouth falling open in an even more undignified way. Draco could feel the warmth against his leg, first hard and then spreading and wet, but his eyes were full of Harry’s glazed eyes and lips parting in satisfaction and breathy groans. This was the perfect way to begin an evening, even if it had been a less than happy day for Harry.

When he was done, Harry folded gracefully down next to Draco like a cut flower, and lay there breathing softly. Draco stroked his hair, waiting and content to wait. Harry wasn’t going to disappoint him.

Harry rolled over and lifted a hand to trace Draco’s cheekbones. “How are you so good?” he murmured, then prevented Draco from answering by pulling down his chin and kissing him on the mouth hard enough to burn.

Draco went with it, but pulled back and shook his head. “What’s good about lying there and letting you rub one off against me? You don’t need any particular skill for that.”

“But no one else could smell like you and lie there so perfectly,” Harry mumbled incoherently, closing his eyes.

Draco thought he would go to sleep, and managed to arrange them so that he was lying with the trailing edge of Harry’s robe beneath his head, and his arms wrapped around Harry. That way, he wouldn’t wake up with a sore head or back in the morning, the way he had the last time they’d done this. The stones of Hogwarts would cradle Harry, but they wouldn’t offer any special consideration to Draco unless Harry told them to.

But Harry started and opened his eyes long before Draco could consider drifting off to sleep. “It’s awful, what they tried to do to the centaurs,” he whispered. “And they were able to get past the wards into the Forest, too.”

Draco opened his mouth in a yawn, but then Harry’s words caught up with him, and he sat up. “Past your wards?”

Harry curled closer to him. “Yeah. And that means I didn’t keep my promise to the centaurs that no one else would bother them in the future.”

Draco shook his head. It didn’t sound as though any centaur foals had been killed yet, or that would have been the first thing Harry told him, so he couldn’t care that much about them right now. “Do you know how they did it?”

“You’re going to make me talk about this now?” Harry rolled a single pleading eye at him.

“You’re the one who brought it up,” Draco pointed out, although he did lie down with his arm around Harry’s shoulders again. “But I would like to hear more about what you found, if you know anything.”

Harry nodded, sighed, and pulled away. Draco Summoned his own cloak and pulled it down on top of him to stifle some of the cold, then got up and followed.

Harry unlocked a drawer in his desk with a complicated wave of his hand before he paused and said, “This might be dangerous, so stand back.”
Dangerous, in the middle of Hogwarts? But if it was something that could get past Harry’s wards once, Draco reckoned it might be again. He stepped back obediently and watched as Harry pulled something clear and shining yellow out to balance it on his palms.

Draco felt all the breath leave his body as he stared at the thing, and he reached out to clutch the edge of the desk. Harry immediately spun around to face him. “You know what it is? What is it?”

“I’ve seen things like it before,” Draco whispered, eyes locked on the reaching, stubby branches, like branches of coral. “Not the same color, but pretty much the same shape.” He managed to drag his eyes away from the thing, and locked them on Harry’s face. “Some of the Death Eaters used them to capture magic in the Manor. The Dark Lord was going to do something with them once they were all charged with enough power. But it was never enough for him, and I never found out what it was.”

Stormclouds stirred in Harry’s eyes. “I see,” he said, and set the thing back in its drawer. “So the only people likely to have knowledge of these are former Death Eaters.”

“Like Yaxley,” Draco caught on, seeing where this was going.

“Like Yaxley.” Harry nodded and stared down at the drawer. “And most of them are in Azkaban and only accessible to Ministry wizards. So the Ministry is interfering again.”

And if the Ministry had any people with sense in it, Draco thought, they would have run a thousand miles in the other direction rather than stir the danger he saw then in Harry’s eyes.
“She’s wonderful.”

Harry had to smile as he sat down next to a breathless Hermione for a quick meal in his office. She’d been talking with Lenneal, the woman Draco had convinced to help them, for several hours now, and apparently Lenneal had an idea which of her contacts in Knockturn Alley could help them track down the poisoned Wolfsbane ingredients. In fact, Hermione was clutching a list of names. Harry was glad that things were going right for somebody.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Harry told her, and sipped at his pumpkin juice with a grimace. He and Hermione had spent too much time talking before he ate, and the juice had gone flat. “And you think you’ll be able to track back the ingredients to the exact person who distributed them?”

Hermione nodded, eyes glowing. “Of course, if that person did it because Gorenson told them to, then the real culprit is already dead,” she added. “But maybe we can make them realize that it’s still wrong and prevent them from doing it again.”

Harry held back a cynical comment on exactly how likely Hermione really was to reeducate their opponents. “Do you think there’s a chance Lenneal could help me track down the source of the centaur rumor, too?”

Hermione blinked. “I don’t know. She says that she has most of her contacts in Knockturn Alley and the Dark apothecaries. Do you think it would have come out of there?”

“At least they would know whether people have been asking them about aphrodisiac potions and using centaur foal hooves in them lately,” said Harry. “Yes, speak to her, please.” He still burned with the desire to avenge the centaurs, but he knew that he wouldn’t do well in an investigation like that. He was too recognizable, and he would thrash around in his anger and make things even more unsubtle than they already were. “I’m going to work on strengthening the wards around the Forest and Hogwarts.”

Hermione frowned. “Do you want help?”

“You and Lenneal go on working together, for now.” Harry squeezed her hand. “Please,” he added, when Hermione opened her mouth as if to object. “I want to be sure that someone is doing something else to help the centaurs. My efforts to strengthen the wards might be useless, at least against the kind of artifacts that the Ministry was using to bypass them.”

After a second, Hermione nodded. “If you want us to.”

“I do, thanks,” said Harry, and finally applied himself to his food. He doubted that Draco was letting doubts and worries make him nervous enough not to eat, even though this was the night when he had another major party, the last one before the election. And he had told Harry that he would start spinning the story of their “real” connection to each other at this party.

*Maybe he’s not nervous, but I still wish I could be there, at his side.*
“How do you feel, now that your victory is all but assured?” Skeeter’s voice dipped sympathetically. “And now that you’ve mostly recovered from the wounds Dark Lord Potter dealt you when your Manor exploded?”

Draco took a sip of his champagne, letting his eyelids flutter as he looked down at the floor. Skeeter could take that as a sign of his modesty or his nervousness. Draco would be pleased if she did.

He was strangling his irritation with her and stirring up the right emotions behind the mask, but at least he was past the stage when he blamed himself for having those emotions.

“I feel that a victory would be the best solution to both problems,” he said at last, “the problem of what’s best for the wizarding world and the problem that Dark Lord Potter presents, as someone that we can’t help but deal with. He’s hurt me, but he hasn’t slaughtered me yet, the way he did to poor Gorenson.” He looked up then, and caught Skeeter’s gaze, so she wouldn’t get suspicious. “That’s the way I have to think of it, you know? That there’s always something worse that could happen to me?”

Skeeter’s fingers twitched on her quill, and her eyes brightened. “Do you care to explain to the public any of your strategies for containing Dark Lord Potter yet?”

Draco looked around, ostentatiously making sure that none of the other people—reporters, pillars of the Ministry, pure-blood supporters, his parents—at the Manor party were near them. Skeeter obligingly cast an anti-eavesdropping spell.

“This is a strategy that I can only tell you right now,” Draco whispered. “If you published it, it would lessen its effectiveness.”

Skeeter pouted at him, and Draco could practically see her two main impulses fighting behind her eyes: the desire to know more about his strategy and be trusted with this secret versus her impulse to publish everything. “But you might let me tell the public the truth eventually?”

Draco hesitated, then nodded. “With time passing, I can snare the Dark Lord Potter more effectively. Finally, when you publish, he won’t believe the story even if someone in his court insists that he should.”

“Oh!” Skeeter whispered, her eyes brightening. “So you do intend to fool him?”

“Dark Lord Potter wants a victim,” said Draco. “A single victim. Witness how he blamed everything wrong with the Ministry on Gorenson, even though lots of people have been involved in fighting him. And how he tortured Gorenson and burned him alive. That’s the person he chose to focus on, despite everything else that went wrong.”

Skeeter looked as if she was about to dance in place. “And you’re going to offer yourself up as that single victim?”

*Remember that Skeeter is smarter than she looks,* Draco told himself firmly, and gave a modest inclination of his head. “I am. But I can’t tell him exactly what I’m doing at first, because then he might kill me for trying to manipulate him.” He let his voice sink. “By the time I tell you it’s safe to publish, then I think I’ll have him firmly enchanted. He’ll blame me for everything. If anyone else tries to tell him otherwise, then he’ll dismiss it as a ridiculous plot.”
“A victim,” said Skeeter. “A sacrifice.” She looked like she might clasp her hands to her bosom, but that would mean putting down the ink and the parchment to do it. “You’ll play the most romantic part I can think of.”

Romantic? Draco did look at her uneasily, wondering if she somehow suspected the relationship between him and Harry. They had acted like that once in front of her, although things had changed so much since then that she had never referred to it again.

But Skeeter just went on beaming. “I’ll be sure to keep what you told me secret until it’s safe to release,” she said. “Thank you.”

And away she walked, almost on air, at knowing something that no one else in the party did.

Draco sighed and picked up a glass of wine from a house-elf, then went to refresh his nerves and his speech one more time before he made it to a bunch of Ministry people who wanted to know what their relations with the Dark Lord Potter would be like if he took over the Ministry.

They know, at the bottom, that I’m their only real choice, the way Lenneal says.

And of course that was true, but that didn’t mean Draco couldn’t do his best to ease their fears, to make things smoother in the future for himself.

And Harry, he thought then, swallowing one more gulp of wine. I’m doing this for Harry, too, always.

* * *

“Lucy thinks that she might have found something.”

Harry started and glanced up. He had been talking to one of the people Draco had recommended for a place in his Court. Her name was Serena Lowell, and she clased her hands on her lap, covered by a fancy blue robe, as she scowled at Hermione. Harry squeezed her hand and got her to smile at him, reluctantly, before he stood up.

“I’m sorry, Miss Lowell, but this interview will have to be concluded later,” he said. “I do think that you have an excellent chance of entering my Court, though.”

“Thank you, my Lord,” said Lowell, and left the room with no more than a cursory glare at Hermione. Harry didn’t think Hermione noticed. She was too busy almost dancing in place, blurring out the news the minute that the door closed behind Lowell.

“Lucy found a contact in Knockturn Alley who remembers having sold some Wolfsbane ingredients to someone named Imber,” said Hermione, whipping out a long parchment full of names and plunking it in the middle of his desk. “And Imber is the name of one of Gorenson’s aliases.”

Harry sighed. It wasn’t definitive proof, but at least it might lessen the paranoia of the werewolves who lived with him, if they knew that the one who had poisoned them was most likely dead.

Still, he wanted the definitive proof if he could get it. “But buying the ingredients for Wolfsbane isn’t the same thing as poisoning the ingredients that got sent here.”
“No,” Hermione agreed. “But we know that Gorenson had his fingers into everything.” She rolled up the parchment, staring intently at him. “I don’t think it’s beyond the realm of possibility that he suborned someone who was supposed to send the ingredients to me and slipped his own in instead.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “Do what you can to find out, but good luck. Has Lenneal found out anything about the centaur foals’ hooves and that rumor?”

Hermione’s shoulders tightened, and her eyes dropped to her hands, contemplating the way they tied up the scroll. Harry sighed. “I’m not going to blame you if you haven’t found anything,” he said quietly. “You know that, Hermione. It’s a hard thing to do, and I only asked you to do it recently—”

“I wasn’t feeling bad about that.” Hermione caught her breath with a gulp and looked up into his face. “I’m feeling bad because we did find something. Yesterday. But it was so horrible that neither one of us wanted to come and talk to you about it.”

Harry clenched the back of his chair with one hand, and swallowed back as much irritation as he could. “All right. What are you talking about? What did you find?”

“We found a butchered centaur foal,” Hermione told the center of the table.

Harry closed his eyes. “Where did you find it, and what did it look like?” Perhaps it was a little much to ask Hermione to relive that much horror for his benefit, but he would pull the memory from her head and place it in a Pensieve if she wanted, rather than make her go through it again.

It sounded as though Hermione was swallowing either the impulse to be sick or a dry sob. She whispered, “We found it as ingredients, chopped up. I don’t think that either of us would have recognized it, but we went in disguise to the apothecary, and the shopkeeper showed it to us when we started asking about aphrodisiac potions. And I recognized the hooves.”

Harry felt himself go cold. Slow and deep and cold, as if he had turned not only into a shark but the water that the shark was gliding through.

“Harry?” Hermione’s hand was on his shoulder, but he felt as if it was on the other side of a thick wool coverlet. “Are you all right?”

“What apothecary was it?” And Harry’s voice sounded like the growl of a dreaming dragon, he thought. His fingers flexed against the table, and small splinters fell off and drifted around in a circle. All around him, Hogwarts was thrumming with magic.

“His name is Garrick Killian,” said Hermione, and she had taken a step back as though she needed to see Harry from a good distance in order to understand him. “What is wrong with you? I know you want to speak to him about this, but—”

“Damn right I want to speak to him about this,” Harry said, and moved his hands in a complicated pattern. The stones of Hogwarts beneath his feet understood and opened up for him, dropping him into a tunnel that sped him through the stones like the tunnel that led down to the Chamber of Secrets.

Harry could have reached out and touched the Chamber as he went past it. He could have summoned a basilisk made of stone. He could have done a lot of things.
But he only wanted the tunnel to bear him to the edge of the grounds and the edge of his power, which it did. Then he closed his eyes and stood there, swaying a little, despite being blown by the cold wind of his rage.

The last thing he had gone charging into a situation with parameters he didn’t fully understand, it had resulted in his capture. And even though he thought he had planned for the one after that, the one that had forced him to destroy Persephone, he had ended up misjudging it. He wouldn’t be caught that way this time.

Besides, he’d neglected to get Apparition coordinates to the apothecary from Hermione.

He would go to someone who could help him. He would try to make sure that he didn’t terrify her too badly.

Harry opened his eyes, knowing he was smiling, and unpleasantly, before he disappeared.

*

“Candidate Malfoy?”

Draco lowered his list of bribes and people who needed to be bribed with a frown. It was true he had given Lucy Lenneal, as someone who had worked with Granger and was working with Harry, permission to contact him privately by Floo if she wanted to, and bypass all the elaborate safeguards Rosenthal used to determine if someone should be able to contact him or not. But he hadn’t expected Lenneal to casually use that access, either.

But from the way Lenneal had her jaw clenched, this wasn’t a casual firecall. Draco leaned forwards and adopted the smooth manner that he thought Lenneal would expect from him. “Yes? What is it?”

“The Dark Lord was just here,” Lenneal whispered, and seemed to realize a second later that Draco might not know where “here” meant. “I mean, in my office. He said that he had come to—to gather information on the discovery that I made yesterday with Granger.”

“What discovery?” Lenneal winced. Draco rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to do whatever you think Dark Lord Potter did. But I do want to know what you found out, since you didn’t see fit to tell me.”

“I was trying to think of the right way to break the news.” Lenneal threw her hair over her shoulder and finally seemed to realize, from his impatient glance, that she should settle down and give Draco the report. “The Dark Lord’s associate and I discovered what I’m certain are the remains of a slaughtered centaur foal in an apothecary, Darkest Signs, owned by a man named Garrick Killian.”

Draco breathed a curse. He knew Killian’s name, although he didn’t think he had ever been in his shop. But Professor Snape had bought ingredients there, and so had his father. Killian was an experienced Dark apothecary. He should have been smarter than to have ingredients like that in his shop or antagonize the Dark Lord of Hogwarts.

“And why did the Dark Lord need to come to you to learn this, when Granger presumably went back to Hogwarts?” Draco asked.
“She did,” said Lenneal. “But he didn’t know the Apparition coordinates of the shop or what it was called. He came to me to learn.” She winced and shook her head when she met his eyes. “And I don’t know why he didn’t ask Granger. I suppose he thought there was the possibility that she might not tell him.”

*And Harry wouldn’t want to force her to tell him, even though he could. He just barely repaired their relationship last time he did something without telling her. This would destroy it forever.* Draco held his face immobile. “Did you give him the coordinates?”

“Yes,” said Lenneal. “But he left only a few moments ago. You may still be able to catch him if you hurry. I can give you the coordinates of the shop if you don’t have them—”

“Yes,” said Lenneal. “But he left only a few moments ago. You may still be able to catch him if you hurry. I can give you the coordinates of the shop if you don’t have them—”

“Why would I be able to *catch* him?” Draco stood up with a snort even as he Summoned his cloak nonverbally and it settled around his shoulders. “You know that I can deal with him as England’s future Minister, but that isn’t the same thing as forcing him to stop and listen to me.”

Lenneal held his gaze. “I think that you’re capable of a lot more where it concerns Dark Lord Potter than you ever wanted us to know,” she said simply.

Draco cursed, but only to himself. That was the worst part of having intelligent allies: then you had nothing to do but *Obliviate* them or live with it if they figured things out. And Lenneal seemed to have divined the relationship, or part of it, that lay between him and Harry. With luck, she wouldn’t have thought it was love, though.

“I don’t think I need to remind you of conclusions that you should keep to yourself?” Draco asked softly.

Lenneal shivered. “I just saw the Dark Lord of Hogwarts in all his glory. I still believe that he won’t attack us if we don’t attack him first, but h-he was angry. And I could see it.” She swallowed. “I wouldn’t be mad enough to oppose someone like that.”

Draco nodded curtly and cut short the Floo call. He could Floo to an “abandoned” shop in Knockturn Alley that was actually a common destination for wizards who wanted to reach that alley without going out in the open and being noted by any Aurors hanging about. It would be faster than racing through the Manor to the edge of his grounds and his wards.

He didn’t think it likely, actually, that he could hold Harry back from doing something to Killian. And he might not want to even if he could, because Harry might owe that response to the centaurs by virtue of his treaty with them.

Draco was just trying to keep it to “understandable vengeance,” rather than “complete and utter destruction.”
Harry landed outside the apothecary, and wrapped layers of magic around himself into a Disillusionment Charm. It was hard to concentrate. His sight was wavering, and Harry didn’t think that had anything to do with either his power or magical exhaustion. He was just sofucking angry, and the wavering moved back and forth in time to the pounding of his blood.

But no one seemed to have noticed him, so far. Two hags were walking down the middle of Knockturn Alley, both contributing to a conversation in which the word “blood” figured prominently. Two warlocks called to them from the other side of the alley, but neither hag turned around. The shop next to Darkest Signs was shuttered, a tall woman walking away from it with a satisfied smile on her face.

And in front of Harry was his target.

He looked it over, carefully. He might have come this far on impulse, but he would make sure, now, that this apothecary had no traps that might hurt him. And in the meantime, he would learn how he could most effectively secure vengeance on the idiot.

The shop was small, with smudged windows, like a lot of them in Knockturn Alley. The nearest window had been broken, in fact, and not repaired; Harry didn’t know if that was meant to send a threatening message or not. The name hung in crooked silver letters above the door.

Harry closed his eyes and cast a complicated spell that he had first learned in Auror training. When he looked again, a tiny bird sat in the middle of his palm, a sparrow that fluttered and chirped at him. Harry nodded. It took off from his hand and flew around the back of the shop.

In a few minutes, it was back, and flew straight into the middle of his forehead, becoming transparent as it did so. Harry closed his eyes, receiving its impressions, recorded much like a Pensieve memory. There was a back door to the shop, but it led out onto another turning of Knockturn Alley deep in rubbish and dirt. Killian wouldn’t go fast down that lane, and it didn’t look like he used the door often, from the thick dust piled in front of it.

Harry nodded. He would be prepared in case Killian tried to escape that way, but it didn’t seem like a big risk.

He dropped the Disillusionment Charm, and strode across the street and through the door of the shop, not bothering to knock.

* * *

Draco stepped out of the Floo and hustled to the door of the abandoned shop, not bothering to brush the soot off his cloak, although he had never not done it before. This time, he had something more important to worry about.

Then he jerked to a stop and lifted his head. There was drumming power around him, power he had felt so many times before that he wouldn’t have noticed it at all in Hogwarts. But this wasn’t Hogwarts, and that power didn’t have a reason to be here.

Well, it shouldn't have a reason to be here.
“Shit,” Draco pointed out to no one in particular, and flung open the shop’s door, and ran.

*

Harry stood for a second as the door of the shop banged to behind him, and looked around. It was only a quick glimpse, but it was enough to tell him there were no wards or trap spells in the immediate vicinity—or none that were strong enough to harm him, anyway. Which meant none he needed to worry about.

Then he had to duck sharply as a Fireball Curse went soaring above him and crashed against the door. From the hiss of dampening spells, fires happened here a lot, and Harry wouldn’t need to worry about one starting behind his back. He lifted his head, smiled in the direction of the counter the spell had come from, and strode forwards.

“Casting a curse at me?” he sang out. “That’s not very friendly, is it?”

Another curse followed, although this one was a Freezing one instead of a Fireball one. Harry lifted his power in front of him and caught it easily, then dissolved it, instead of simply deflecting it the way a Shield Charm would have. That cost him a bit of power, and more than he would have had to use on the grounds of Hogwarts, but it looked fucking impressive—the little dots of ice collecting in midair, wavering, and then flashing into nonexistence.

A man with manky red hair and a long, rat-like nose stuck his head up from behind the counter and gaped at Harry.

“Garrick Killian?” Harry asked, and twitched his fingers. A small light began to shine from his magic, stronger than Lumos but floating in a ring around his head, so that it illuminated his face.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” Killian clutched his wand as though he still thought it could protect him.

Harry assumed the light wasn’t strong enough, and obligingly strengthened it, then lifted a hand to his fringe, pulling it back to expose the lightning scar. “Your worst nightmare,” he added helpfully, when Killian was still tense and staring and apparently unable to recognize him a moment later.

Killian blurted something so scared it wasn’t even words, and darted backwards into the wall behind the counter. Then he grabbed a wire that hung down from the ceiling.

Harry didn’t wait to find out what he intended to do with it. He went over the counter in an easy bound, and a second later he had Killian’s throat in his hand and was holding him up above the floor with his legs dangling.

He could have done this with magic, admittedly, or in some way that didn’t involve physically holding Killian. But he had magic strengthening his arms so he could do it in the first place, and he thought that counted.

Besides, from the expression that was creeping over Killian’s face, he was more than intimidating the man anyway.

“I don’t know what you’re doing here,” Killian whimpered, and struggled against him hard enough that Harry had to release his hold a bit, or Killian would damage his own throat. “I swear, all
I did was sell ingredients to people who were part of your Court! If you didn’t want them to have them, take it up with them and not me!”

“So butchering a centaur foal doesn’t count as a crime to you?” Harry supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised, but he had thought Killian would immediately guess why Harry was in his shop.

Killian stared at him. “It’s ingredients, like anything else,” he said. “Some of my customers wanted ingredients. I provided them. No one gets upset when I hunt Runespoors and Ashwinders!”

“If they lived in the Forbidden Forest, then I would,” said Harry, and tightened his grip again. “The Forbidden Forest is under my protection. You went there and butchered a centaur foal?” He had thought it would be a little harder to prove that Killian was the one who’d killed the foal. At least his blabbing mouth had a use.

“It’s not like they’re human,” said Killian, shaking his head back and forth as much as he could with Harry’s hand still on his throat. “It’s not like I killed a baby!”

Harry lowered Killian to the floor again. The man smiled, as if he suspected that Harry agreed with him, and swept a hand at his shelves. “As proof that I don’t have any hard feelings against you, why don’t you take anything you want? Free. I know you’re not much of a Potions brewer, but you must have people in your Court who can do it for you.”

“You should have known better than that,” Harry whispered, and felt the flames of his magic begin to burn more visibly around him. “So what I’m wondering is, should I break all the bones in your body or simply turn you inside out and leave you for other people to find?”

“You shouldn’t do either, because he’s not worth it.”

That was Draco’s voice, from the door. Harry kept himself from turning in that direction and reaching out immediately; they were in front of an audience, someone who wouldn’t have any reason to think that Draco Malfoy and Dark Lord Potter were anything but enemies, maybe reluctant allies.

Although, come to think of it, Harry wasn’t sure that he was going to leave Killian alive long enough to spread rumors anyway.

“Candidate Malfoy,” said Harry, turning around slowly, and keeping an effortless grip on Killian with his magic. “Have you come to defend this worthless killer? He violated my boundaries and the treaties I’ve made with the centaurs. I don’t see much reason to leave him alive.”

Draco took a step towards him. Harry could see the answer in his wide eyes as clearly as if he’d spoken it: I’ve come to defend you.

Harry appreciated the silent support, but again, he could hardly show that in front of Killian. He turned and gestured. A small ball of fire formed off to the side, bright white and glowing. As Harry moved his fingers, it spread into the outline of a man, hollow in the middle, and sized to fit Killian. Then it started moving forwards.

“You were saying?” Harry asked Draco.

“I hadn’t said much of anything yet,” said Draco. If he was worried about the fire and what it might do to Killian, he didn’t show it. Killian had started whimpering, and Harry had to admit that
was a deeply satisfying sound. “I do think you’re being too hasty. Do you even know if this man did... whatever he did alone? You could get more information from him if you don’t kill him.”

*Very good, Draco.* It was the sort of political lie that Draco was good at spinning on the spot, and which Harry would have floundered hopelessly through. He inclined his head as though Draco had a point.

“I could torture him for information, perhaps,” said Harry, as if he was considering deeply and Draco had the chance to persuade him otherwise. “And then kill him when I’m done.”

“I thought you were a fair and just Lord.” Draco sidled towards him. “I thought you only killed people for crimes they actually committed.”

*Trying to make yourself into a witness?* But Harry knew that not enough people would believe Draco for it to be worth the effort.

That led to the inevitable conclusion that he really was trying to save Killian’s life. Perhaps he thought that people would accept Killian’s testimony most of all.

But Harry didn’t intend to leave Killian in a position where he could just go and speak to newspapers like everyone else, even if he spared his life. “He admitted to butchering a centaur foal. His life belongs to me.”

“Really?” Draco was beside him now, and although Harry knew he must have been at least a little nervous, he couldn’t see any sign of that in the way Draco raised his eyebrows, polite disbelief almost radiating off him. “Because I would have thought that his life belongs to the centaurs, not you. With all due respect. My Lord.”

Harry stared at Draco, and then nodded slowly. He should have thought of that direction earlier, and Draco was incredibly smart to have thought of it.

*But of course. He’s a politician.* Harry turned back to Killian, who looked white enough that he probably would have fainted if Harry moved the fiery outline a few inches closer, and smiled. “What do you prefer, Killian? You could choose your own fate, you know. Do I have you?” He raised his hand, and the outline surged a bit nearer. Killian squealed. “Or do the centaurs have you?”

“I want to live,” Killian whispered. “I’m sorry I killed the foal, I’m sorry! But I can’t go back and undo it. What do you want me to do?”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “Is this the way that you handle all the conflicts you might have?” he asked. “What if you sell illegal ingredients? Would you just tell the Aurors that you were sorry and you didn’t mean to when they came into your shop and insisted on arresting you for selling them? Or would you acknowledge that they have a right to be upset?”

Killian stared at him as if he didn’t know what Harry was talking about. Harry shrugged angrily. Probably, he didn’t. He either didn’t think of centaurs as human or Harry as human, or both. He expected to take some risks breaking laws, but the laws that protected centaurs were breakable.

Or something. Harry had to admit that he wasn’t going to spend much time trying to fathom the mind of someone who killed centaur foals, and justified it by saying that it wasn’t like he was killing human babies.
“Time’s almost up,” he said. “You can still choose, but take more than one minute and I’ll choose for you. What is it going to be?”

Killian stared back and forth between the outline of himself and then the shelf where Harry could see what looked like the outline of a folded centaur hide, and swallowed. “How can you make me pick like that?” he whispered. “You’re merciless.” He really sounded like he was a few breaths away from crying.

“How can you make me pick like that?” he whispered. “You’re merciless.” He really sounded like he was a few breaths away from crying.

“Time is up now,” Harry said. “And since you haven’t chosen, and I don’t want to be bothered with you, I’m going to give you to the centaurs.”

Killian uttered another wordless cry, and began to weep. Harry stepped back and dismissed the outline of fire, floating Killian towards the door of the shop. Draco got out of the way, without taking his eyes from Harry. He seemed to believe that he could tell Harry the right thing to do silently, by staring at him.

“I’m going to make sure that everyone knows what happened here,” Harry said, both to Killian and to Draco. They could think about what messages they’d carry—well, Draco could. Killian wouldn’t be carrying anything anywhere. “And I’m going to give the centaur foal a memorial. You may not have thought he was worth anything, but I do.”

He gestured Draco out the door, and made Killian follow him. Then he stood in the middle of the shop and looked around at all the wooden cabinets, the barrels, the shelves, the flasks, the potions that simmered in fake display cauldrons, and raised his hands.

Not everything was made of wood, but even the things that weren’t would burn well enough in the heat of the fire Harry intended to call.

This time, the flames had no shape, but simply poured from his hands and arched up to touch the walls, the floors, the shelves, the cabinets, everything, and everything simmered for a moment only before it burst into fire.

Harry stepped outside and conjured water, making sure that he soaked Knockturn Alley, the roofs and doors and everything else of the shops on either side and across the street from Darkest Signs, and the people who had come out to see what was happening. Some of them shrieked from that. Others shrieked at the sight of him. Harry honestly wasn’t sure what was which, and he only looked at them. Some people immediately ducked back into their shops or houses; even this close, it was hard to tell the difference between the two.

Others drew their wands and assisted him in soaking everything down so that nothing else would catch on fire. A few tried to put out the flames. Harry shook his head. “You won’t be able to,” he said.

One of the hags who had been walking down the middle of the alley when Harry first appeared turned and looked at him. Then she bowed and said, “You heard the Dark Lord. Let’s make sure nothing else burns.”

Other people appeared more willing to listen to her than to him. Harry could hardly blame them for that. At least it meant that they weren’t scrambling around anymore and would listen to someone.

He turned to Killian, who still hung in the air, and nodded to Draco. “I’m about to Apparate to the
Forbidden Forest,” he said. “Ministerial Candidate Malfoy, will you spread the word of what happens to apothecaries, or anyone else, who harms my allies?”

“I will,” said Draco, looking him dead in the eye. “If you really think that this is the best thing you can do. My Lord.”

“I think that the centaurs will make the decision,” said Harry. “They’ve returned some people alive before now.” He smiled, thinking of Umbridge. “And they may remand him to my justice. I’ve made the decision, since he wouldn’t.” He turned on his heel and Apparated to Hogwarts, pulling the still-whimpering Killian with him.

* 

Draco, left with the flames on one hand and the people casting water spells on the other, had a few moments to decide what he ought to do, before those people started coming up to him and demanding answers.

And he decided that he was going to do the best he could to defend Harry without lessening the fury of his vengeance. He knew the fury was part of the reason Harry had done this. Fewer people would hurt the centaurs if they thought there was a chance that they really might suffer for doing so.

“Candidate Malfoy?” The nearest hag had come up to him. “Does the Dark Lord mean it, that he’ll hurt people who hurt the centaurs?”

Draco nodded and faced her. “He does,” he said, and that gave him the direction of his own speech, the thin line that he needed to dance.

He and Harry might be secret allies, but it was still up to Draco to support him and not undermine his decisions. And Draco could find little impulse in him to care about what happened to Killian. It was what the public might say about Harry because of that that he dreaded.

_On the other hand, we’ve already decided to live with that._
“You didn’t say that you were going to bring us such a prize.” Niamh’s voice was soft, but her tail coiled around her flanks as though she was using it to whip herself.

Harry nudged Killian with his foot. He had bound him with both magic and rope so there was no chance he could break free and harm any centaurs before they could subdue him. “Until today, I didn’t know that my people would be able to track him down so easily. But although I know he killed a foal, I don’t know how he’s connected to the other people who were trying to sneak into the forest.” He looked at Niamh. “I was hoping that you could find out for me.”

Niamh inclined her head, without a smile. “If you do not care what we do to him, we can find out much.”

“I didn’t care what you did to the last wizard who violated your boundaries and territory,” Harry said. “Although I was angry enough that I nearly burned this one to death. One of my colleagues managed to remind me that you have a better claim to his life than I do.”

Niamh had been bending down to check on the knots that tied Killian, but she looked back up at that. “I would like to meet him.”

“I’ll bring him if he agrees to come,” said Harry. Killian was still alive, and would know it was Draco Harry was speaking about, and while Harry highly doubted that Killian would come out of the forest and be able to talk to anyone about it, he was still going to be cautious. “It might not be politically advantageous for him.”

Niamh nodded, then did a complicated folding trick with her legs that left her kneeling down but still able to reach out and use her arms fully. She heaved Killian onto her back, draped across her withers. He moaned and tried to garble out something, but Niamh didn’t seem inclined to pay attention. She stood up instead, and nodded to Harry. “Thank you for bringing him to us. We will see that he pays for the foal’s death, and gives us the information before he dies.” She cantered into the Forbidden Forest.

Harry listened to the noise of her hoofbeats and Killian’s moans fading, and felt viciously satisfied. Then he sighed and turned his back on the forest, making his way towards the castle.

Briseis met him just outside the gates, shaking her head. “Please tell me that I’m not going to have another political crisis to control.”

“No,” Harry said. “I did think about killing the apothecary, but Draco stopped me. So I burned his shop to the ground and ensured no other shops would be burned, and then took Killian and gave him to the centaurs.”

Briseis considered that, then nodded. “That might be for the best. We need you to maintain somewhat of a threatening image, so that our enemies don’t simply start attacking the Court again.”

“I agree.” Harry turned and fell into step beside her. “Now, tell me about the new arrivals I can see you’re bursting to mention.”
“It’s sometimes creepy that you know that much about me, my Lord,” said Briseis, and then held out a sheaf of papers. “There are a lot more in the last few days. I don’t know why. I would have thought they would start staying away once they heard about your new reputation.”

“Maybe some will once they hear about the burning of Darkest Signs,” said Harry absently, and flipped through the top papers. “But right now, there are so many people who are uncertain about that council in the Ministry and their ability to control anything that I’m not surprised we’re getting more immigrants.” He paused on seeing a name on the paper in front of him. “Nott?”

“No, the name,” Harry said, and held out the paper. “There was a Slytherin named Theodore Nott in my year. I don’t recognize this name, though. Hortenisa Nott? Do you think she could be his sister?”

Briseis looked at the paper with the slight frown that Harry knew meant her mind was really racing in concentration. “Yes, I think she is. She says that she wants to immigrate to the Court because you treat Slytherins fairly.” She looked sideways at Harry. “Considering that I am high up in your hierarchy and you’ve shut down the House rivalry that used to flourish at the expense of the Slytherins, I think that’s right.”

Harry nodded. “Maybe Draco can give me tips about how to handle her, if I think the interview with her doesn’t go the way I want it to.” He pulled Hortensia’s parchment to the top of the pile. “Tell Miss Nott that I’ll interview her next.”

“Do you think that going to the Dark Lord’s Court would really benefit us?”

Draco sighed. He had answered almost a hundred questions from various people in Knockturn Alley since Harry had burned Darkest Signs, and there seemed to be no possibility of getting away anytime soon. Even the hags and warlocks and other people Draco had thought would avoid him, since he was running for Minister, had approached him.

On the other hand, they had seen him speak to the Dark Lord of Hogwarts without bad consequences. Perhaps they thought that was enough to make him sympathetic to the Dark.

“I don’t know,” he told the hag who had asked him that last question. She was done up to her eyes in a thick cloak and hood that hid everything about her, even the color of her hair. She had black eyes, though, he could see that much. “You have to consider that it would prejudice some of your family against you, if they’re on the Ministry’s side, and that the Ministry might seize your property if you do it.”

The hag waved a hand. “All my property is the sort that can be carried on my back.” She looked deeply into his eyes. “And I know that I have skills that would prove of value to the Dark Lord’s Court.”

“Really?” Draco knew hags were skilled with Dark spells and potions, but Harry had people around him who could do that already. “Like what?”

“I see more than most people do,” said the hag. “Call it the Sight if you wish. I never have. I see that you and the Dark Lord are closer than you like people to think, and that the main reason the
Dark Lord did not destroy that idiot today was as a favor to you.”

Draco’s hand shifted to clench on his wand. The hag cackled. “And it wouldn’t do any good to curse me, either, boy. I can melt away and be gone much more easily than some of these fools.”

Draco released his wand with a sigh. There was no way he could know her name when he hadn’t seen her face, and he thought a hag was one of the last people who would go to the Ministry with news of his connection with Harry, anyway. “What do you want?”

“Sometimes even wanderers long for a home. I’ve been content with wandering a good long time, but I could fancy a Court.” The hag spread her hands. “Put in a good word for me, and I’ll use those eyes on your enemies.”

“Fine,” said Draco. “But just because I put in a good word doesn’t mean the Dark Lord will accept you. I might be able to—calm him down, sometimes, but that doesn’t mean I control him.”

“Why would I want to serve a Lord someone else could control?” The hag cackled again and turned away. “Tell the Dark Lord to look for Nightshade when he wants to speak for me.”

The people who’d been waiting to talk to Draco almost melted out of the way when Nightshade walked past them. Draco stared, then snorted. At least he thought he’d have less trouble finding her when he wanted to.

*  

“Will you tell me why you want to enter my Court?”

Hortensia Nott looked a little like Theodore, or at least Harry thought so; he had to admire he didn’t remember her brother that well. She was tall and long and skinny, with a nose to rival Snape’s. She drew her robes around her at all times as though she expected the floor to be crawling with dirt and diseases. She examined Harry’s face as if all the dirt and diseases focused there, then nodded.

“No one will hire me for the work I want to do in the Ministry,” said Hortensia, her voice also thin and her hands working restlessly in front of her. “And it is not a work that is easy to do outside it. I must compete with others in the same field. I wish to be in a Court where my work will be valued and rare.”

“I have people who can brew potions here.”

Hortensia paused, and then her hands stopped working. She sat up. Harry held back the urge to laugh. Yes, he had read her right. She wanted to be challenged, and she took blunt honesty as part of that challenge.

“I brew poisons,” she said. “And I can work out cures for most of them. But supplies are expensive, and the Ministry won’t fund research into creating poisons. They only want cures. They’re ridiculous. How can I work out how to combat poisons unless I know what goes into making them? And the truly new and experimental ones are invented mostly for assassination attempts. It would be useless for me to never do anything in that line. It would leave me facing a weapon compounded of ingredients that I did not understand and could not counter or trace back in time.”

Harry cocked his head. “Very well. But how do I know that you wouldn’t turn on the other people
in my Court and use your poisons against me?”

“How well will they treat me? If someone is prejudiced against me for coming from a Slytherin family and spits on me, then I would be more tempted to use a mild poison that would cause them some stomach pain, at least. Not all poisons are fatal,” she added, probably because Harry could feel his eyebrows rising. “I am a master of the ones that are not.”

Harry leaned back and considered her. It was true that Hermione and Lucy could use some help in tracing back the ingredients of the poisoned Wolfsbane, and Harry would like someone in his Court who counteract it if the werewolves ever suffered from the same fate.

But he didn’t know how well someone who talked intensely about her love for poisons would do in his court. “What about people who distrust you because of what you love to do?”

Hortensia shrugged. “If they distrust or fear me enough not to attack me, I don’t care. It’s only a problem when they decide that my work means I need to be destroyed.”

“I don’t know if I could trust you,” Harry said, and stood up to pace back and forth across the room. It still felt empty without Persephone on her perch, preening sometimes and giving him a stare that told him how pathetic he was other times. “That would be the most important factor in whether I could give you shelter. How stupid would I be to invite an enemy right into my home?”

“The magic of Hogwarts answers to you, I’m told.”

Harry glanced at her. “Yes, it does. But I don’t know if I could command it to stop me from ingesting poison in time.”

“Set it to watching me,” said Hortensia. “Portraits or whatever else you wish. The very stones can watch those you tell them to watch, I’ve heard. Very well. But it can act against me and attack me if I make a hostile move against you.”

Harry frowned and didn’t answer. In truth, it was a clever answer, and it impressed him with Hortensia’s determination to work in an environment that was literally hostile. But he didn’t know if Hogwarts’s magic was intelligent enough, put bluntly, to recognize when Hortensia was concocting a poison for use against him or someone else in his Court.

“Very well,” he said at last. “I’m going to need a magical oath from you that you won’t use poisons against me.”

Hortensia paused expectantly, and then said, “Why didn’t you require the same vow against me using any poison against the members of your Court?”

“Because I don’t have control of them the way I do of Hogwarts and my own reactions,” said Harry. “If someone attacks you, you deserve the right to defend yourself. What your vow will say is that you can’t fatally poison anyone in my Court.”

“I was told that I could trust you. I’m glad to see my informant was right.” Hortensia drew her wand and unhesitatingly held out her wrist. “Who will you invite to be our Bonder?”

“It doesn’t need to be an Unbreakable Vow. I was thinking more of a blood oath.” Blood oaths blended back into their maker and could turn Hortensia’s veins against her if she broke it. Harry thought that pain was a better lesson than death, the way that being sick to their stomach might
impress someone more than dying.

“You think like one of us, after all,” said Hortensia, and smiled at him. “They’d told me that you did, but I wasn’t sure.”

Harry shook his head and gathered up the magic of Hogwarts, surrounding Hortensia’s chair with it in a silently orbiting cloud of grey and green particles. Hortensia watched it calmly, politely, without moving. Harry raised his hand, and the particles settled until they were drifting around her. “Us? Them? What do you mean?”

“I meant the clever people,” said Hortensia, drawing her sleeve back to bare her arm, “mostly former Slytherins. But not all of them are. And by them, I meant the same people, the ones who told me that I should take my chances here.”

“These particles of my magic are going to go into your blood,” Harry told her. “Your idea about having my magic watch you is a good one, but it’s going to watch you from the inside. And it’ll react defensively if you try to hurt me, or kill anyone inside the Court’s borders.”

Hortensia smiled again. “I can see that others of the clever people will want to come here once I tell them about this,” she said, and made a little incision in the skin of her arm with her wand. The blood trickled out, and Harry shook his head and directed some of the particles of magic down into her blood. Hortensia laughed. “It tickles.”

“You’re talking about it like it’s an honor,” Harry said. “That’s not how most people would think of it.”

Hortensia looked him dead in the eye. “Then most people are stupid.”

Harry laughed in spite of himself. “Maybe I can learn to think like you,” he said, and lit the particles of his magic with a touch of his will. He was certain that they would still function even when separated from the rest of his magic and surrounded by blood now. Well, reasonably certain. “That this is an honor, and that my magic will comfort some people instead of upsetting them.”

Hortensia still hadn’t blinked or looked away. “You should always think that, my Lord. Why wouldn’t you? Your magic is strong enough to protect you from the consequences of any mistakes you do make, and then you can avoid making them in the future.”

Harry thought of the centaur foal. “My magic isn’t strong enough to protect everybody.”

“Protect who you can. Stay alive to defend the rest.” Hortensia lifted her arm. The blood under the surface of the skin sparkled and blazed with light. “Should I make the oath now?”

“Yes,” Harry said, feeling as though she had punched him in the stomach, but with her attitude more than her words. “Say this: I will never try to harm Harry Potter in any way, direct or indirect, and I will not use any of my skills against any members of his court fatally, and only use them at all against other members of his Court if they attack me first.”

Hortensia nodded and repeated the oath word-for-word, other than substituting in “my Lord” for Harry Potter. Harry supposed the oath would accept that. At least, there was no change in the soft sparkle of his magic in Hortensia’s blood. He’d take it.

Hortensia stood up after that and asked, “Where can I move in? When can I move in? I want to
bring some of my poisons and equipment with me as soon as possible, but I need to buy more ingredients before I potentially cut off contact with other markets.”

“There’s the Forbidden Forest, if you can go into it without violating the centaurs’ territory,” Harry said. “And I have to forbid you from chopping up magical creatures.”

“Non-magical plants are the best ingredients for many of my poisons in any case,” said Hortensia. “You will not regret this decision, Lord Potter. I can be loyal to those who will back me and believe in me.” She departed in a swirl of skirts.

Harry leaned back against his desk, and thought some more. He wanted to protect his people from harm. One reason he had been so angered by the death of the centaur foal was the thought that he had failed in doing that.

But when it came to him, and taking risks accepting new people into his Court, and making alliances…yes, his magic could enforce order if he had to. And he could discourage people without killing them, or even binding them. Just frighten them, and that changed the game. Already, they were attacking his people instead of him. He didn’t much like that, but at least it argued that they were too fearful to go after him directly.

Something he did was working.

Harry grinned a little. He and Draco had thought he would have to manipulate the public through fear of retaliation and Dark magic alone. But what if he cultivated another image? Of someone who could attack strongly if he had to, but was otherwise above it all, other than for a few sharp remarks?

Yes, that might be worth doing.
“You need to look your best today. You know that.”

Rosenthal’s voice was so harassed that Draco closed his mouth instead of giving her the taunting reply he had been about to issue. He simply nodded and let her fuss around him, now pausing to stare intently at his robes, now studying the fall of his hair. She finally stood back and shook her head, eyes sweeping him head to foot.

“I can’t find anything wrong with your appearance,” she said. “Even though I’m sure that someone will try to find it.”

“If they do, then you can take comfort it wasn’t your fault,” said Draco, and smiled at Rosenthal. She didn’t smile back, which was unusual enough that Draco felt compelled to add, “Have you already heard something that made you uneasy?”

“No,” said Rosenthal. “Nothing specific.” She fell silent again, still frowning, and Draco waited. He knew that her political instincts were some of the most trustworthy he’d run across. He wouldn’t have employed her otherwise. “It’s simply that—that I don’t think the Ministry, or your enemies, if you want to detach them from the whole Ministry, will be content to see you as the only viable candidate for Minister.”

“Here’s the part where I reassure you that they don’t have a choice, and they know it,” said Draco, adjusting the hang of the lace at his cuffs. Rosenthal made a face at the result, but it was the only way Draco could keep his hands free to sign documents or wave gracefully. “But I can’t, because I agree with you.”

Rosenthal blinked, then seemed to regret the emotion she had let slip out, and stood up straighter. “You do?”

“Of course.” Draco gave her an indulgent smile, and moved towards the door that led out into the gardens, closest to an Apparition point from the Manor. “I know that sitting back and letting me take control, then trying to undermine me later on, would be the politically expedient thing to do, but our enemies haven’t shown themselves as all that sane.”

Rosenthal thought about that as she paced after him, then nodded abruptly as Draco opened the door. “As long as you remember that. I’ll have some extra safeguards in place, beyond the visible ones.”

Draco nodded, and slipped a hand into his pocket to clutch the smooth pebble Harry had given him yesterday. It contained a bit of the magic of Hogwarts. It couldn’t surround and protect Draco as effectively as Harry could have if he was inside the walls of the school, but it could raise a defensive shield that most spells would fall back from.

*Most is not all,* Draco thought, and remembered the fact that Gorenson had had access to the Department of Mysteries and the artifacts there.

But staying in his house and giving in to his paranoia wasn’t an option. Draco made sure that his strides were long and smooth as he headed for the Apparition point, and that he paused before he Apparated to make sure Rosenthal could adjust the hang of his lace to an angle they both agreed
“Where do you think you’re going? I thought you’d like to hear what Lucy and I discovered on the poisonings.” There was a pause. “And Hortensia. She was more useful than I thought she was going to be.”

Harry stepped back from the tunnel that Hogwarts had opened in the wall and focused on Hermione. “And you can’t explain those things you found to me when I come back?”

“I would be less worried if I knew where you were going.” Hermione clutched her notebook to her chest and stared at him with shadowed eyes.

Harry discovered that he could still smile when he concentrated on it. “I’m going to watch Draco’s speech where he calls for an end to the hostilities between the Ministry and the Dark Lord of Hogwarts, and begs them to accept the peace that he can secure if they elect him as Minister.”

“I thought Ron was going to watch that speech.” Hermione’s fingers tightened again. “I distinctly remember him talking about it at breakfast. He was grumbling about how boring it would be.”

Harry sighed. “I’m not going to be watching openly, of course. I would scare everyone except Draco out of their minds if I showed up as myself. I’ll be under a glamour. And you can be sure that my magic is strong enough to provide a good one.”

Hermione shook her head. “That’s not the point. You’re still venturing outside the protection of Hogwarts, and you know what happened last time.”

“I destroyed an apothecary who’d been using centaur foals as his potions ingredients?”

Hermione flushed. “I meant the time before that, when Gorenson captured you.”

Harry sighed and toyed with the pebble in his pocket that was linked to the one Draco carried, and would let him establish an even stronger defensive shield if someone attacked Draco when both stones were close enough together. “I agree that it was a stupid thing for me to do, Hermione. But that very experience proved to me that I needed to be more cautious, so now I will be. And I managed to escape on my own.”

“We’ve risked so much on your safety,” Hermione whispered, “not just me and Ron, but all the other people who’ve come to Hogwarts and allied with you, or become part of your Court. Can you sacrifice the chance to keep them safe because you want to see Malfoy speak?”

“I don’t think of it as sacrificing them for Draco.” Harry winked at her when she flushed more deeply, because he knew the deeper concerns under the surface, the concerns that she probably wouldn’t let herself express because she knew he would get angry. “I think of it as contenting me so that I don’t get snappish doing all these endless interviews. And preserving the balance between the Ministry and Hogwarts. If I’m there to stop someone if they try to assassinate Draco, that might increase people’s trust in Draco, and their conviction that they can elect him Minister and stay in the wizarding world. They don’t have to come here, even if they’re afraid, if they trust the person in charge.”

“In charge of the rest of the wizarding world?” Again Hermione gave him a complex expression.
“You know that the Minister is less in charge than most people think.”

“But Draco won’t be that kind of Minister.” Harry cast a Tempus Charm. “Look, Hermione, I do have to hurry if I don’t want to miss the beginning of Draco’s speech.”

Hermione shook her head and said something else, but Harry had vanished into the tunnel. He knew her concerns, and he shared them, to a certain extent. He would never be as casual about leaving Hogwarts as he had been before Gorenson captured him.

But a Dark Lord who was caged up in his castle all the time was no good at all. He had to at least prove that he would come out to defend his people, the way he had when he attacked Darkest Signs.

The sooner he established that new personality he had been thinking of the other day after he interviewed Hortensia, the more he could balance his power and his indifference to a lot of affairs in the wizarding world that didn’t touch on his Court, the happier he would be.

He created the glamour for himself that he would use to blend into the crowd on the way down to the edge of the wards, and Apparated the moment he was beyond them. His body rang with soft excitement.

*the better a lover I’ll be, too.*

Draco took his hand out of the robe pocket and off the pebble that Harry had enchanted for him when he saw how sternly Rosenthal’s eyes were fastened on him. He had promised to be good, hadn’t he? And that meant not looking like he was dreamily staring into the air and ignoring the claims of the public on him.

He looked out over the vast crowd that had assembled around the edge of Diagon Alley, carefully out of the way of the shops’ doorways, but crowding into the front doors of restaurants that were happy to have the increased business. A lot of people had ice cream cones or sandwiches or glasses of pumpkin juice in their hands.

And for the first time since he had started making these speeches, Draco thought the majority weren’t reporters or Ministry employers. They were ordinary witches and wizards who wanted to see what he was all about, and hear him speak. The people who would elect him, maybe, if they decided to vote.

Draco looked from face to face, slowly. He couldn’t possibly look everyone there in the eye, but he was going to make a spirited attempt.

Some people waved at him, or smiled. Other people scowled, but Draco was going to do his best to ignore those. He would always have *some* detractors. Getting rid of them was as impossible as expecting all of Harry’s enemies to fall down dead, just because it would be convenient.

Besides, if he played his cards right, then he could use his enemies to make himself look good.

“You’re here today to see me speak,” he said. He had just caught sight of Weasley’s red hair and rolling eyes, and he addressed himself specifically to Weasley for a moment. “Not all of you are here for the same reason, but that doesn’t matter. You can still *listen* to me. And if you make a
response that shows you’ve listened, I might respect it, even if it opposes me.”

Weasley gave him a more considering look after that. Draco smiled. He had always done better with small audiences, one reason that his father had thought Draco’s decision to run for Minister was crazy. But he could make one person into a substitute for the larger audience, and he thought he would do that with Weasley right now. He might as well perform some service other than just representing the Dark Lord of Hogwarts at Draco’s speech.

“I want you to know that I understand your uneasiness about the Ministry. One day, you had what looked like a normal election, though perhaps with some more drama than usual. And then the incumbent Minister announced his retirement, the Ministry appointed a ‘council’ to work in his place, and there were Unspeakables running around as though they owned everything.”

A few other people were relaxing, responding to his informal tone. Weasley’s expression hadn’t really changed.

“But I can promise that I’ll bring an end to that,” said Draco. “I can make tomorrow look like today. And that’s something no other Minister can promise you.”

That caused a stir in the crowd that made Rosenthal tense, but Draco stayed calm without much effort. He didn’t think that kind of stir would precede a serious attempt to kill him.

“Why?” demanded a woman who probably was a reporter, just from the way she held her hands as if missing parchment and a quill, although she didn’t wear the official robes or insignia that would have marked her as affiliated with one of the papers. “Why do you think that you have this strength, when you’ve never showed it so far?” She folded her arms and looked around, as though she was trying to gather support, or maybe just approval.

“Because I’m flexible,” said Draco. That got some doubtful looks at his arms and ankles, which made him want to laugh. But he maintained his calm look and his silence, and in a few seconds, they went back to paying attention to his face. “I mean that I can work with people who might make enemies of other Ministerial candidates, or this council. I can even work with the Unspeakables. I don’t hold them responsible for what Gorenson did. I’d rather find ways to not tread on their territory, and learn how we can have a productive relationship in the future Ministry.”

There. That ought to help any spies for the Unspeakables in the crowd—and Draco was sure there were some—to make up their minds.

“Anyone could say that,” the reporter challenged him. “You still haven’t told us who you can work with that no one else could.”

Draco smiled. He really couldn’t have asked for a better opening. “The Dark Lord.”

That made a few people near the edges of the crowd start and scream, but really, they would have anyway. Most of the more reasonable ones were considering it, although with grimaces that said they didn’t like being indebted to Harry for anything, not even for leaving them alone. Weasley frowned.

“Why?” the reporter whispered. “What do you have on him?”

Draco spread his hands. “Not on him. Just the realization that he’s powerful and we need to learn to live with him, because challenging his power is suicidal. That’s a realization the Ministry has
never yet come to.”

“We have to protect our ideals and ways of life,” said a woman with blond hair who Draco thought was probably a scion of a family who donated to Hogwarts, although he couldn’t remember which one. “He’s threatening to destroy them.”

“Which ideal?” Draco asked, curious. “Which way of life? He certainly protected our traditions by keeping Hogwarts open, and the Ministry was proposing to shut it down. Did you know they didn’t have any date for when it would be open again? They just said it would happen some time in the future.” He shook his head sadly. “That’s sacrificing tradition for novelty, right there.”

The blond woman frowned some more. Weasley, of all people, was the one who spoke up. “I think she means the ideal of not living under a Dark Lord. That’s one that I’d find worth preserving.”

Draco thought he kept his face neutral enough for most people not to notice his impulse to glare at Weasley, but Weasley himself grinned. *What is he playing at?* Draco wondered.

Then he remembered that Harry had described Weasley as a great chess player, and wanted to groan. It was political chess, wasn’t it? It was this stupid impulse to put out a statement and see how Draco would respond to it.

If he hadn’t known Weasley was loyal to Harry, down to the bone, Draco might also have thought it was an attempt to trip Draco up and make him look stupid. But Weasley wouldn’t do that. He must think he was helping. In his way.

“No one has to live under him,” said Draco. “I will always maintain the independence of the rest of the wizarding world and the Ministry from him. If he tried to take over the office of the Minister or insisted on being compensated for the Unspeakables’ attacking him more than he has been, I would deny him. But I don’t think he wants that. I think he wants to be left alone, and for the people who have sworn to him to be left alone.”

He gave Weasley a glance this time that he hoped would inform Weasley that he was taking advantage of that protection, standing there in Diagon Alley without being attacked. Weasley’s grin only widened.

“So you’re talking about coexistence,” said the reporter who had accosted him before.

Draco focused back on her. “That would be a good word for it.”

“What if we don’t want to coexist with a Dark Lord?” The reporter stood up tall and straight, looking around for an army of followers that still seemed pretty nonexistent as far as Draco was concerned. “That was an ideal that people during the last war fought and died for!”

“And they fought to disprove blood purity, and to keep a Dark Lord from taking over the wizarding world,” Draco pointed out. He could feel his blood singing softly through his veins. This was the kind of political debate he liked, with someone who would lay their points out simply and thoroughly and let Draco demolish them in the same way. “This Dark Lord doesn’t want to take over our world. We can let him have Hogwarts and the people who want to live there.”

“What about the children who want to attend the school but don’t want to follow his lead?” The reporter struck a martyred pose. “Don’t they deserve an education, too?”
Draco shrugged. “As far as I know, Dark Lord Potter considers the students under his protection, but he doesn’t demand that they believe the same things as he does. He only demands that they refrain from attacking magical creatures and other members of his Court, the way he does of adult wizards in the world outside Hogwarts.”

“But what if they _want_ to attack magical creatures?”

“Then, yes, I would assume Lord Potter would say they should find an education elsewhere.”

“But for some wizards, those are among our cherished ideals!”

Draco was about to answer when he felt the pebble in his pocket growing steadily warmer, a sudden blazing star against his leg. He started to put a hand down towards it, wondering. Had Harry also enchanted it so that it would warn Draco when he was going too far in his claims? Draco couldn’t speak for Harry, after all, and perhaps the pebble was warning him against trying.

But instead, a shield appeared around him, composed of softly glowing flames. The same thing happened with Rosenthal, and Weasley, and a number of other people in the crowd who Draco knew had sworn to Harry.

Then Harry stepped out of nowhere to Draco’s side, his face utterly impersonal and his robes glittering with finery that Draco had never seen, including emeralds in the cuffs at his wrists.

“If you want to say that killing magical creatures is within your cherished traditions,” said Harry, his voice distant and empty, “then you may. If you _do_ it in my Court or against any of the creatures that have allied with me, then you will burn the way Darkest Signs did.” He gave them a wide smile. “Want a look?”

More fire curled away from him, although Draco stood close enough to realize that it was an illusion; there wasn’t even any heat. But it was impressive in the way it rose up like waves, and the gold and blue colors at its heart, and it made people back away from him, crying out.

Harry nodded as though he had fulfilled some contract with himself, eyes glinting. “Have a nice day.”

Then Harry vanished, and the shields of fire vanished, and Draco straightened up and his collar around his throat, clearing it gently.

“So. The Dark Lord doesn’t care what you talk about or even what you believe as long as you don’t attack his people. I believe that was what I was saying. And I find it a reasonable demand, and I think that I will be able to compel the Ministry to see it as a reasonable price for coexisting with the Dark Lord of Hogwarts. Does anyone have any more questions?”

There was a long pause. Then someone asked, “Is it true that you would restructure the Department of Mysteries to be less secretive? Someone was saying that you w-would, but I couldn’t figure out the purpose of it.”

Draco smiled, and answered. He wondered if that person was one of Rosenthal’s plants in the crowd; not even Draco knew who all of them were. At any rate, it reminded people that there were more issues in this election than who the Dark Lord of Hogwarts favored, or whether one could coexist with him.
Draco saw the speculative glances thrown at him. Most people had noticed the shield of fire. On the other hand, it had appeared on so many people there that one couldn’t say that Draco had been singled out as Harry’s only possible ally.

And Draco saw, too, the secretive smile on the face of a hunched-over man with brown beard and eyes near the edge of the crowd.

*You chose to time your intervention*, he thought, but he couldn’t muster any resentment at the thought. If that was Harry displaying his political instincts, newly-acquired or otherwise, it was about time.
“Did it go well?”

Hermione’s voice came from the office doorway, and Harry took his time looking up at her. He saw the way she tensed when he did, and snorted. “Draco is fine. Ron is fine. Everyone there is fine. I just appeared and made a dramatic statement when someone tried to say that killing magical creatures is a cherished wizarding tradition and I was being mean and unfair to act against that.”

Hermione’s mouth fell open a little. “What did you say to them?”

“They can say and believe whatever they like, but if they try to act against any of the magical creatures who are sheltering in my Court, then I’ll burn them.”

Harry took his time putting his feet up on his desk after that. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to encounter Hermione’s disapproval on the matter. It had seemed so simple when he was in the crowd listening to Draco’s speech, and then heard that woman speak about a nonsensical tradition of killing magical creatures, and a fire of his own had filled his head.

But he wasn’t sure Hermione would take a naked threat, even if covered with a little humor, the same way.

“Good.”

Harry sneaked a cautious peek at Hermione. She was standing in front of him with a vial full of what looked like ground-up jade—or a green potion, it could be that, too, Harry—instead of the usual papers. She had a vicious smile.

“People need to understand what’s going to happen if they interfere with beings who never hurt them,” said Hermione. “What Killian did to that foal was inhuman, not all the things they complain about.” She extended the vial. “Nott invented this, or brought it with her. She says she invented it a while ago. What do you think about using it as a defense on the wards?”

Harry lifted the potion, feeling a little stunned. I suppose all that’s needed to overcome some of Hermione’s moral scruples is an attack on non-humans. “Maybe I would say that it’s a good defense if I knew what it does.”

Hermione shook her head. “Oh, right. I forgot that I hadn’t told you. I was just picturing what some of their faces might have looked like.”

“I can give you a Pensieve memory.”

“Do. Later.” Hermione tapped the vial with a finger. “This is a poison that only remains in liquid form while it’s in a bottle, Nott said.” Harry opened his mouth to ask how that would be possible when she would be working with an open cauldron during the brewing process, but Hermione only shrugged. “The woman’s a Potions genius, ask her. But when the vial is broken, which you could spell to happen when someone you didn’t want to cross the wards crossed them, it turns into a gas.”

“What does it do then?” Harry wondered for a second if Snape had ever taught Hortensia, and if he would have liked the way that she’d decided to use her poisons in Harry’s service.
“It blinds everyone there, and starts making them vomit.” Hermione looked pensive for a second. “I told her that it sounded like what Muggle nerve gas does, and Nott says that she studied Muggle nerve gas when she was researching how to create the poison.”

Harry snorted, understanding Hermione’s expression perfectly. She might approve of more wizards and witches getting involved with Muggle culture, but she could have wished for a different way that they applied the knowledge. “It isn’t fatal?”

“No. The worst it can do is make them sick for a while. Well, Nott did say that it would be fatal if they breathed it for more than twenty minutes, but she doesn’t think that anyone would do that on purpose.”

Harry nodded. “And I can watch the wards, and if someone falls down and starts breathing it without knowing what they’re doing, then I can kick them beyond the wards and out of danger.”

“I don’t think they would try to cross them twice. At least, not at that place,” said Hermione, and in her voice was exhaustion, like his, with the stupid way that the Ministry was acting most of the time.

Harry nodded and touched the vial. “Does she need this back?”

“No. She’s making more, and she said that she could come up with as much as you need.”

“Good. Then I’ll come up with a way that I can link it to the wards, and everyone should be satisfied. Well, except the people who try to cross it. But watching them wheeze and vomit might be amusing.”

“Amusing, in a way,” said Hermione, and gave him another smile before she left the office.

Harry smiled and leaned back to study the vial. He felt his heart hammering in something that might be either fear or excitement, or perhaps just passion. He and Hermione were more on the same page now, he thought. They would take non-fatal measures when they could, but the people who attacked them now wouldn’t receive the same compassion they would offer to people who left them alone.

Or even tried to help them.

Harry’s mind turned to Draco, and he wondered idly what he was doing, but he decided against either sending him an owl or starting a firecall. Draco was probably still at his speech, and if he wasn’t, then Harry would get to see and speak to him soon enough.

*  

“Tell me you didn’t know that Lord Potter would appear today.”

Draco rolled his eyes and gently shrugged on a new robe, one that wasn’t as finely-made as the one he had worn at the speech. “The way I’ve already told you six times, and you haven’t believed me once?”

Rosenthal was silent. Draco turned back and found that she was playing her fingers along her wrist, as though remembering the yellow light Harry had encircled her hands with when she swore to
him. It was a precaution against her writing any truths that would betray him.

“It bothers me that he was suddenly there,” Rosenthal whispered. “It bothers me that he’s keeping such a short leash on you and such a great scrutiny on everything his opponents say that he could suddenly appear like that.”

“I know,” said Draco. “But I think he was only at the speech because he knew I was speaking. He wouldn’t have bothered to show up if I wasn’t there, and then that assertion would have to pass unchallenged.”

Rosenthal’s eyes focused on him. “He burned that apothecary, too. I think that he might be going insane, becoming a Dark Lord in the way that You-Know-Who was.”

“He burned the building, not the man himself,” Draco said patiently. He knew this was a misconception he would have to spend a lot of time correcting, probably. At least Harry had had some witnesses in Diagon Alley, and that meant there were people who would also spread the contrary story. “And if burning his shop and turning him over to the centaurs isn’t justified by his slaughter of a centaur foal, I don’t know what would justify it.”

He expected Rosenthal to respond immediately with a good political argument, the way she usually would, but instead, she got a deep, thoughtful look on her face, and didn’t answer. Draco finished changing into his robe, and flipped through his mental schedule. Ah, yes. That little “private tour” of the Ministry, where he would meet some of the people on the council who were willing to work with him.

“I think I can see the way the world he wants to make will work,” Rosenthal murmured. “Wizards can’t think that they’re superior to magical creatures anymore. They can’t take action against someone who’s announced that he’s a Dark Lord. If they send their children to Hogwarts, they at least have to accept that their children can’t follow all the beliefs they’ve taught them at the school. That will change things.”

“I’m sure it will for some people,” said Draco. “The same way that Harry being willing to work with the Ministry if they leave him alone will for some people.”

Rosenthal shook her head, her expression rapt. “I think this goes deeper,” she said. “Deeper than you might understand right now. You would probably know it better if you were older and had children. There’s this—strain—in some families, both pure-blood and Muggleborn, that they should be able to do whatever they like. They don’t respect Muggles, of course. They think they’re superior because they have magic. There’s still certain things they won’t do because it would expose us to Muggles and put us in danger, but they don’t fear them.”

“Right,” Draco murmured, wondering where she was going with this.

“And most people wouldn’t match into the Forbidden Forest and attempt to slaughter a centaur, but they’re used to the idea that they could if they wanted to.” Rosenthal lifted glowing eyes. “Now someone is telling them that isn’t true, and they’ll have to change a lot of the ways they think and do things, if they don’t want to suffer the consequences.”

“You think that would make an actual difference?” Draco could now see where she was going with this, but he had to admit it made him skeptical. He didn’t think it would count all that much if it was a prohibition on something that most people would never do.
“Think about it this way,” said Rosenthal. “Do you believe that woman who told you today that killing magical creatures is a tradition of her family has killed a lot of magical creatures in her lifetime?”

“Not unless they were doxies.”

Rosenthal smiled. “Right. And she probably doesn’t care that much about magical creatures one way or the other. She’s used to disregarding them and not caring about them. She was only trying to make a political point. But consider what it means to her to be told, directly, to her face, that attempts to slaughter magical creatures will result in death for her.”

“It sounds like a risky long-term strategy,” Draco had to concede, his heart sinking a little. “Is that what you’re trying to say? That you don’t think Harry can keep this up for long?”

“The opposite,” said Rosenthal, that real smile still on her face. “Because if most of the public is arrogant and convinced they should be able to slaughter magical creatures if they want to, they’re also afraid of Lord Potter and the way the newspapers and Ministry have portrayed him. Now they’ve come face-to-face with that power. They’ll have to change the way they act.”

Draco rubbed his forehead. “Maybe I’m being unusually stupid today, but that’s what you said before, and I still don’t see how this becomes some important political revolution.”

“They’ll change their minds,” said Rosenthal softly. “They couldn’t get through those shields Lord Potter put up today, even if they think they should have been able to. They can’t talk their way around his power, or offer him anything that would convince him to change his mind. They have to deal with him if they want Potions ingredients from the Forbidden Forest, or if they want to send their children to Hogwarts. There’s a new political power on the scene, one that isn’t the Ministry, and that can’t be bribed or tricked.”

Draco nodded. “All right. I see it more clearly, now, but I think you might still be overestimating the impact of Harry’s little drama today.”

Rosenthal snorted, something else she almost never did. “I think it see more clearly than you do even now. We live with constraints. The Statute of Secrecy, the limited number of magical people and pure-blood families, the unavailability of some ingredients and spells that would make our lives easier because they’re expensive or Dark Arts or just don’t exist. This is another constraint we’ll adapt to. And just like some wizards started to consider Muggles worthy of respect when they had no choice but to live with them, I think some wizards will start to think better of magical creatures.”

Draco caught on this time. “They’ll do it because the alternative is admitting that they’re scared.”

Rosenthal smiled. “Right. I’m not saying that everyone is going to make the change. But eventually? Yes, I think we’ll see a more relaxed attitude towards other beings, and it’ll be easier for you to make some legislative changes. It’ll take time. It’ll take campaigning and laws and probably bribes on your part, and Lord Potter accepting some more people into his Court and showing that the standard of living really isn’t lower there. But it will come.”

“You really should be the one running for Minister, not me.”

Rosenthal waved a hand. “I would lose my patience too easily with people who looked to me for direct orders, rather than being able to manipulate them from behind the scenes.”
That made Draco wonder exactly how much she enjoyed manipulating him, but he didn’t get a chance to ask before Rosenthal leaned forwards briskly. “So. I suggest that you start thinking about that meeting at the Ministry. How many people are you going to see?”

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“Lord Potter. We have a report.”

Harry had come awake with difficulty, to the point that Hermione practically had to shake his shoulder blade apart and shout in his ear before he sat up, and now he wanted to rub his eyes and tell Niamh to tell him later. But she had come through a lot to enter the castle at midnight, and he nodded and sat up. “All right. What did Killian tell you?”

“That he had one of those artifacts like the one I gave you.” Niamh looked at the drawer in Harry’s desk that still held the piece of golden crystal, and he wondered if she could sense it. “He claimed not to know who gave it to him at first, but then he broke down and admitted it was an Unspeakable. He still did not know the woman’s name.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Harry muttered, grimly. So there was his proof that these artifacts were originating in the Department of Mysteries, and he doubted that he would get any more specific answer. “Did he say how they could be stopped?”

“No.” Niamh stamped one hoof down. “I doubt that he knows himself. He did say something about our enemies’ future plans, however.”

“Did he?” Harry promptly sat up. This was interesting to him, and possibly relevant. “How could he know that, if he was just a dupe of the Unspeakables?”

“They mentioned something in their conversations in front of him, when he questioned whether he would be safe using the crystal. They wanted to reassure him that they were giving the crystals to many people, I believe, although Killian did not want to phrase it that way.” Niamh gave a satisfied little twitch of her flanks, and Harry had no trouble believing that Killian would have trouble phrasing anything that way right now, or any other way. “They said that they would soon have crystals that could travel through water.”

Harry turned and stared out his office window towards the lake, which he could sense but not see with the darkness that had closed around Hogwarts. “The merfolk,” he whispered. He had made a bargain with them, too, although it didn’t seem to be as widely known to the public as his bargain with the centaurs was.

“That is what I thought,” said Niamh, though in the infuriating way of centaurs, she didn’t sound as if she had much concern about the merfolk. “Do you wish to question him yourself? He is still sane enough for that.”

Harry shuddered a little, though it was more because he was imagining what he might do to Killian than because of what he thought the centaurs had done. “No. I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to see him. Do go on asking him questions, though. And if you feel like delivering him to me when you’re done…”

“If he is still alive,” said Niamh, and bowed her head, and left.
Harry’s hands closed down slowly on the windowsill when she was gone. He knew that his breathing was spinning out of control, and there was an ache in the center of his soul where Persephone had been and was no more. She would have landed on his shoulder and rested her beak against him if she was in her sweet, sick mood; she would have screamed at him and distracted him from brooding if she wasn’t.

The attack planned on the lake might never come now. The Unspeakables had to be aware of what had happened to Killian. They might think he would tell Harry of their plans, and change them accordingly.

But what happened if they had given crystals that could bypass his wards to other people? And what happened if those people believed some new rumor about the scales or skin or eyes of merpeople being beneficial to potions?

This was a multi-pronged attack that would never be countered by the kind of fear that Harry was hoping to raise in people who proclaimed that it was part of their traditions to kill magical creatures. This was the kind of danger that would be ended only when he had managed to figure out how the artifacts worked, and counter them.

*Hopefully with some kind of poison that Hortensia’s invented.*

Harry walked grimly back to his desk and opened the drawer that held the golden crystal prisoner. He had some research to do.
Harry flipped the pouch on his belt that held the golden crystalline object. He had found that containing it in a pouch of soft moleskin like the one that had supposedly been found on the first wizard intruding into the centaur part of the Forbidden Forest would stop its beams from reaching for his magic.

He stood outside next to the lake, ignoring the way that the waters lapped softly on the shore at his feet. He had set up several wards around him, working with the will of Hogwarts to protect the grounds. He wanted no one, human or otherwise, to stumble into him as he worked on the crystal.

He picked up the pouch and held it in front of him for a second. He needed to have it out to work with, but he was reluctant to expose the magic of Hogwarts to a possible draining effect.

Well, he’d done impossible things before, hadn’t he, like conjured Persephone out of nothing and then broken her magic down and driven it back into Hogwarts? Harry bared his teeth and raised his left hand.

The magic he called to this time came from deep down in the earth, deeper than the bond he had with Hogwarts, deeper than anything he had called on before. He reached down to it, and it stirred and rose for him, yawning with an enormous sound on the way. Harry closed his eyes.

His hope was that magic that came from the heart of the earth itself was going to be more resistant to the golden crystal than wizarding magic—which all the magic of Hogwarts was, even if it came from the Founders and not Harry.

The ground in front of him stirred. Harry moved his hand to the side so that the rising power wouldn’t disrupt the lake too much. That would be a good beginning to his alliance with the merfolk.

The dirt heaved and mounded up. Harry blinked into the face of what looked like a swaying worm, or a dragon. Even as he looked at it, it formed itself, maybe in response to the images in his mind, so that it had long, curling horns and a blunt brown snout like a muzzle, with impressions along the sides of the muzzle like teeth. It had dark hollows in the sides of the face for eyes.

Harry swallowed and opened the pouch.

The golden crystal vibrated in his hand as he held it out. Harry stared down at it, and saw the same thing he had seen once before, the reaching rays from the sides of the strange shape. They aimed at his magic, and the wards he had set up, and the edges of the Hogwarts grounds where his power secured the protection of his Court, and the lake where the magic of the merfolk lingered.

But they didn’t reach towards the rearing earth-worm in front of Harry.

Harry grinned savagely, and closed his hands around the crystal. It was an uncomfortable sensation, as the spikes cut into him and sucked at his skin, drawing off the power from his core. But that also brought him into intimate contact with it, and made it a lot easier to realize what it was doing.

It’s a fucking ritual.
It was. Harry could see the streaks of lightning darting across the surface of the crystal, something he would never have noticed if he were simply trying to watch it from a distance, or in the moments before slamming his desk drawer shut. The lightning formed runes, and surrounded the body and “limbs” of the crystal at a distance from the center. Harry couldn’t see the whole crystal at once, but he knew that the runes would probably form a circle.

Every time a wizard used the crystal, they basically enacted a ritual that took place entirely inside the thing. Or maybe the open air gave the ritual circle embedded in the crystal its power. Either way, it was no wonder that these things were so powerful. Ritual magic, as Harry had reason to know, could do things that most ordinary spells never could.

Harry started as he felt his hands grow cold, and realized that he could no longer feel the crystal he was touching. It was slick with his blood, and the color was changing from gold to pink and flushed.

Harry threw the golden crystal straight at the earthworm, which had continued to watch him with those hollow black eyes, unmoving.

The worm’s maw gaped, and it swallowed the crystal without a blink and without a pause. Then, slowly, it writhed back into the earth, and was gone. It had helped him as much as it was going to. It would take the crystal back into the heart of the rock and stone, and probably crush it there.

Harry gasped and sank to his knees. His heart was laboring. Draining one’s magic wasn’t pleasant.

He knelt there until he knew that he could stand up and walk to the edge of the lake without falling over. Then he bathed his hands in the water, scrubbing until even the feeling of the crystal’s slick coolness was gone.

“Lord Potter.”

That was a merwoman, her head poking out from the surface. Harry managed to stop himself from jerking and splashing her, but it was a near thing. He hadn’t felt her swimming near at all, despite his connection to Hogwarts and the lake. The crystal had depleted his magical core more than he’d thought it had.

“Yes,” he said, nodding to her and waiting for the weakness in his knees to pass.

“Why did you call up such a potent force so near the lake?” He hadn’t met this particular merwoman before, and he wondered why, when she was obviously proficient with English in a way not many of them were. She folded her arms and stared at him. “That is not the act of an ally.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, and at least his voice was calm and confident. Either from the lake or from the lack of constant pulling on his core, he felt a little stronger. “I was dealing with a weapon that some of my enemies had invented to sneak through my wards. They had done it at least twice without me knowing. I needed the earth-magic to contain it, and my own magic to see how the object worked. I forgot that you would be able to feel the earth shifting around below the water.”

The merwoman studied him some more. Harry endured the scrutiny, wondering what he would do if she didn’t believe him and summoned some other merfolk to combat him. He didn’t think he could resist too many in this state, and he didn’t want to hurt them, anyway.
The merwoman finally snorted and flipped her tail at him. “You should be more careful,” she said in that resonant voice, drifting away from shore and more towards the middle of the lake. “Next time, we might not accept that apology.”

“I know,” Harry tried his best to look repentant. He must have looked enough like that for her to believe him, because she dived.

Harry waited, shivering, beside the lake, but she didn’t surface again. And he had enough strength now to step back and ask Hogwarts to take him to the castle. It made the castle hesitate a few seconds, to decide what to do in the absence of further instructions, but then it formed a long roll of earth beneath his feet that looked sort of like a train, and bore him off through the night towards the entrance.

Harry sighed and let his body relax into the dirt. He knew the train would take him through the walls of Hogwarts, too, and up to his office, and he would spend as much time as he needed to relaxing and recovering in its safety.

He knew how to combat the crystals now, and keep all the people—magical creatures included—safe within his Court. That was worth the risk he had taken confronting the ritual hidden inside the golden crystal.

*

“Thank you for coming.”

Lucy Lenneal had taken charge of Draco the moment he arrived at the Ministry, and she was gliding ahead of him now, taking him through corridors he had never seen before. Draco wasn’t entirely surprised to discover that there were departments within departments here, parts of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement that the Aurors didn’t know about, others secret from the Hit Wizards, and ones that the Minister didn’t know existed. He was just glad that he had taken the precaution of making friends with some of the people who knew those secrets, so he wouldn’t be taken by surprise when he became Minister.

That didn’t mean Lenneal would show him all the secrets she held, any more than the others would. But at least he would know that this underlayer of conspiracy existed, and that might teach him more about where to look. Someone who did know that secret passages existed in Hogwarts would have more advantages than someone who didn’t, even if they didn’t know them all individually.

Lenneal halted in front of a door made of a wood that Draco identified, after a moment of struggle, as white oak. There was a symbol in the middle of it that looked like an upside-down silver M. Lenneal knocked three times, each time on a different part of the M.

There was a pause that felt lengthy and embarrassed to Draco, and then the door dissolved like mist. Draco raised his eyebrows. He knew that particular ward, but it was complex and difficult.

“I trust that I’ll be impressed with the caliber of your companions, if one of them made that ward,” he murmured, and followed Lenneal inside.

Lenneal’s sudden silence made Draco sure that the companion was in this room. He drew his cloak off and nodded to everyone in sight, faintly smiling.
There were numerous men and women in this room, more than he had expected. It seemed that the Ministry’s move to consolidate power in a council had alienated some people who had been willing to put up with Minister Tillipop. And there was a tall, strong man standing at the head of the circular table in the room who made Draco pause in the middle of the remark he was about to make.

“Really,” he said. “I didn’t expect to see you here, Mr. Diggory.”

“Call me Amos.” Diggory looked Draco directly in the eye, the way that his son Cedric once had. “And I know. But there are things we have to talk about, and I want someone sensible to discuss them with.”

After considering that for a second, Draco nodded and handed his cloak over to the diaphanous, ghost-like presence that had obviously replaced a house-elf. It was true that it wouldn’t be wise to have house-elves present in this meeting. They might blurt out something that someone didn’t want, and most house-elves in the Ministry had multiple owners and thus multiple loyalties.

“So.” Diggory looked around the room and collected the others with his eyes. Some of those present drifted slowly in the direction of the table, though, Draco noted. The alliance was uneasy, like most coalitions made between pure-bloods and others in the Ministry. “You will become the Minister we want?”

“That depends on your desires,” said Draco, and took the wide oaken chair that Lenneal had indicated for him.

“A political answer.” Diggory—or Amos, as Draco supposed he should call him even in his head so that he didn’t get tripped up—stared at him intensely. “But what we want at the moment is a strong Minister. That’s what everyone wants. That’s what everyone needs.”

Draco allowed one eyebrow to lift. “I thought some people enjoyed not having a strong Minister. It certainly allowed you to get away with things during Tillipop’s reign more easily.”

“When you speak of getting away,” Amos began.

Draco forced himself to dip his head in response. “Forgive me, that was badly-phrased. What I meant was that you had achieved your goals more easily with a Minister like Tillipop, I thought.” There. He didn’t think even Rosenthal could have asked him to be more diplomatic. “Why would you want one who would pry into your affairs?”

Glances flew around the table. Draco waited, and Amos finally seemed to realize that everyone had been silently electing him spokesperson. He sighed and faced Draco again. “The Ministry is faltering for lack of a strong Minister. No one ordinary trusts us anymore. The goblins send us requests to see the Minister on a daily basis, and when we tell them that we have a council now, they say that they’ve always dealt with the Minister and consider it essential that we have one. Foreign wizards don’t really want to deal with the council, either. Basically, Mr. Malfoy, the wizarding world is resistant to change, and we didn’t know how resistant when we thought we could change things.”

“Well, that can’t be completely true,” Draco said, frowning a little, and inwardly enjoying himself hugely. “I’m a change from Minister Tillipop, even a change in that no Malfoy has ever been Minister, and yet you assume people will vote for me.”
Amos leaned forwards. “You’ll allow us the illusion of continuity while we make the changes that we need to in the background.”

Draco smiled slowly. “Now, I think, we have a bargain that we can understand. As long as you realize that I want the power I can claim to be more than illusory.”

“All we require is that you put up a good front, and deal with people like the goblins and the ambassadors who care dearly about our having a Minister, and you can do whatever you want other than that.”

Some of the people at the table frowned, and Draco set his fingers together. “Whether or not they wanted you to speak for them, Amos, it’s clear that not everyone here agrees it’s that simple.”

“Then we need to hammer out something more complicated,” said Amos, and gestured insistently. “I’m ready to do that right now.”

“If you are,” Draco said, and sat up more firmly, “then of course I am.”

* *

It was nearly eleven the next morning before Harry’s fireplace flared and Draco tumbled through it. He looked as though he was sleepwalking, an impression that his rapidly blinking eyes and deep circles under them didn’t help.

“What’s wrong?” Harry was across the room to catch him before he could fall, wrapping his arms firmly around Draco’s waist and assisting him into the chair behind the desk. He considered a second, then snapped his fingers. Hogwarts began to bring a more cushioned chair up from a lower classroom that no one used anymore. Harry would normally have tried to conjure or Transfigure one, but his magic was still a little shaky.

“I was negotiating most of the night, that’s all.” Draco’s mouth opened in a gigantic yawn, and he peered at Harry over his own lips. “You think you’re the only one who can assemble a circle of diverse allies? Well, you aren’t.”

Harry snorted in both amusement and relief, and settled on the desk next to Draco. “These are allies in the Ministry?”

Draco nodded and tried to respond, but another yawn interrupted him. By that time, the chair had arrived. Harry helped him into it, and Draco leaned his head back against the cushions with a luxurious sigh. “Most of the senior Aurors, and some other people who work in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Other Departments, too, and the important undersecretaries in them, and some people who fulfill the role that my father used to and donate large political sums.” He paused delicately. “I even got someone I think was an Unspeakable, though I can’t promise the whole Department of Mysteries will follow her decrees.”

“That’s wonderful, Draco.” Harry moved behind him so that he could massage his shoulders. “You didn’t have to come over here right away, though. You know that? You could have slept in, enough not to stumble as you came through the fireplace.”

Draco snorted like he was going to snore, but no such luck. “I did not stumble.”

“You didn’t see yourself from the outside. I’m happy for what you accomplished, but you look like
shit.”

Draco lifted his head and turned it to glare. Harry expected him to talk some more about how he didn’t look like shit and he was utterly fine and Harry was the one who liked to worry without it meaning anything.

But what he said was, “Speaking of. I just noticed that your aura is less strong than it usually is. What have you been doing to yourself?”

Shit.
“I didn’t really do anything that was too bad.”

Draco fought the drag of his eyelids and his own exhaustion, and sat up, shaking his head. “That means ‘please don’t be angry at me, Draco.’ It doesn’t mean that what you were doing wasn’t actually dangerous.”

Harry froze and glared at him. Draco glared back. Yes, he could feel the fatigue in his limbs. That didn’t matter. What mattered was making it clear to Harry that he had done something fucking stupid and he should be glad that Draco wasn’t in the right state of mind or mood to shake it out of him.

Harry finally seemed to relent, and glanced away with a sigh. “I decided to surround that golden crystal with enough barriers to see what really happened when it sucked on my magic. I found out that it was a ritual. There are little runes of light embedded in the crystal that form a circle. And you know that ritual circles are always more powerful than ordinary spells. I’m not surprised that nothing we tried contained it, now.”

“What kind of barriers did you raise?” Draco made sure that his voice was quiet, even, gentle. He could yell at Harry later. There might be more information to know, and Harry would get sulky and retreat with too much yelling.

Harry brightened. “Wards around me, and then power based on the bond that I have with Hogwarts. Hogwarts was what took care of me after the crystal mostly drained my core,” he added, as if he thought that would reassure Draco. “It carried me back to the castle and made sure that I slept.”

Draco breathed through his nose. It would keep him from exploding. “Your core was drained? What prevented you from draining it completely?”

“I called up magic from the heart of the earth under Hogwarts,” said Harry simply. “That’s older than wizarding magic, you know. It blocked the crystal and proved to me that there’s at least one of kind of power that the ritual can’t affect. I’m not surprised. The Unspeakables who probably invented this were always more interested in artifacts than natural sources of magic.”

“You still did an unspeakably dangerous thing,” Draco whispered.

“Is that a pun?”

Draco bit his lips, savagely, so he wouldn’t yell. He didn’t think he would really get anywhere with Harry if he yelled. “Okay,” he said. “So you did something where you didn’t know all the consequences, and you’re trying to tell me it was okay because—what? You had something to walk you back to your office afterwards?” Picturing Harry doing that while Draco was in a meeting with potential allies that was only politically dangerous made him sick. Like he should have been there.

He’s still an adult, and a Dark Lord. I can’t know what kind of shit he’s going to pull all the time, and it’s not my place to police it.
Harry looked shiftily away from him, then sighed and nodded when Draco kept staring at him.
“And because the earth-magic manifested in the form of a dragon, and swallowed the crystal when I thought I’d learned as much as I could from it. So there’s a sign that it can stop and contain and crush the crystals, too. We finally have a weapon we can use against them.” He looked at Draco with a widening of his eyes that Draco recognized, with a faint shock, as pleading. “Isn’t it worth it, if I learn enough to defeat the crystal?”

“Nothing is worth the loss of you,” said Draco, which was so simple and so straightforward he didn’t know why Harry hadn’t reasoned it out for himself.

“I wasn’t going to die. That power that makes me into a responsible Dark Lord also makes me someone who can—”

“Who can take risks, sure, and survive things that other people couldn’t,” said Draco, and he thought some of the building fury leaked through this time, because Harry looked startled. “It doesn’t mean that it’s fun for you to get hurt, or for people to watch you get hurt!”

Harry held still, and then reached out and smoothed one hand down the side of Draco’s face and onto his shoulder. Draco eyed him narrowly. He thought that Harry’s aura might have strengthened in the last few minutes, although it was hard to be sure.

“Hey,” Harry said softly. “You brought up a point I hadn’t considered. I thought—well, I knew I wouldn’t die or get permanently harmed, and I thought it was worth it to find out what was going on with the crystal. But next time, I might consider other methods of addressing the problem, at least.” He reached out, smiling, and punched Draco in the shoulder. “Thanks for making me consider that.”

Draco studied him again. Yes, the aura had come back, muted but stronger than it had been when he’d stepped into the room. Perhaps that meant that Harry talking about his magical core being drained was a bit of an exaggeration.

“How can you summon up the earth-power to destroy all the crystals that might come close to the wards, though?” he asked, deciding that he would take this as the peace offering it probably was. “I thought the earth-power would do what it wanted to do, and you couldn’t really control it.”

“That’s a good point,” Harry said in a solemn way that made Draco sure he already had an answer and had thought of this. “I’m not going to rely on the earth-power. I only wanted to be sure that there was something that could resist the crystal, that it wasn’t all-powerful, and Hogwarts wouldn’t be damaged if the crystal I had got out of control.” He hopped up on the edge of the desk, making Draco miss the warmth of his stroking hand right away. “But in the meantime, I’m going to work out ways to disrupt the ritual in the crystal, instead of working out how to block it altogether. If I make it so that that ritual couldn’t take place on Hogwarts grounds…”

“You’ll have to tell me about how you’re going to do that,” Draco murmured. Harry stopped, his head cocked to the side like a rabbit listening for the dive of a hawk. “Later. After you make up for frightening me.”

Harry turned around, hands planted on his desk. “And what way can I make up for that? Or are there multiple ways?”

“Multiple ways.” Draco stretched languidly in his chair, glad now that the cushioned back would prop his head up and show off the length of his neck. Sure enough, Harry’s stare locked onto it,
and it was a hungry stare. Draco hid his smile by looking at Harry in turn. “You could use your mouth on me, for instance. Or your hands. Or your body. Or your cock.”

“I like the sound of that last one,” Harry whispered, and came towards him.

*

Making love to Draco was a little different when Harry didn’t have the magic to simply conjure a bed, but on the other hand, he still had his bond with Hogwarts.

As he rolled a laughing Draco to the floor, the stones softened under them, and became the sort of mattress that could make them both bounce almost off it. Harry knelt down and waved a hand over Draco’s clothes, and small hands came swarming out of the mattress and plucked them off.

Draco’s eyes widened, and he looked up at Harry as if he had never seen him before. “Even with your aura weakened, you can still do so much,” he whispered.

Harry realized he had been tense, and relaxed a little. He had thought the hands might hurt Draco or frighten him. But it wasn’t the case, and Draco was already reaching up and entwining impatient arms around Harry’s neck, pulling him down so that they lay groin-to-groin, chest-to-chest, body-to-body.

Harry groaned and took off his own clothes by making the little hands rise up and pull at him. The way he temporarily lost sight of Draco as his shirt was dragged over his head was the most agonizing thing he’d experienced in days. He promptly lowered his head and sucked at the side of Draco’s neck.

Draco reached up and held him there. What little Harry could see of his face from the corner of his eye looked like he had his mouth parted in idiotic bliss.

Harry lapped one more time at the skin of Draco’s neck, which was slick and salty and warmer than he had thought skin could be, and then sat up and reached for the lube that was in a drawer of the desk. It made Draco snort and then shiver to be exposed to the cold air, but Harry couldn’t help that. He carefully coated himself with the gleaming, sticky liquid, and then reached down and slid his fingers into Draco’s arse.

Draco opened his legs. “I just want you in me,” he whispered. “Go ahead and skip the foreplay.”

Harry still teased Draco with a few sharp motions of his fingers, because he liked the foreplay, but he put aside both lube and teasing when he saw the panting, serious expression on Draco’s face. He slid slowly inside, and grunted and groaned like a mad thing when the heat he had forgotten enwrapped him. He always forgot it. There was no remembering an experience like this, not perfectly.

Draco reached up and kissed him fiercely, then wrapped his legs around Harry’s waist. Harry began to rock, his eyes on Draco’s all the while. Draco had the same silly expression of bliss, and he was groaning a little, rolling his hips as though that could make Harry go faster.

Well, what Draco wanted, Draco should have, Harry considered. So he went faster, and the little hum in Draco’s throat began to break out in shouted growls of his own.

Harry adjusted the pace of his thrusts when he realized that he would probably come before Draco
did. He didn’t want that. He wanted to linger, to watch Draco’s expression and the way his hands groped around at the edges of the mattress as though he didn’t really know what to do with them, to listen to the silly squeaking noises that their bodies made together.

Draco caught his breath with what sounded like an enormous gasp, and turned his head to demand, “Who said that you could go slower?”

Harry grinned and bent down, kissing Draco hard enough this time to make their lips hurt, and quickened his thrusts again. Maybe there could be too much of a good thing.

Or maybe it would be just as much fun to watch Draco fall apart as it was to take him there.

Draco groaned his way through his orgasm, all right, neck arched and shaking, legs spread as though he was trying to get even more of Harry’s cock inside his body. When he fell limp, it was to lie there and tremble, head turned to the side and tongue dangling out.

“I love you,” Harry breathed, because he did, he loved Draco more at the moment than he ever had.

Draco squeezed down in response. Harry got the point, and came with a sharp hiss that Draco was welcome to think was Parseltongue if he wanted. He excited Harry enough that he was wordless except for hisses anyway. Harry crashed down on top of Draco and did some more panting, and heard more smug humming from Draco in return.

“I want to know that you’re not going to do that with anyone else,” Draco whispered against his throat. “I know that you want me and you’re faithful, but what if something happens to split us apart? Some serious political conflict?”

Harry blinked slowly, recalling his thoughts from the mists of physical pleasure to reality. “You want me to swear that I’m not going to do that with anyone else?”

“Yes.” And Draco’s arms and legs grew even heavier, as if he would just hold Harry here on the mattress with him until he agreed.

Harry reached up and stroked the side of Draco’s neck, where his mark still was. “Even if that would mean I’d have to stay celibate? You realize that that’s a bit of an unreasonable request, don’t you?”

“Yes. And yes.”

Draco’s eyes were clear, not still hazed in the way that would have made Harry certain Draco didn’t really know what he was asking. And he went on looking until Harry dipped his head in a slow nod.

“I can’t promise that I’ll always be in love with you,” Harry whispered. “Although right now it feels like I will.” Draco still waited, and Harry knew it wasn’t good enough. “But I can promise that I would never do anything like this with someone else. There’s no one else it could ever be like this with.”

Draco spent some time considering that. Harry wanted to ask why he had desired that promise from Harry in the first place, or if he would make a promise like it, but this didn’t seem to be the time.
“Fine,” said Draco at last. “That’s good to know. Because there are lots of people who would want to be with the Dark Lord of Hogwarts, you realize?”

Harry snorted. “You have too much on your mind if you really think that. There are plenty of people who would be too frightened of me to ever consider being with me, no matter how many personal advantages it gives them.”

“No if they knew what kind of lover and person you really were.” Harry opened his mouth to answer back, but Draco went on, speaking insistently over him. “No, I mean it. I don’t want someone else to steal into your heart and find my place there. Not ever.”

And that, Harry reckoned, was what really mattered to Draco, more than Harry making love to someone else or using Hogwarts and his magic to do it. He bent down until his mouth was next to Draco’s ear.

“I promise,” he whispered. “There’s no one else who will ever hold the place in my heart that you do, and I won’t go looking for someone who will. It’s you or no one. You’re the only one who gets to see this side of me.”

Draco studied his face until some tipping point that Harry didn’t understand was reached, and then he kissed Harry soundly. Harry went with the kiss, liking it, whether or not he always understood Draco’s impulses.

But hey, Draco had come near to losing Harry, as he saw it, when Harry confronted that golden crystal. Maybe it was only logical for him to want a promise that would keep a part of Harry safe.

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Draco lay still with his eyes closed until he heard Harry’s breathing smooth and slow. Then he rolled over and looked at him. Harry was ordinary in sleep, at least, if he wasn’t ordinary any other time, his head hanging to the side and his mouth open a little as though he was sucking at something invisible.

* I wish it was my cock.*

Draco sighed. He was too tired even to stir to hardness at that. He laid his head in the middle of Harry’s chest and closed his eyes.

He supposed that it hadn’t been the best time to demand that Harry remain forever devoted to him, but the idea had come down and struck him like the sight of the ritual in the golden crystal must have struck Harry, and he hadn’t been able to dismiss it. So he had asked, and the words had come out of his mouth, and Harry had promised.

Had made the only promise that mattered, in the end. Draco knew that Harry might have other lovers if they ended their days not together; it might be politically necessary for Draco to pretend that he wasn’t interested in Harry even if the truth of their relationship came out. There were already some people who believed that Harry had another lover, in the form of the man Draco had pretended to be under a glamour.

In so many ways, Harry was beyond Draco. More powerful, more invulnerable, not dependent on the good will of people in the Ministry, less inclined to be political, more courageous, with closer friends. Draco wanted at least one hold on him, one thing that would make their relationship closer
and show that Harry was at least inclined to lean on Draco in private.

Harry rolled nearer, his mouth parting and a gabble of nonsense words flowing out. Draco rolled his eyes and gathered him in, awkwardly patting the back of Harry’s neck when he snorted and snuffled and cuddled closer.

“In the end, it’s not really about power,” he whispered into Harry’s ear. “I know that. It’s just hard enough to remember sometimes that I need extra help.”

Harry whuffed again and rolled fully on top of him. Draco smiled. It was hard not to feel loved when Harry was doing that.

And so he finally let his eyes close and his body relax in the way that he hadn’t been able to do before. The flashes of uncertainty or even wishing that he hadn’t become close to Harry were only momentary. This was the forever.
The Banned Ritual

Rosenthal pulled at the golden chain that dangled down the front of Draco's chest, under his robes. "You realize that they'll be wild to know what this means? That a lot of the questions you receive will focus on that?"

"You mean that the questions you want to ask focus on that." Draco stepped back from the mirror and studied himself critically. He had to admit that the royal blue robes weren't ones he would have chosen, but they were dramatic, contrasting with the golden chain and making his hair stand out like a pale flame. He had asked Rosenthal for dramatic, after all.

"I can admit the possibility of both being true, which you're unlikely to." Rosenthal circled him slowly. "I would feel better if you told me what you were planning."

Draco raised an eyebrow at her reflection. "I can see that you would. You're not usually this unsubtle."

"You say this is the stroke that could guarantee your election, and you expect me not to be curious?"

Softening, Draco glanced at her. "I think my election is guaranteed already. What I can do is guarantee a certain relationship between the Ministry and Harry."

"And you won't tell me what it is."

"I want you to be as surprised as everyone else." Draco touched the chain one more time, and more specifically the clasp that fastened it to the top of the hidden vial, then turned towards the door. "Let's go."

*

Hermione sighed and handed over a pile of books taller than her head. "I'm sorry, Harry. I can't find anything in there about a way to prevent a ritual from being performed on Hogwarts grounds."

Harry glanced at Lucy Lenneal, who hesitated. "I know a way to protect powerful places like Hogwarts from outside interference, but it takes months. I don't think you have that."

"I know a way."

Harry turned to Hortenisa Nott, who had joined them in his office when he invited the various people living in Hogwarts to come to him if they had any idea for banning a ritual from being performed on the entire grounds. Hortensia hadn’t said anything so far, and frankly Harry hadn’t expected her to. Her expertise in poisons would lead to some good physical defenses, but there was no way for her to extend that to rituals, unless she offered to poison anyone leading a ritual at Hogwarts. And Harry or his Veela or werewolf or merfolk or centaur guests might want to do that sometimes.

“What is it?” Harry asked, when he realized that Hortensia was watching him unblinkingly and apparently awaiting permission to speak. She did make his flesh creep sometimes.
“Anything can be poisoned,” said Hortensia. “That was one thing I was taught, and I hold it as an article of faith. That should include ideas, concepts, ghosts, the air itself. It should include rituals.”

“You can’t poison an abstract concept,” Hermione started. Harry recognized one of those debating tones that meant Hermione could sit there and happily argue it for years, and hastily intervened.

“I think she’s right, Hortensia,” he said. “I mean, I certainly never heard of anyone trying to poison any of those things. Or maybe the air, but they just meant poisoning it so that other people would breathe it in.”

“I mean poisoning it,” said Hortensia peacefully, “so that it would cease to exist. And I spent many years thinking of, and sometimes creating, potions that would do harm to targets other people find strange.” Her politely bland face said that she thought they were the strange ones, for not pursuing all available lines of research. “I know how to poison a ritual.”

“Even one that takes place inside a golden crystal?” Harry demanded. “Wouldn’t you have to smear the potion directly on each crystal in that case? And we can’t do that because we don’t know when they’re coming through the wards.”

Hortensia folded her hands in her lap. “It presents an unusual challenge, and will demand a modification of my original design. But yes, I have thought of a way to handle even that.”

“Then tell us,” said Hermione. Her leg was bouncing off the corner of her seat.

Hortensia still waited until Harry made an encouraging little go-ahead motion with one hand, and then looked off into the distance as if she was contemplating eternity. “A ritual is made of will, ultimately. It may use a circle of blood or salt, the bark of an ash tree or a scattering of cinnabar, but it is human will that raises the power around the circle or invests the ash bark with symbolic effect or says that because cinnabar is a form of quicksilver, it may be used with immediately deadly effect. To poison a ritual, poison the will.

“To poison the will might not sound much less difficult than to poison the ritual itself. But the will is only a portion of the human being, like the magical core or the mind. They are not physical, either. They are the sum of the power or the thoughts or the motions that make them up.”

Hortensia sounded as if she was reciting from a book, but in a creepier way than Hermione, her eyes focused far away. Harry raised an eyebrow at Hermione, but she only shook her head and frowned. If this was in a book, it wasn’t one she was familiar with, and that alone was enough to make Harry listen to Hortensia with more interest.

“Will can be destroyed, by drugs or the Imperius Curse or subtle poison or simply another will. So I created a poison that is its opposite—another will itself, one that wishes to neutralize the buildup of willpower when it encounters it.” Hortensia was speaking more normally now, her eyes fastened on Harry. “It will be a tricky matter to modify it so that it seeks the buildup of willpower inside a crystal rather than the open air or inside a chamber, but I know the theory. I will do it.”

“And how soon do you think you can have it ready?” Although Harry didn’t know what Lenneal’s method was and thought he might have been able to do something that would take other people months in a shorter amount of time, she was right about one thing. They couldn’t wait for long.

“In a few days,” said Hortensia, and looked seriously at him. “If you need to do something else,
then I will develop the poison anyway. It is something that I want to exist.”

Harry concealed a shudder. Perhaps it was the intense focus that made being around Hortensia so disturbing. “Well. Thank you. Go ahead and make it. I don’t think we’ll find a better defense.”

Hortensia nodded and stood up, wandering out of his office. That left Hermione and Lenneal to exchange glances before Lenneal turned back to him.

“Do you think it wise to trust her, Lord Potter? She could turn her poisons expertise against you at any time.”

“I think that it’s wise I made her take an oath of loyalty not to harm me or my people unless she’s attacked first,” said Harry, and grinned a little at the shock on Lenneal’s face. “I understand what you’re saying, but it’s fine, really. I trust Hortensia to want to defend the Court where she’s taken up residence.”

Lenneal gave him a long, slow look, and then stood. “I should probably be present at the speech that Candidate Malfoy is going to make today. He said that he would be revealing something that would change the Ministry’s relationship with you.”

Harry grinned more widely. “I know he is,” he said. “Do send me a Pensieve memory of your reaction later. It should be priceless.” There was a reason that Draco hadn’t told anyone other than Harry what he intended.

Lenneal gave him another slow look before leaving. That left Hermione to hold Harry’s eyes and ask, “But you don’t need to go to the speech, do you?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m going to be busy with more interviews, anyway. And making sure that the Veela know that when they expand Hogwarts, they have to do it carefully, or they’re going to end up making more mistakes and causing more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Expand Hogwarts?”

“They persuaded me their tree-souls would need more room to grow, and I agree that that’s probably true,” said Harry, with a slight shrug. “The tree-souls can grow Hogwarts with roots that reinforce the stone walls. I don’t think it’s a permanent solution to all our space problems, but it’s a good one for now.”

Hermione nodded and stood. Her gaze didn’t leave him, though. Harry cocked his head. “What?”

“You’re working with so many different people now,” said Hermione. “And you’re taking such aggressive measures in defense. I wonder if the Ministry really needs to be persuaded to leave you alone anymore. Maybe they would leave you alone of their own free will now.”

Harry snorted a little. “I have some hope that what Draco’s going to speak about today will strengthen that attitude, but it’ll still take a little while to settle in completely.”

Hermione nodded. Harry was pleased to see that she didn’t immediately argue the way she would have before, but stood up with a faintly resigned expression and reached for the books on the desk. “You won’t need these now that you have Hortensia’s promise to come up with the poison, will you?”
“Well, I might fancy a bit of light reading, so you can leave them,” said Harry, solely to see the expression on her face.

*

Draco took his place in front of the crowd, his expression nervous and resigned. He knew it was, because he had made it so, and cast a few glamours that would hide twitches of his eyes and mouth and help to strengthen the impression. He touched the gold chain around his neck and glanced back and forth, across the crowd.

They had assembled in the Ministry, this time, in one of the courtrooms that the Wizengamot used for highly public trials. That was a challenging, daring gesture, one that Draco had discussed with Amos Diggory and Lucy Lenneal for some time before he decided to use it. The council that technically had replaced the Minister would find it easy to get at him right now and strike him down.

But he couldn’t worry as much about that. He had other things to worry about. _Real_ things.

The crowd that filled the courtroom, sitting beneath the balcony where he stood and staring up at him, consisted mostly of Ministry people, as he should have expected. A small contingent of reporters was shunted off to one side, and there were Unspeakables with their hoods down and a few people Draco almost recognized by now, they followed him so stubbornly from speech to speech. He didn’t know for sure if they were spies for someone or just people who looked on politics as a spectator sport.

But mostly the Ministry. As he had planned and decided on. He fingered the golden chain, and saw more than one person look at it with an expression of high curiosity. But he didn’t let it go.

Heads bent towards each other all over the courtroom, and although a lot of people whispered so that no one else could overhear what they were saying, the buzzing noise itself increased the waves of sound. Draco waited until some of them were speaking in loud voices, caution overwhelmed by their excitement. Then he cleared his throat, the _Sonorus_ he had already cast bouncing the sound in several different directions.

They stopped talking at once, and turned to stare up at him. Draco nodded as if embarrassed and waved his hand so that Rosenthal, waiting in the wings, would come forwards with a sheaf of parchment that his audience would take to be the text of his speech.

Draco waited until Rosenthal was halfway across the floor to him, as they had already decided on. Then he flung up a hand. Rosenthal stopped and took a step backwards, the “speech” dangling in her hand. She looked surprised and disconcerted in a way that Draco wanted to applaud her for. It was exactly as they had practiced it.

He turned his head back and forth, collecting eyes, making people stare at him. Then he drew out the golden chain and the vial that hung on the end of it, made of green glass. He saw people craning their necks to look, and obligingly held the vial up higher so that they could all see it and focus on it.

“This is the memory of the last encounter I had with Harry Potter,” he whispered. “I didn’t want to show it to you. I brought it with me today to give me strength, to remind myself of what we would face if I didn’t negotiate with him and keep his attention. But I find that I can’t keep it private. I have to share it, to watch the same understanding reflected in your eyes.”
The Unspeakables’ hoods rustled. Other people were reacting, too, calling and shouting, but Draco watched the Unspeakables. They wondered where he was going with this, he was almost certain. They had been trying to present the image of Harry as dangerous, but it must seem strange that Draco would do their work for them.

Draco gently uncorked the vial and tapped the glass of the lip with his wand. “There is a spell that can make memories visible without the aid of a Pensieve,” he whispered. “It costs a lot to cast, but not as much as I’ve already suffered.”

And that was all true, except the last part. This was a memory made visible, and anyone else who wanted to could go and look up the spell, locate it and verify for themselves that Draco was telling the truth.

What they were seeing was, of course, the doctored memory that Draco and Harry had created between them as Harry’s magic slowly grew back to its full strength. But since it was spun of Harry’s power, it wouldn’t have the telltales of a fake or changed memory that most people could recognize.

The green gas that rose from the vial slowly turned darker and diversified, and then became the shore of the lake at Hogwarts, the trees of the Forbidden Forest leaning near. Draco knelt on the shore, shivering, his hands extended outwards. Harry stood in front of him, leaning down with his face locked in a scowl.

His magic extended enormous black wings from his back, curving out and down until Draco was in their shadow.

Some people, maybe near the back and unable to see as well, started shrieking that Lord Potter’s black phoenix had never died. Draco didn’t care about that. It was the interaction between him and Harry that was most important.

“I don’t understand why you let me live,” the fake Draco whispered, “if you despise me that much.”

The fake Harry bent down and touched Draco’s chin, not with a finger but with the tip of a wing. Draco shivered a little, watching. He did wish sometimes that Harry had done that to him in reality, but not for the reasons that anyone would assume—at least, anyone who wasn’t Rosenthal.

“I’m letting you live because you amuse me,” the fake Harry said, and shook his head, the emotions sharp and vivid on his face. “I think that no one else would amuse me as much. You’re someone I had a rivalry with in Hogwarts! Someone who thought that he could just swagger right up to me and offer me all sorts of advice on the political scene.” He stretched his wings and stepped back a little, as though he wanted Draco to cower at different parts of his shadow. “My magic substitutes for knowledge. I really don’t need you to offer me anything that you could. If you were a different kind of person, maybe…”

Then he reached down and gripped Draco’s shoulder. “But if you were a different kind of person, one who had a more realistic evaluation of his own goals, you wouldn’t be as amusing.”

The fake Draco’s face drained of blood as Harry squeezed down. They had carefully made up the memory to make it look like Harry was leaving a bruise on him at the precise spot where the real Harry had left a love bite. Draco touched his shoulder in reality and winced, because the spot was a
little tender, and saw his audience’s eyes follow the gesture.

“I’m going to let you go now,” the fake Harry whispered, tender as a sadist. “And you’d better win the election, because I don’t want to deal with someone else, someone who doesn’t amuse me as much, as the head of the Ministry.”

The fake Draco nodded frantically, scrambled to his feet, and ran. The memory dissolved then, with the fake Harry spreading his wings as if to fly.

In the silence that followed, Draco lowered the vial and stared at the faces that stared back at him.

“We have to propitiate him,” Draco whispered. “It’s the only way that we can survive. And for some reason, I’m the one he wants to do that.” He tried to smile. He knew it came out as sickly, because that was the way he willed it to come out. “I hope that I can fight for some independence for the Ministry in the meantime, but it’s not an immediate goal. My immediate goal is survival—and the survival of the wizarding world that will come along with me, at least if Lord Potter keeps his word.”

There was uproar then, questions, and even Rosenthal played along with realistic shock and overprotectiveness when some of the questions turned too personal. But the Unspeakables were the ones that Draco kept an eye on.

They were whispering to each other, but they didn’t leave the room. They listened intently to every word Draco and Rosenthal said, and more than once, Draco felt the tingle of a charm launched at the vial around his neck, as if to figure out what it was made of or Summon it discreetly.

They might not be convinced yet, but they were intrigued, perhaps frightened, and they had better reason than most to know how powerful Harry was. Draco held his frightened-but-brave expression with some difficulty, given the laughter in his heart.
An Infernal Charade

“What do you think was going through their heads?”

Draco sighed and cuddled closer to Harry’s side in the bed that Hogwarts had built for the two of them. He had shared his memory of the speech in the courtroom with Harry, and Harry had laughed until he started choking on air. But that wasn’t enough, it seemed. Harry was talking about the Unspeakables, Draco was pretty sure. Well, that was fair. Draco could only show Harry what he had seen, not what the Unspeakables had been actually thinking.

Draco shrugged, though, because he didn’t have much more of an idea now than he had had when he confronted them. “They might have believed me completely. I’d doubt it, though. I think they’re going to try and test this charade.”

Harry tensed, his hands coming down harder on Draco’s sides. Draco had to breathe in quickly to suppress a moan. He didn’t want Harry to think he was in pain. “They’d just better not try to hurt you, that’s all.”

“We’ve planned for that, remember?” Draco leaned his head on Harry’s shoulder. “Hortensia gave me that potion that will disable Veritaserum the second it enters my bloodstream.” It had been odd to trust someone that much, to drink a potion Draco had never seen before, but he didn’t regret doing it. Hortensia was odd, intense, focused, but Draco didn’t think she was a spy for the Unspeakables or the Ministry. He suspected she would never hold anything higher than her work, and Harry had given her space and time and permission for that work.

“I didn’t mean like that.” Harry rippled restlessly back and forth, not physically but with his magic, which Draco could see forming a moving aura around his body out of the corner of his eye. “What if they take you and decide that physically damaging you is the best way to get me out to come out of Hogwarts?”

“Yes, then they would be smart, because it would be.”

Harry tensed again. “Don’t make jokes like that, Draco. Please.”

His mouth was open to make another one, but Draco managed to retract it and nod. “Fine. What I meant is, we’re trying to follow the plan we talked about.” He jabbed an elbow into Harry’s side. “The plan that says they’ll leave me alone not because they’re afraid or me or I’m so personally accommodating, but because getting rid of me is more trouble than it’s worth. I keep the Dark Lord of Hogwarts pacified. How many people can say that?”

Harry flipped over and took Draco’s hands in his, staring into his eyes. “You do a lot more than pacify me.”

“I know,” said Draco, trying to sound prim, because they were both talking about things they already realized, or should have, but he couldn’t help the enormous grin that spread across his face. It was still something, to see Harry look at him like that and be so willing to say it. Like the promise that Harry had given to put Draco first in his heart, it was an indication of how much Harry loved him. “But I don’t think we can know for sure how well the plan worked until they make a first approach to me.”
“That’s true,” said Harry. “I didn’t see anything in your memory that made me think they were going to hurt us right away.” He leaned his nose against Draco’s neck and sniffed as if he was smelling the scent of all the bruises he had left on Draco. “Shall we?”

“Shall we do what?” Draco asked, wondering if they were still talking about the Unspeakables.

“Since we can’t predict what they’re going to do, shall we talk about something more productive?” Harry asked, and removed all doubts by beginning to mouth very gently around the lobe of Draco’s ear.

* 

“I have the poison completed, my Lord, if you’d like to see how it works.”

Harry grimaced a little. He had been talking to Gabrielle Delacour, the one of the Veela who had come to live in his court that he was on the friendliest terms with, and she was describing some very delicate manipulations of the Veela’s tree-souls to him. It wasn’t the best time for Hortensia to interrupt.

But Gabrielle just smiled a little when Harry glanced at her, and sat back in her chair with the manner of one prepared to wait. And Hortensia would never bother to notice when she was interrupting anyway. Harry sighed and turned to Hortensia. “Can you show me without using the poison to hurt someone?”

“Of course,” said Hortensia. “All you need to do is show me the golden crystal, and I’ll show you how the poison works.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “I thought you knew.” He was sure that Hortensia knew, sure that he had described why they needed the ritual banned from Hogwarts grounds in their last conversation, but it didn’t seem to have stuck. “I got rid of the golden crystal when I was testing to see whether it could be destroyed or contained. I don’t have it here for you to test your poison on.”

Hortensia frowned at him. “I must say that was careless and uncongenial of you, my Lord. I don’t know how else you think that I’m supposed to test the poison without hurting anyone.”

“If I can provide a substitute ritual, that should work, shouldn’t it?” Harry asked soothingly. In truth, he hadn’t thought at all of how the poison would be tested. He had supposed that Hortensia would work something out, because otherwise how could she make the potion at all? “It won’t harm me if you use the poison on the ritual?”

“No.” Hortensia sounded as this was definitely second-best. She crouched on the floor, however, and took out a large flask that she must have been carrying tied to her waist. She set it on the floor and stroked the glass. Harry saw the yellow liquid inside take on a subtle glow. From the corner of his eye, he also saw Gabrielle moving her chair further back. Harry had to snort a little. As much as he didn’t want the members of his Court to distrust each other, he couldn’t blame Gabrielle entirely for her reaction.

“Now,” said Hortensia. “You should set up your ritual in this room, my Lord. The potion is awake now, and reaching out.”

“It’s awake?” Harry raised his eyebrows even as he gestured to the stones of Hogwarts, and they began to groove themselves into a deep circle. His bond with the school ensured that he could do it
without hurt to the stones. “That doesn’t sound as if it won’t hurt me.”

Hortensia gave him a mild but speaking look. “I told you that I had to create a poison with a will of its own, my Lord, if I was going to make sure that I could actually oppose the will behind a ritual.”

“You did tell me that.” Harry dropped a bit of blood into the ritual circle and held up a hand to Hortensia in silent apology. “It won’t hurt me even if it’s my blood that’s powering the circle?”

“No,” said Hortensia, and gave him the kind of patient smile that Harry recognized from some of his professors when they were dealing with troublesome students. “It’s the ritual that the poison opposes, not anyone connected to it, no matter how distantly or closely they’re connected.”

*Why did you allow her into your Court, if you didn’t trust her?* Harry asked himself, and found that he had no answer. He crouched and laid his hand above the ritual circle, adding a little more blood.

Hortensia smiled, at him or the ritual circle or the poison, and poured out the yellow liquid from the flask.

It didn’t flow immediately into the circle carved into the stones, the way Harry had thought it would. Instead, it hovered in midair, the bottom of it still curved in memory of the way the flask had shaped it, and yellow tendrils reached out, wavering. They were transparent, but began to glow with light as Harry watched.

A second later, Harry started. He could feel something brushing against his—his will, he supposed he would have to call it. He suspected he could feel it only because of his bond with Hogwarts, and that a regular person conducting a regular ritual wouldn’t feel it at all, but it was still a creepy feeling.

The tendrils wavered and slowed to a stop. The poison wound in on itself, like a closing flower, and the sensation of another will brushing against Harry’s went away.

Then the ritual circle died.

That, Harry could feel happen, too, and it was an even more creepy feeling than that of the poison touching his will. The sensation of rising power that he had infused the circle with simply faded. The humming stopped. The blood that he had shed from his body suddenly felt no more connected to him than the blood of a stranger would.

Harry lifted his head, staring. Hortensia bowed from her kneeling position, one hand protectively on the flank, which the yellow potion had flowed back into. “I told you that it would work, my Lord,” she murmured.

“You did,” Harry echoed, dazed, and then had to grin and shake his head. “Remind me never to doubt you again, Hortensia.”

“You’ll doubt me a few more times, I think,” said Hortensia. She stood and cradled the flask against her. “I’ve seen the way you look doubtingly at me. You’re afraid that I’ll poison someone in your Court.”

Since Harry couldn’t hide anyway, he met her directness with his own. “Well, you must know something about how weird you come off to other people. I don’t believe you’ll stupid.”
“What’s stupid is caring about that,” said Hortensia calmly. “Fear of what you looked like in other people’s eyes didn’t stop you from declaring yourself Dark Lord of Hogwarts, did it?”

Harry held up one hand. “You’re right,” he said. “I’ll try to keep my distrust of you to a reasonable level, then.”

Hortensia nodded and trotted out of the room. Harry gazed after her until Gabrielle cleared her throat, and recalled him to knowledge of her presence. He really had managed to forget, so intense was Hortensia’s just being there.

“Forgive me, Gabrielle,” Harry said, turning and sitting down in his chair again. “I just didn’t think it would be a good idea to put that off.”

“To put her off, you mean.” Gabrielle gave a curious little smile, that had something of a grimace in it. “As long as she doesn’t poison the roots of our tree-souls—which I think she’s capable of—then we’re willing to consider her an ally.”

“If you say that, I can trust you.” Harry nodded back. When the Veela first came, Madame de Lis, their leader, had tried to fob him off and make up little lies and use their allure on him. He had started dealing with Gabrielle preferentially, because she knew more about him and what it was wise to spring on him than they did.

“You can.” Gabrielle touched the plan on the desk between them, which showed the expansion of the walls of Hogwarts that she and the other Veela had planned. “I’d like you to look at this, and see if you think expanding to the west would intrude too much into the Forbidden Forest and maybe territory that we shouldn’t take over…”

*  

“Mr. Malfoy. Thank you so much for letting me see you.”

Draco leaned back in his chair, which occupied a comfortable drawing room near the back of the Manor, and looked at Rita Skeeter with lazy eyes. “I wasn’t aware that it was a matter of my permission. According to my adviser Rosenthal, your owls crowded out all the others asking for an interview. And attacked the owls they were next to, as well.”

“In this business, you need the best birds you can get,” said Skeeter, and gave him a confident little smile as she touched her quill to parchment. “Now, tell me, were you really afraid of Dark Lord Potter? After the intimacy that you’ve enjoyed with him, too.” The quill rapped a little faster when Draco didn’t immediately respond.

Draco looked off to the side, and finally spoke, although he let his words falter and hesitate. It made sense for him to still be overwhelmed by the experience of seeing the Dark Lord with black wings on his back, touching his throat and telling him that he was still alive only because he was amusing. “You know, I don’t remember that much about it. If not for the memory, I might doubt it had happened.”

Skeeter frowned. Draco knew that he wasn’t giving her much material she could work into a usable story. “But you must feel something about it.”

“Yes,” said Draco, nodding, and looked at her directly, something she didn’t seem to expect, if the way she started was any indication. “It made me feel what a huge responsibility lies on my
shoulders.”

“What do you mean?” Skeeter had gone back to scribbling, though. “It looked to me as though the Dark Lord had made you into a plaything. That’s the opposite of responsibility.” She gave Draco a bright smile.

She was trying to anger him, of course. Draco responded only with a slow blink, resuming the words when Skeeter made a little gesture with her quill. “No. You don’t understand. I—I could feel, and grasp, and really understand how responsible I am, if I’m the Minister, as the only person who stands between Dark Lord Potter and the world that he would otherwise take out his wrath on.”

“You believe all his words, then?” Skeeter glanced at him in a way she probably thought was sly.

“Of course,” said Draco, and gave her a bleak smile. “What happened in the past when we didn’t believe him, when we thought there was no possible way that someone could really have that much power or that much desire to take vengeance for the insults offered him?”

Skeeter hesitated for the first time since the interview began. “You’re right,” she said. “We must take his threats seriously.”

Draco nodded and clasped his hands on his knees. This was the part that Harry hadn’t thought would work, with Skeeter’s love of twisting his words around, but Draco had been right. Her sense of the dramatic would make her report the truth, if the truth was dark enough and likely to intrigue her audience. “Yes. And I’m the one that he wants to play with. Who knows why? Our old rivalry, the fact that I’m the one who responded to him the most, the fact that I’m the favorite to win the election? I can’t divine all the reasons, and I couldn’t attempt to fathom the mind of a Dark Lord anyway. I’m only grateful that I can make myself into the bulwark that his power breaks on.”

Skeeter’s eyes had a peculiar gleam as she wrote that down. Draco didn’t think she fully believed him, but that didn’t matter. What mattered was that she thought it would make good copy. That was why she reported on silly politicians’ speeches so faithfully. She would relish their broken promises just as often when they failed to keep them, but she could play the believing game at the moment of the speech as well as anyone else.

“I’m only grateful that Dark Lord Potter has allowed me to keep some independence so far,” Draco continued. “I go to Hogwarts to negotiate with him, but I don’t have to move in there.”

“He probably realizes that you have to spend some of your time at home and the Ministry,” said Skeeter. “Do you see that changing any time soon?”

Draco tried out another of the bleak smiles, since they had worked so well last time. “Not as long as I maintain enough free time to answer his calls for his toy in a minute if he needs me.”

“You call yourself a toy one minute, and a bulwark the next.” Skeeter tapped her quill again to indicate her interest, her intensity. “Does that indicate ambivalence about your role in all this?”

Draco laughed hollowly. “I don’t think that anyone could escape ambivalence about this sort of role. But I’m a toy to the Dark Lord and a bulwark to my constituents.” He paused and watched Skeeter write for a minute. “At least, that’s the way I hope they think of me. I know that I can’t do much about what Dark Lord Potter thinks of me.”
Skeeter bent a look on him that was comical in its benevolence. “Do you think that might appear more like a bulwark with help?”

Draco pretended to consider that. “It would—excuse the pun—help a lot.”

Skeeter nodded. “Well, I think the brave man I interviewed today should get his chance to count in the public debates surrounding your name and Dark Lord Potter, as well as the man who knelt before the Dark Lord.” She went back to writing.

Draco relaxed. Skeeter was unpredictable at times, but he understood the silent threat and warning: as long as he gave her new material, and material she liked and that was dramatic enough, then she would do what she could to spread that material.

“I’ll have to make some additions to my schedules,” Draco said reflectively. “As well as time for the Dark Lord and for myself, so that I can have some oases in the round of my duties, I’ll have to make sure to schedule regular interviews with you, Madam Skeeter.”

“If that’s what you need to do,” said Skeeter, and lowered her eyelids on her smile.
Harry opened his eyes, and knew a threat was coming through the wards. This time, he had tuned the grounds of Hogwarts so that they were sensitive to the feet of humans moving around on them during the night. It had been a nuisance at first, because he caught students sneaking out of their common rooms and no one much else, but now he felt the sharp tingle of a presence away to the west, beyond the lake.

Harry sat up swiftly and silently, and cupped his hands beneath him. The stone slid aside, opening up a speaking tube through itself, beneath his bed, into the room where Hortensia slept.

“Can you be ready with the poison that will destroy rituals in five minutes?” he asked.

“I will be, yes, my Lord,” said Hortensia, sounding as alert as though Harry hadn’t just woken her out of a sound sleep.

Harry snorted as he let the stone slide shut again. For all he knew, he hadn’t, and Hortensia spent all night lying awake and inventing new poisons. Maybe she slept while they were brewing.

There came another insistent tingle from the newly sensitive grounds, and Harry let his fancies go with a grimace. It didn’t matter what Hortensia did with her night hours, or how much sleep she got, as long as she would defend her adopted home, and Harry thought she would, without trouble.

He dressed quietly, wishing as he did that Draco was here to give him admiring looks while his robes slid over his head, and then opened another tunnel in the stones and dropped through it as silent as breathing. The tunnel bent and curved like the one he had once ridden down to the Chamber of Secrets, heading straight for the far side of the lake. Harry wrapped his arms and legs close together and rode the bouncing, jolting route in a haze of memories.

* 

Draco opened his eyes and drew breath.

“That wouldn’t be a good idea,” said a voice at the end of a sharp blade. Draco didn’t swallow; he knew it would cut his skin if he did. “Good. I see that you’ve already appreciated the unique aspects of your situation and decided to cooperate.”

Draco said nothing. He wanted to say a good many things, especially when a wand tip flared with a *Lumos* and he saw how many grey-clad Unspeakables stood in his bedroom, but he knew enough to bow his head submissively and keep silence.

“We need to know how much of what you showed us is the truth,” said the Unspeakable who held the blade at Draco’s throat. “Perhaps that memory was a little too good. Perhaps there are ways of faking even such an impressive and abject display of degradation.” His knife eased a little deeper into a fold of Draco’s throat, teasingly scratching the skin. “Perhaps we need to investigate just a little bit more.”

Draco said nothing, because he was thinking about how they had got past his wards instead. He would have to investigate in the morning, himself.
‘You’re much more intelligent than I assumed,’ said the Unspeakable, with a faint smile that only let Draco see a dark moustache under his hood. ‘Now. Summon the Dark Lord.’

Draco began to laugh despite himself, a faint, hysterical bubble of sound that made that Unspeakable nearly withdraw the knife. He frowned, and then turned and said something to another of his subordinates. She nodded, and a shock of cold water came down on Draco.

His involuntary laughter had already determined the tack Draco would take with this, and so he gasped a little and shook his head, but didn’t try to stop laughing. ‘Listen. You think that the Dark Lord would leave me some means of summoning him? I do whatever he wants at his pleasure, not mine. He would never leave me anything that’s even capable of being linked to him. He doesn’t trust me to be strong when my weakness is what amuses him.’

Draco fell silent at the end of that speech and looked at the Unspeakable. ‘I don’t think it would amuse him very much if you killed me. But I can’t actually stop you.’ He flicked his eyes to the blade that had come back to hover less than a hair’s breadth away from his pulse. ‘And I can’t summon him no matter what you do to me.’

The Unspeakable went on looking at him as if he thought he should try and put that to the test, then nodded once and made a gesture to the woman who had the *Lumos* Charm on her wand. She stepped back and seemed to melt through the nearest wall, but not before Draco caught the gleam of a nasty little silver artifact in her hand. He didn’t curse, but it was a near thing. Of course they had used Dark artifacts to win their way through his wards. Gorenson had done something similar before Harry killed him.

‘So,’ said the Unspeakable, with a solemnity that Draco hated immediately. ‘We cannot force you to summon the Dark Lord, even if we torture you? I happen to believe that. But if we take you to the place where the Dark Lord is now…then perhaps we can see whether your danger will summon him.’

He stepped back, and several of the Unspeakables cast Chain Charms and Body-Bind Charms on Draco before he could even think of trying to escape. Then they scooped him up and tipped him into a stretcher of some kind. Draco sighed and lay still, since he didn’t have much other choice.

He would just have to hope that Harry’s magic and reputation could carry the day, the way they had so often before.

*  

Harry landed in silence on the far shore of the lake, and looked around. It didn’t take him long to pinpoint where the attack was coming from. He could see the flashes of golden crystal a few meters away from him.

Harry held up one hand, and called fire. It lit around his fingers, with a purple flare that reminded him unpleasantly of Persephone, and the Unspeakables holding the golden crystals started and looked around.

Harry smiled at them. ‘Hello. Did you want something?’

The Unspeakables didn’t bother standing there gaping at him, although Harry had almost hoped
they would. Two of them broke away from the group, facing him with their wands up, and twin streams of purple light came towards him.

Harry recognized the purple light from his Auror training, a nasty spell that would make him feel like his flesh was boiling away without leaving a mark. He clucked his tongue and countered by disappearing beneath the earth and appearing again behind them, in the midst of their group. The Unspeakables who had tried to strike at him whirled around, disoriented, and in the meantime, Harry was distracting those who had been using the crystals by batting them out of their hands.

“Hortensia!” he called.

She was there, or at least had managed to make her way out of the castle and break the flask, or whatever she really needed to do. Harry saw the familiar yellow glow of the poison flowing from the other side of the lake. He pulled his own will back inside him, all but for the faint shield that still spread around him, defending him against the Unspeakables’ hasty attacks.

The poison floated on the wind, expanding far more rapidly than it had back in his office. The Unspeakables who had their wands drawn snapped harsh words and spells at it, but nothing happened. Of course not, Harry thought. Unless the poison was made to attack them, they couldn’t do anything to affect it one way or the other.

The Unspeakables who held the crystals made no attempt to defend themselves. Harry chuckled, grimly, to himself. He thought they were probably caught up in the rituals happening inside the crystals the same way he had been caught up in analyzing it and nearly drained of his magical core.

A second after the golden glow of the poison reached their side of the lake, one of the Unspeakables shrieked and dropped the crystal he held. The others cried out a few moments later, and Harry made the flame flare higher around him so that he could see the crystals lying on the ground better. They looked as if they had been drained of all light and power, and now they were only odd, slick shapes that might look well on someone’s mantel.

Harry had to smile. Hortensia had done exactly as she’d said she would. While he might distrust her for justifiable reasons in the future, he thought that he would never again doubt that she could do what she said she would when she talked about brewing a poison.

“Dark Lord Potter!”

That call came from still another direction, behind Harry, away from the Unspeakables who were staring in distress at their dead crystals. Keeping his shield up around him, Harry turned so he could see the speakers.

He nearly loosed a torrent of magic right then. The Unspeakables who came towards him brought Draco with them, floating in bonds so tight that Harry could see his hands and feet losing their circulation.

But he held still, only raising the shields tighter around him when the group who’d held the crystals tried new spells, and asked again, “Yes? Did you want something?”

* 

*He’s so calm.*
Well, and why shouldn’t Harry be? Draco asked himself, in a bit of disgust, a moment later. He was surrounded by his own powerful magic, defended in a way that Draco knew he couldn’t match, that probably not even the nasty artifacts the Unspeakables carried could match. He wasn’t going to get hurt, no matter what happened.

Then Draco caught his eye. He swallowed a little, as much as he could with multiple bonds and Body-Binds constricting his movements.

_Oh_. Of course it was still possible for them to hurt Harry, if they hurt Draco, or someone else he loved. He just wasn’t going to be hurt in the crude way they had planned to take him, with magic.

Draco tried to be confident, anyway. He knew, and he doubted the Unspeakables had any idea, of just how deep and strongly Harry’s magic ran. Harry would find some way to get Draco out of this situation, and himself, and all the people who depended on him. Draco just had to be patient.

“We have the man that you say amuses you,” said the Unspeakable who had held the blade to Draco’s face. His hood was dangling on his shoulders now, maybe because he had decided that he didn’t care about disguise anymore, maybe out of excitement. His eyes certainly never moved from Harry’s face. “What will you give us for him?”

Harry seemed to be listening to advice from an invisible source, although Draco didn’t know who that could be. The only other person out here was probably Hortensia, or whoever had released that poison from the other side of the lake. Among the many other reasons that he wanted to live past this night, Draco admitted, was that he wanted to know how that poison worked and how it was made.

The biggest reason he wanted to live looked at the Unspeakables and said quietly, “Your lives.”

“It must be more than that,” said the dark-haired Unspeakable. He made a sweeping gesture with one hand. “Consider what we can do if you don’t cooperate. We can destroy the man that you want to be Minister in a few seconds. We can—”

The grass writhed, and the waters of the lake. Even knowing what would probably happen, and that nothing Harry commanded would hurt _him_, Draco still gasped in anticipation of pain as the mingled ropes of earth and water rose up and danced around the bodies of everyone in sight except for Harry himself.

One particular grassy rope had spread quickly up Draco’s arms and legs, and was winding around the neck of the Unspeakable who had just threatened Harry. That Unspeakable’s lips were open, but he didn’t get the chance to move them. The grass’s tendrils pushed down on his tongue, and probably would have entwined his mouth if that hadn’t already been sufficient to keep him from talking. The Unspeakable’s eyes were bulging.

Draco swallowed to keep from laughing, and then paused as he realized he had moved his throat freely. Where the ropes of grass and water had moved across his skin, they had dissolved the spells and bonds that the Unspeakables had used to hold him prisoner. Draco was amazed that Harry had control that fine-grained, to free him and imprison the Unspeakables at the same time, but he snorted a second later. That was one of the advantages of being a Dark Lord, he supposed.

Harry swaggered towards them and stopped a distance away. He didn't move towards Draco or give him a gesture at all. But Draco had known better than to look for it. Harry was playing the role of the canny Dark Lord to the hilt, and that role didn't care about Draco except as a toy.
There might be a time when that will start to annoy me.

For now, though, Draco could still appreciate the hidden thrill of knowing something about Harry that other people didn't. He could watch the way that the Unspeakables' eyes almost sweated, looking at Harry and the swirling aura of power that had started to surround him. Harry bent down towards the man who had threatened Draco, then breathed on him. The man moaned a little, his eyes fixing in a gaze past Draco's head. Draco grinned viciously. If the idiot was now looking at his worst nightmares, then it was the least he deserved.

"I know what this was," said Harry, his voice low and sepulchral enough to make Draco shiver with desire. Let other people think it was fear if they wanted; Draco and Harry could be the ones who knew the truth. "This was a test, wasn't it? You wanted to see what would happen if you attacked Hogwarts and threatened the Minister-elect I said amused me at the same time. You wanted to see what I would do." He paused, while the breath of the Unspeakable in front of him grew more and more labored.

Draco felt another little thrill of desire. He knew it wasn't long ago that a charade like this would have been so disgusting to Harry that he would have tried anything to get out of it. But now Harry was doing it, and in large part because Draco had been in danger.

“And this is what I will do,” said Harry, and snapped his fingers in a complicated pattern that Draco didn’t think he could follow even with his eyes, let alone his hands. The ropes that still entwined the Unspeakables wound closer, and began to sink into their skin. “Leave you with marks of your very own, for daring to disturb me. They won’t bother you unless you decide to try something stupid like this again. Then they’ll come to life and strangle you, the way they would have done tonight if I had wanted them to. Then you can have the amusement of picking them out of your skin and trying to separate something that has become a part of your magic from you.” He winked at them. “Do you understand?”

“Please,” whispered the Unspeakable Draco had come to think of almost as his, the one who had threatened him. “Please.”

“You want some other punishment?” Harry considered that, his fingers wound about each other, his hand rising as if he was going to pry open the air. “I suppose that I could take the ropes away and give you something worse.”

“No!” the Unspeakable Draco remembered as holding the lit wand on him screamed abruptly. “Let us go with these! These are good enough!”

“Fine,” said Harry, and spread his fingers again. The flowing ropes became mere faint shadows against the Unspeakables’ skin. “But remember. They live if your betrayal lives. I find that I’ve become tired of this nonsense.” And he turned away and walked towards Draco. “Are you all right, little toy?”

Draco shuddered at the word, but then again, Harry had his back towards the Unspeakables, and what he really felt shone in his eyes. And the deep peace that Draco received when he saw the anger there—when he saw the way that Harry regarded him and the way he would have acted even more openly if not for their audience—soothed him. He nodded, and Harry bent over him and sneered.

“Good. Then see that you maintain your safety. Take some of these artifacts and use them to
defend your home if need be.” Spheres and cubes and cones, all of which looked like they were made of silver or crystal, shot out of the Unspeakables’ pockets and landed on the grass next to the lake. “Study them, make duplicates of them, do whatever you want with them.”

Draco bowed, trying to hide his glee. He had wanted to make sure that the Unspeakables didn’t intrude into his home again, and now he had a way. Though he hoped that the Unspeakables wouldn’t challenge Harry once they saw his power close up, he had been wrong about that before.

“Thank you, Dark Lord Potter,” he said, and made his voice quiver with enough abjection for their audience, if the way their eyes widened was any indication. “When should I expect you to summon me again?”

“I’ve seen you tonight,” said Harry, and reached out carelessly for his shoulder. Draco thought he was the only one who would even bother looking for the caress in the rough touch. “I’ll send you a message by my own channels when I want to see you again.” He nodded to Draco, and then turned and dropped into a tunnel in the earth, heading back towards Hogwarts.

Currents of water lapped out from the lake and floated the Unspeakables towards the edge of the grounds. Meanwhile, they floated the artifacts that had dropped from the Unspeakables’ robes and his wand towards Draco. Draco stooped and picked up the wand, then conjured a pouch he could put the artifacts into, his mind spinning with possibilities.

But more than he wanted to think about whether this display of power would finally impress the Unspeakables into leaving them alone, he wanted to think about the next time he would be alone with Harry—and how much he looked forward to it.
“May I ask exactly why you’re getting all sorts of letters about whether you can keep Unspeakables out of your Court?”

Briseis’s voice was severe, but she put the letters down on his desk and looked at him with a faint smile. Harry smiled back and laid his hand on the first of the letters. “Do they seem genuine to you?”

“Most of them. Some might be tricks, or just people who have legal problems with the Unspeakables and wouldn’t be useful here. But I think most of them are real.” Briseis studied him thoughtfully. “Hortensia told me that her poison worked. Nothing other than that.”

“You’re usually subtler than this,” Harry teased her, but flung up his hands in surrender when Briseis moved hers thoughtfully towards her wand. “It’s nothing that I haven’t done before. The Unspeakables showed up with those crystals, and I thwarted them. Or Hortensia did, with her poison, and I kept them busy when they tried to battle to me and distract her. And when they showed up with Draco.”

Briseis blinked. “How had they managed to kidnap him?”

At least she knows Draco better than to think he would accompany them willingly. “Artifacts, how else? They worked their way through his wards the same way Gorenson did once, before he died.”

“I see,” said Briseis, and her eyes grew distant for a moment. “It may be time to do something about the Unspeakables.”

“I marked them,” said Harry, and had to smile at the way her eyes snapped back to him. “With ropes of water and grass, magic from the earth of Hogwarts. The ropes will punish them if they ever act against me again. And that includes acting against Draco, since they know him as the only Minster who can amuse me and keep me in check.”

Briseis cocked her head. “That is a bolder move than you’ve made before, yes. I can only hope that it will be enough to keep them in check.”

Harry waved his hand. “What else should I do? I don’t think that you’re advocating hunting them down and killing them.”

“No, but they haven’t given up yet,” said Briseis, and shoved the letters towards him. “I don’t know how the word got out, but—”

“Then you haven’t looked at the paper and the public interview Draco gave for this afternoon,” said Harry, and picked up the letters. “I’ll sort these. I want you to ask the centaurs if they’ve had any more trouble with intrusion into their part of the Forest. The Unspeakables might not have given up yet, but I don’t think they’ll try the crystals again.”

Briseis bowed her head and said, “At last, maybe they’ll see that you’re not as fearful an enemy as they think you are.”

“No, we want them to think that I’m a fearful enemy,” Harry reminded her, as he opened the first
letter. “Just not a Dark Lord that it’s worthwhile to die defeating.”

“Then perhaps you’re getting better at walking that fine line,” said Briseis, her face opaque.

Harry nodded at her. “I hope so.”

* 

Draco stood up slowly and came around to the front of the table in the secret room in the Ministry. He made sure to limp and exaggerate his injuries a little more than they actually pained him. There had to be *some* advantage in getting kidnapped by Unspeakables, even if it was only the sympathy of his allies.

“I don’t understand this,” said Amos Diggory, his eyes narrowed as he took in the sight of the mostly artistic bruises that Draco had on his arms and legs. “What are the Unspeakables hoping to gain from this? Why do they persist in attacking you?”

“Perhaps the Unspeakable among us could answer that,” Draco said, and turned towards the single grey-cloaked figure seated at the table. Lucy and Amos and a few other people looked with him.

There was a long pause before the woman stood and let her hood drop down on her shoulders. She had shining brown hair, and brown eyes that shone almost golden, making Draco suspect for a moment she was a werewolf. But if so, she showed no sign of savagery as she bowed a few times, first to Draco and then to Amos.

“There are different factions among us,” she said. “Some of them want revenge for the man that most of you knew as Gorenson in his last incarnation. Some of them are concerned that any Dark Lord in Britain will restrict their freedom sooner or later. And some of them think that attacking you is the best way to test the strength of the Minister.” She looked at Draco.

“You can tell them that I’ve been tested,” said Draco dryly, and rubbed at his shoulder, the one that Harry had caressed last night under the guise of brutalizing him. “Surely they must understand by now that I’m sufficiently impressed, and there’s nothing else that they need to do to me?”

The woman’s face folded in on itself. “We must make sure that we have a strong Minister.”

Amos answered before Draco could. “And if we destroy this one? What is left? Who else can take his place, and negotiate an alliance—of sorts—with the Dark Lord?” He glanced at Draco. “You haven’t asked that all the Unspeakables be kicked out of the Ministry and slaughtered. Commendable restraint, under the circumstances.”

Draco managed a chuckle, though it was hard when he thought of the Unspeakables taking him from his bed last night. Well, then, he wouldn’t think of that. “What good would it do? I know that I would only earn enemies in the Ministry if I did that. I need the Unspeakables here, to run the Department of Mysteries.” He glanced at the woman with her hood down and made his voice as emphatic as possible. “But I don’t need people who think more about their own grudges than the good of the wizarding world. If they keep causing this much trouble, I *might* have to restrain them.”

The woman studied him some more, and said at last, “If you could, sir.”

“I wouldn’t like to have to try,” said Draco. “I’m sure the conflict would cause more trouble than
it’s worth, for all parties. But that means that self-control on the part of some afflicted parties would be appreciated now. You understand what I mean?”

For long seconds, he didn’t think she did. Her mouth opened, and he was sure that some spurious political argument would come out. But in the end, she nodded, and said, “I will speak to the faction that sees you mostly as a good way to get at the Dark Lord. It may be that they can see their way to—self-control.”

“Good,” said Draco, and turned to Amos. “I came to tell you that I think the Dark Lord is near the limit of his patience with attacks.”

Amos’s eyes narrowed. “Then your usefulness to us is limited.”

Draco sighed and let his head fall back so he was staring at the ceiling. “At the limit of his patience with attacks,” he told the ceiling. It was more sensible than half the people in the room. “It doesn’t mean that he won’t listen to people who want to live in mutual peace most of the time, and perhaps limited negotiation for things like the resources of the Forbidden Forest or introducing Ministry-mandated subjects at Hogwarts. But the next attackers who come near him, I’m afraid he means to kill.” He straightened up and glanced at the Unspeakable woman, whose mouth, sure enough, was open. “I know that you were about to bring up Gorenson, but when you think about it, it’s strange that there’s only been one casualty in a struggle that the Ministry keeps seeing as open warfare.”

“Only some parts of the Ministry,” said Amos, but his face was thoughtful. “You think that he’s been tolerant?”

More tolerant than you could imagine.

But Draco couldn’t say that even to a group of people who nominally supported him. They simply had no idea who Harry really was. He smiled instead, and said, “I think that he’s close to not distinguishing between different parts of the Ministry. The Unspeakables who kidnapped me had enough support to marshal artifacts that could get through the wards. The Dark Lord awarded those artifacts to me, but that does suggest they aren’t exactly exiles from the hierarchy of their department.”

“We would like those artifacts back,” said the Unspeakable representative, staring at him.

Draco glanced at her. “I’m sure you would. And then the Dark Lord would ask me what kind of progress I was making in using them or finding a way to secure the wards, and I would have to tell him that I returned them to his enemies. That would just make him suspicious of me. No. Why should I seek to benefit people who have done nothing but inconvenience me?” he continued, seeing her open her mouth again. “They haven’t even done me the courtesy of asking if I’d like to participate in a ruse against the Dark Lord. They just took me and dragged me into the middle of the battle.”

Once again, the representative frowned and shook her head, but at least this time she didn’t try to argue that he should help his enemies. She settled back and began to whisper into something that looked like a big golden watch attached to her wrist. Draco decided to ignore her unless she spoke to him directly again.

He turned back to Amos and the rest. “I gave an interview about the battle I was in last night. Or perhaps I should call it a rout, with the way that the Dark Lord handled them. You can’t fight him. You won’t last if you do.” He straightened his shoulders and blew out a brave little breath. “I’m
pleased to take a certain amount of the burden on myself. The only one who can, since he finds me so amusing in a way that he doesn’t find other people.”

“And you want some concessions for that,” said Lucy.

Draco knew she was playing a part and was nearly as much on Harry’s side as he was, but he dropped his mask and snarled with the frustration that the charade kept him from displaying most of the time. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. I didn’t choose to do this! The Dark Lord finds me so amusing that he’s willing to leave me alive and treat with the Ministry through me. Fine. How many of you want that role?” He turned his head so he could see most of the room. “Do any of you have plans to deal with him that would work? Do any of you have the least notion of how terrible he could be if he really wanted to? He hasn’t been so far, but he could be! He’s shown me!”

Draco shut his eyes and shivered. Most of it was the act, but he was picturing what Harry would do if he did let loose. Draco thought he had been close to it the other night. It didn’t mean he would anytime soon, but if someone pushed him…

It would be what the bastards would deserve.

But at the same time, Draco could picture the problems it would cause for Harry, maybe even within his Court, and to Draco’s own ambitions. Harry had caused enough bad press for himself when he killed Gorenson. That had taken longer to recover from than Draco had thought, even with the shit Gorenson was trying to pull. The fear of Harry’s magic would outweigh Gorenson’s crimes in a lot of people’s minds.

The same thing would happen if he killed “innocent” Unspeakables who were “merely” trying to figure out ways to fight him.

“We’re sorry, Draco,” said Amos at last, gently. “We hadn’t considered it from that point of view.”

Draco snorted bitterly and opened his eyes. “Well, consider it, before he does something else that you won’t like because you provoked him.”

That got a few exchanged glances and frowns, before one of the women Draco knew less well—though he knew her name was something like Glass, and that she worked in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement—eased forwards. “Is there going to be any accommodation at all? Or is it just going to be him mistreating you and bullying you, and through you, us?”

Draco wanted to scream, but he managed to massage his face with one hand and speak quietly, instead. “This isn’t bullying. This is reacting. Restrain the people in the Ministry who continue to go out there and attack him, and there won’t be any more reactions like this.”

“Even though he finds you amusing?”

Draco dropped his hand. “Like this, I said. He might grant more favorable trade terms to the Ministry, or just play with me and let me go. But he won’t be using his magic on Ministry employees. I honestly don’t think he cares about most people outside the boundaries of Hogwarts. It’s when we insist on crossing those boundaries that we become his problem.”

“Very well,” said Amos. “While we cannot stop all the Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries from behaving like idiots, we can certainly do our best to ensure that they will receive a warning. Can’t we?”
The Unspeakable woman who had talked earlier hunched her shoulders, and didn’t look up. Amos shook his head in what looked like disgust and turned away, saying, “Now, we should consider exactly how we’re going to get around the council and convince those who are on it and not allied with us to step down.”

Draco relaxed a little. He didn’t know if he had brought home to them how deep the danger was, but there was a greater chance that they would listen, now.

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“Harry.”

Draco’s voice was low, and seemed to echo from everywhere at once. Harry rose from his bed and reached out a hand. Most of the time, Draco came to him in his office, but Briseis had finally persuaded Harry to go to his bedroom and sleep, and Draco had equal access through the Floo to this room.

“Did you go to the office first?” Harry murmured, still half-asleep and thinking only of the inconvenience that would have attended Draco searching for him through several places.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Draco, and flung his shirt over his head. Harry blinked to get the sleep out of his eyes and realized that Draco had been undressing as he walked across the room. “I’m here now.”

He was, pale as moonlight but much warmer, and Harry slid him into the bed and began sucking on his neck. Draco arched a little and hissed. “You—like doing that,” he muttered. “I—never had someone—who found my neck particularly tasty before.”

“You’re never going to have the chance to find out if anyone else likes it, either,” Harry muttered, busy with what he was doing, and resenting taking his hands and mouth off Draco even for the length of time it took him to say those words.

But Draco tensed, and his skin seemed to go chill. Harry lifted his head, resigned to an explanation if he had to make one. “What’s wrong?”

“I wanted you to promise permanency,” Draco whispered, eyes fastened on Harry’s instead of looking away. “And this sure sounds like it.”

“The way I felt when I saw those Unspeakables holding you,” Harry began, and then stopped. He didn’t think that he needed to explain himself further, not when he saw the delight shining in Draco’s eyes.

“Maybe that clarified some things for you that you didn’t understand before?” Draco asked, reaching up to toy with the locks of Harry’s hair that grew above his ears.

“Yeah,” said Harry, and tugged him down until Draco was resting directly beneath him. He listened to his heart, deliberately using magic to sharpen his hearing until he could be sure of how strongly and steadily it beat. “I can’t—Draco, I can’t go through that again.”

“Can’t go through what again?”
Despite the fact that he knew he was awake, Harry still felt like he was in a dream as he spoke. “Can’t go through seeing you at the hands of your enemies. Helpless. I know they couldn’t have killed you before I could interfere. Not after they brought you to Hogwarts. But before that—they could have. And someone’s going to figure that out someday. Please use those artifacts I gave you. Make your home as safe as possible.”

“Maybe a few more shows of power, then?” Draco whispered, coaxingly, at once. “Illusions, not real ones. But be as impressive as you can. Show everyone that you don’t tolerate interference with the man who lives to amuse you.”

Harry tightened the pressure of his arms, stubbornly, insistently. “If only I could show them how much I really value you.”

“For now, this is enough,” said Draco, voice low and thrilling. “But think about the illusions. And now—” He wriggled around beneath Harry into what was probably a more comfortable position. “Show me how much you value me.”

It didn’t take much to call up lube, to prepare Draco, and to enter him. And it was only bliss to rock there, not taking his eyes from Draco’s face, and agree to the illusions when Draco asked again.

I want him safe. I want him loved.

I will have him that way.
“What do you think, my Lord?”

Gabrielle was standing with her hands clasped in front of her, eyes fastened on the ground. She wore a demure little white dress that Harry had never seen her in before, although at one time he would have been willing to say that all Veela probably wore clothes like that. She sneaked a glance at him and then lowered her gaze back to the ground.

“It’s incredible, and you know it,” Harry told her. “So stop standing there with that false modesty and tell me how you did it.”

Gabrielle smiled and moved forwards to reach up and caress the slender, springing branch of what looked like a small sapling. Its silvery wood glowed with soft white light under her touch. “This is part of my soul,” she said. “You know that.”

Harry nodded. He knew that Veela kept parts of their souls outside their bodies, hence why they had mates and these trees, which they’d had to bring with them when they came to his Court. Now there was a long stand of trees spreading along the flank of the castle into the Forbidden Forest, whispering and moving in the sunlight.

But that wasn’t the most incredible thing they were doing.

The branches of the trees reached through the stone of Hogwarts, and had woven around them so that they cradled the actual blocks and cobblestones and flagstones and walls in several places now. That was how the Veela had chosen to solve the problem of needing space for their trees but not wanting to intrude into the Forbidden Forest where the centaurs and other allies lived, or grow the trees only inside, away from the sunlight. The trees were growing out of the stone, and around it, absorbing the walls of Hogwarts into their trunks and branches.

Harry knew that his Court would be well-protected with them there. And now that the trees were used to stone, Gabrielle had explained, they would naturally carry it with them and make more as they grew. Hogwarts’s halls and rooms would gradually expand—something that Harry could use, if the number of people came into his Court that he was expecting.

“And now my soul is rooted here,” said Gabrielle, stealing Harry’s attention back. She still had her hand on the silvery tree, staring at it the way that Harry thought he used to look at Persephone—although Gabrielle had been the one to tell him that the connection between Harry and his phoenix was unlike the connection that the Veela shared with their trees, and ultimately unstable. “This couldn’t happen unless I, and the other Veela whose tree-souls are growing here, had accepted the Court as their home.”

“Then it’s less likely to encourage rebellions and plotting against me, the way that Madame de Lis tried at first.”

Gabrielle gave him a long, cool look. “There’s a reason that she gave dealing with you over to me, you know.”

“Yes. She tried to trick me.” Harry admired the wall of trees again. “What would happen if someone did attack them?”
“The trees know certain kinds of magic that wouldn’t come naturally to a tree otherwise, because they really are embodied souls, and not ordinary plants.” Gabrielle stroked her soul’s trunk again. Harry didn’t think it was his imagination that one of the white ripples of light on its bark ran down to meet her hands. “You’ll see, and your enemies will too, how well they defend themselves.”

“Good.” Harry stepped back and studied the trees once more. He wanted to take the memory of their beauty with him, to remind himself of what he was fighting for when the politics he dealt in became tiresome.

And to remind himself that there were ways to get things done other than just by charging in and using the most powerful magic he could. He might, for example, be able to weave illusions into his politics the way that Draco had advised him to.

He would see how well the lesson had entered his mind in just a short while. He and Draco were about to have their first public meeting in full view of other people since they had started this pretense about Draco being the Minister Harry loved to hurt.

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“You look cold, sir.”

Draco turned around and smiled at Lucy Lenneal. Of all the people gathered around him at the edge of Hogsmeade—the far edge of Hogsmeade, not the one nearest the gates of Hogwarts—she was the only one who knew the truth about him and Harry, the only one who would understand the way he was trembling. “Fear sometimes makes its way into the bravest of hearts, Ms. Lenneal.”

Lucy frowned, but said nothing else. In fact, a second later her gaze rose past him towards the castle, and Draco turned around with a feeling of accomplishment. He knew that he was the only reason that Harry had agreed to this meeting.

But probably not the only reason that Harry came gliding down to Hogsmeade on a cushion of wind, carried by yellow-colored currents he must have tinted with his magic so people could see them. That would be partly Harry’s sense of drama. He stepped out of the cushion after a few seconds and started hovering above the delegation’s heads, peering down.

A few of the people around them gaped, but others were bristling. Draco could read their minds as if he had used Legilimency on all of them. They were thinking that Harry’s superiority was all arrogance, and how dare he show up like this and oblige them to pay attention to him? He should be humble.

Draco bit his lip to avoid smiling. He didn’t want to ruin the surprise of what Harry was about to do.

Harry hesitated, examining the people in front of him, as if he was surprised to see so many there, although he and Draco had “negotiated” beforehand exactly how many Ministry workers should come with Draco. Then he held up his hand and made a negligent gesture with his arm towards the skies.

Draco jumped along with everyone else when a bird’s screech cut through the air. He honestly hadn’t expected that level of realism in the illusion.
The phoenix that soared down to Harry’s arm was an exact copy of Persephone, except that the flames around her flickered more blue than violet. She landed on Harry and eyed them all in silent hostility for a second, then tilted her head back and screeched at the sky again.

And a silver phoenix came diving down to Harry’s other shoulder, balancing so lightly that Draco caught his breath in sheer appreciation. He had known vaguely what Harry was going to do, but he hadn’t seen these illusions before. Harry must have practiced them in front of a mirror in order to get the exact right impression that the phoenix was landing on his shoulder, and leaning in such a way that suggested it might take to the sky again at any moment.

“So,” said Harry in a bored voice, looking at every face in sight, but Draco’s last. Draco was sure he was the only one who knew what the slightly raised eyebrow in his own direction meant. “You can see that your own creatures of the Light favor me. Can we stop this tiresome business where you declare that you have to destroy me as a Dark Lord now because clearly I only engage in Dark magic?”

“If you created that phoenix from your own magic, then it’s still a Dark creature,” Amos Diggory said, pressing forwards. Draco restrained the impulse to groan. He knew that Amos did want peace with Harry, and was probably only doing this to get the challenge someone might make later out in the open. But Harry was staring at Amos with sheer boredom. Not a good sign. “I’ve never heard of a silver phoenix.”

“Believe what you like,” said Harry, with a shrug. The silver phoenix lifted into the air and flew in a circle around Amos. Draco was close enough that he could feel the hot air wafting off its feathers. “But you know I could barely create one black phoenix before, and then only when I was striving desperately to save my own life. Could I create two?”

The silver phoenix screamed into Amos’s face. Then it began to croon, and Draco felt tears threaten from the sheer beauty of its song as it flew back and perched on Harry’s shoulder, spreading wings that shone like a butterfly’s from the light through them.

He knew that Harry had heard phoenix song, and was drawing on his own memory of it to create it now. But it was still thrilling, unearthly, and bloody convincing.

“I—I apologize, Dark Lord,” said Amos, although he glanced at Draco from the corner of his eye as though he wanted to know why Draco hadn’t told them about the Dark Lord’s silver phoenix. Draco was glad of that, actually. It would help to convince them that he was more a helpless pawn of Harry’s than a minion to be trusted. “I didn’t realize that silver phoenixes existed.”

“Now you do.” Harry glanced back and forth calmly across the crowd’s heads. “Why have you come to me?”

Amos was still staring at the illusory birds and seemed at a loss. Draco sighed delicately and stepped forwards. He didn’t mind. He had suspected he would have to play this part anyway, as the one person there who only needed to feign fear of Harry.

And it would be a good debt to remind Amos that he owed Draco later.

“We’ve come to try and make peace,” he said, and bowed until his hair almost swept the grass. When he looked back up, Harry had a perfect sneer on his face. Draco and Harry were the only ones there who would know that it was a sneer at the sight of Draco bowing, which Harry didn’t think he should do under any circumstances.
And Draco was the only one there who knew that he didn’t mind, that he liked bowing to Harry because he had sworn to Harry as his Lord. But that was another thing that his brain could keep to itself. He held the bow a moment longer, then straightened. “Are you ready to make peace, Harry Potter, Dark Lord of Hogwarts?” Make this sound as pompous as he could, and there was a chance that they wouldn’t need to repeat it any time soon.

Harry gave him a single, blazing-eyed glance, and then turned and stared at the Ministry workers. As one, they gave an uneasy shuffle backwards.

Harry half-snorted, and turned back to Draco. “I am. As long as you can give me a promise of true peace.”

“What does that mean, true peace?” Draco knew, of course. He and Harry had staged this conversation in several different variations, each of them depending on how frightened the Ministry workers who had come with Draco were. But that didn’t mean that they could skip over the spaces between, the important words, as if they really did know each other’s intentions.

Harry had scary teeth, when he chose to use them. “True peace means that you don’t attack me every time I do something that frightens you or pisses you off.”

“I’ve been warned that, as Minister, not even I can fully control the Department of Mysteries,” Draco said. He knew the Unspeakables would have spies among the people with him today, although no fully-acknowledged Unspeakables had come. In fact, he and Harry were rather counting on the spies.

Harry held out one hand, where a thin tongue of black flame danced. “Oh, that’s quite all right,” he said. “Since even the Marking I did on some of them hasn’t rendered them susceptible to reason, I’m about to give them something that will, something that came hunting for me and asked me what service it could do me.”

Even knowing it was only an illusion, Draco had to stare in frank admiration as he watched the black flame grow wings and a slender body, writhing around on Harry’s palm and breathing fire at all and sundry. Harry had said that he could make another black phoenix out of illusion, but since he would already have one on his shoulder at this meeting, Draco had suggested that it be a different kind of creature instead.

And it was. In the middle of Harry’s palm crouched a small black dragon, incredibly solid-looking, its wings spread as it hissed and deposited pools of flame in the middle of Harry’s sleeve. The fires stayed there, burning, but of course didn’t consume Harry’s skin or cloth.

*Of course not, they’re illusion,* Draco thought a second later. God, even he was in danger of falling under the influence of Harry’s sense of the theatrical.

But it took an incredible sense of control over one’s magic to keep the fires burning like that, and to keep adding to them as the skeletal dragon reared and grew in size, black scales running over a tail and feet that had been air only moments before. If their enemies knew the truth and had any sense, the amount of skill Harry had with potentially wild power would worry them more than what he had done so far.

They neither knew the truth nor had any sense, however, so they gaped as Harry’s dragon winged over to them and hovered, hissing. Amos even ducked when a few sparks fell towards his hair.
“This dragon is the representative a small clan of sentient dragons chose to send me, and it will keep watch on the Unspeakables,” Harry said softly. “It will fly through their Department of Mysteries and check on their progress in achieving peace. They don’t need to suffer damage from its fire as long as they don’t touch it. But if it sees something that looks like planning for an attack on me, it will fly back to me and report immediately.” Harry gave the assembled Ministry workers a small, nasty smile. “And it will do the same thing if it’s damaged, of course. In fact, it can turn itself insubstantial if anyone tries, so that blows will go through it. Keep in mind the way it appeared just now, as if from thin air. Then it will fly back to me.”

Draco caught his breath. Oh that was perfect, perfect. Some exceptionally powerful illusions really could spy for their masters, and Harry had just made all the excuses he would ever need for the spying as well as for the inability of the Unspeakables to hit the illusion, should they try.

“Is that—is that necessary?” Amos finally asked, having managed to clear his throat. “The Unspeakables—”

“Have done nothing but attack me for weeks in some misguided attempt at vengeance,” Harry said flatly, and paused so the phoenixes could shriek and the dragon could hiss. “I don’t trust them. This will encourage them to be more prompt with cleaning up their own house.”

“At least they will retain control over their own house,” said Draco quickly, when he saw some expressions hardening out of the corner of his eye. “So you won’t take it away from them or make it impossible for them to retain control of the Department of Mysteries, will you?”

“No,” said Harry. “As long as they follow my precise instructions.”

“That’s just control by another name!” called out one of the people Draco had brought with him. She supposedly worked in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but Draco thought this was probably enough to peg her as an Unspeakable spy. “You’re just controlling them from a distance!”

Harry turned slowly to her. The illusion-dragon took flight and glided towards her. It flew over Draco’s head on its way, and Draco shook his head in amazement. He could smell the stink of fire and sulfur coming from it. Harry had done an incredible job with the illusion.

When the dragon hovered above the woman’s head, Harry asked mildly, “You were saying?”

“You’re still intimidating us,” the woman whispered with more conviction than Draco would have thought possible. But she had betrayed herself. Even as she paled, she tried to correct what she’d said. “Them. You’re intimidating the Unspeakables into doing things they don’t want to, so that you can—”

“Keep the peace,” Harry drawled in a bored way, while his phoenixes took off and circled his head, and the dragon dropped a little closer to the woman he was speaking to. “The Unspeakables failed to do so. If there are any of them who don’t want war with me, who find the mysteries they supposedly guard more fascinating, then I suggest they speak up and restrain the ones who want to attack me. If all of them want war with me, then I’m taking precautions against a determined enemy. I don’t consider that stupid.”

The woman swallowed again, her eyes tracing the flight of both phoenixes and dragon. Then she looked down. “It’s still intimidation,” she whispered.
“And so is what some of the Unspeakables did to me,” Harry said. “Including trying to murder the man I said amuses me.” He cast Draco a sardonic look. “I do defend my toys, you know.”

Draco bit the inside of his cheek, not sure if he wanted to sneer or chuckle more. It was best to stand still and let Harry handle this, perhaps.

“Understand this,” Harry said, cutting off the woman when she opened her mouth to make some other kind of protest. “I’m the one who’s in charge here. Not you. Here on the grounds of Hogwarts, I’m in control. I won’t listen to any dissenting voices unless I know that they’re actually part of my Court and trying to change things for the better, not just to give themselves more power.” He nodded to the dragon, which turned and soared in the direction of the Ministry. “I wouldn’t have had to send a spy to the Department of Mysteries if they’d controlled themselves. They chose to attack me, for whatever mysterious motives they don’t want to tell me. Now they have a narrower range of choices.”

The woman said nothing. Draco didn’t know if she was permanently cowed, but at least she was wise enough not to interrupt this meeting with any more nattering.

“Are there any other questions?” Harry asked in a soft, pleasant voice, sweeping his eyes around the assembled crowd, and nodded expectantly at the end of it. “Very well. This is the way it will be. I’ll stay inside the bounds of Hogwarts and not venture outside them—unless you mistreat the magical creatures sworn to me, or attack me, or do something else stupid. No, I won’t define all the limits of that. I’m sure that you can figure them out on your own, intelligent wizards that you are.”

He aimed the arm that the black phoenix sat on at Draco, and Draco froze in place as the phoenix fixed him with one gleaming dark blue eye. “Stay, Minister-elect Malfoy. There are things we need to discuss.”

Amos and the rest appeared all too eager to leave, though some of them gave him pitying glances. Draco stared back at them impartially. He knew his role, and he would play it.

Harry landed, and created an illusion that would shield them from sight and sound; Draco knew that without having to ask, or he would never have done what he did next, which was whoop out loud and seize Draco in a tight hug. “You were right,” he whispered into Draco’s ear. “I can accomplish a lot more with illusions than with lethal magic or just sitting tight and hoping they leave me in peace.”

“They won’t leave you in peace, more fools they,” Draco whispered, rubbing his cheek against Harry’s. “But you did what you needed to safeguard Hogwarts.”

“And you,” added Harry, and the silver phoenix illusion moved comfortably from his shoulder to Draco’s. “You’re going to have a protector who can alert me immediately if you’re in trouble. No more Unspeakable sneak attacks.”

Draco touched a hand to the phoenix’s barely tangible talon, and smiled.
“Is that thing going to come everywhere with you?”

Draco turned around, careful not to unbalance the silver phoenix illusion on his shoulder. Of course, it was hard to do that anyway, since the phoenix was only a weaving of air and magic and light, but Draco didn’t want to give the impression that it was anything but a real bird of flesh and bone, too. “What do you mean?” he asked. “The Dark Lord of Hogwarts gave this phoenix to me for my protection. I don’t have a choice about whether it comes with me or not.”

The woman who had come to speak to him, a colleague of Amos’s, leaned forwards and studied him frankly. Draco studied her back. Brown eyes, black hair, a set mouth. She nodded once, finally, and said, “I see that this time, our Minister has some strength. Unlike Tillipop.”

Her expression said that wet tissue probably had more strength than Tillipop. Because Draco agreed, he gave her a smile. Because he didn’t want to be undiplomatic to anyone in earshot in the bustling corridors of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement who had served Tillipop, he said, “I hope that I’ll have my own strength.”

“Maybe you will,” said the woman, and put out her hand. “Alice Reynaud.”

Amos had told him her name already, but Draco didn’t want to be undiplomatic about that, either. He took her hand and kissed the air above her knuckles. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Reynaud. Amos said that you were bringing up the reports about some Obliviators who had decided that they didn’t have to listen to the council’s authority?”

“Yes.” Reynaud rattled the papers she held, gave one more dubious glance at the phoenix on Draco’s shoulder, and then obviously decided to ignore it. “Some of the council are proving stubborn about giving up their authority, as well.”

Draco fell softly into pace beside her as she turned to lead him down the corridor towards the “secret” meeting room that, in reality, he already knew about. He reminded himself to act surprised when the door opened, though. “So we have problems on two fronts?”

Reynaud glanced sideways at him, and didn’t answer. Draco was tempted to wave one hand up and down in front of her eyes, but before he could succumb to the temptation, Reynaud said abruptly, “You’re different than I thought you were.”

“In a good or bad way?” Draco asked calmly. “Or just a way that will make it hard for you to work with me?”

Reynaud pinched the air in a throwing-away motion. “Neither. But I had heard that you had little strength to face up to the Dark Lord, and here you are, ready to take charge in the way a Minister should.”

Draco turned to look at her. “Do you really think that it takes weakness to let the Dark Lord do as he wants to me without retaliating?” he asked. “Knowing that doing so keeps him from doing the same thing to other people?”

Reynaud’s eyes glinted at him. “I think that you might start out with weakness and then define it as
strength by necessity, because the Dark Lord won’t let you do anything else,” she said.

Draco concealed a wince. Reynaud was disconcertingly smart. He hoped that outwitting her wasn’t going to become a priority. “Well. That could be. But in reality, this is making the best of the situation. Whether it started in weakness or not, it didn’t stay there. Letting the Dark Lord hit me as hard as he wants keeps the same thing from happening to someone else.”

Reynaud parted her lips in a soundless whistle. “Because Malfoys have always been known for their altruism.”

“It isn’t altruism,” Draco said, and let a touch of sharpness enter his voice. “I crave the power that I’ve been promised as Minister, just like everyone else running did. But if I can serve my people and keep the Dark Lord from turning on them, too, then that’s what I’m going to do. Of course. The two goals can march with each other.”

Reynaud considered that, then abruptly answered his question. “It’s not weakness to do what you do, unless you’re giving in to the Dark Lord about something that could cost your people something they don’t want to give up.”

“Even then, I trust my own judgment more,” Draco said, and this time he let himself be dry. “If the Department of Mysteries, for example, wanted permission to attack the Dark Lord, and didn’t want to give that up, tough shit. I’m still not going to do something that would get them in trouble.”

“Well said,” said Reynaud. “Now. I’ll warn you that none of the members of the council are happy.”

“They include Unspeakables. They wouldn’t be.”

“Indeed.” Reynaud sneaked a look at the silver phoenix on Draco’s shoulder that Draco thought had some fascination. Maybe he should tell Harry to start making illusions like this for people who proved themselves worthy of Harry and Draco’s trust. It wouldn’t solve every problem, but the gift of “pets” like that would charm some people and bind others.

“Just tell me the challenges,” said Draco. “And you needn’t be afraid to say anything in front of Brightness that you would say in front of the Dark Lord.”

Again, he got a sidelong glance. “An interesting definition of fear you have there,” said Reynaud. “Why do you call the phoenix Brightness? It’s rather a plain name.”

“It’s what I hope to bring to the future of the Ministry and the entire wizarding world,” said Draco primly.

“ Aren’t you a charmer,” said Reynaud. “ Very well. I think the biggest problem is going to be Desiree Hocum. She’s a relative of Minister Tillipop’s, and of course she would be happiest if her family’s influence wasn’t going to diminish the way it inevitably will because of his resignation…”

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“My Lord!” Briseis came flying into his office, papers scattering around her. Harry stood up at once. It had to be serious, from the way she was letting the paperwork fall to the floor.

“What is it?” he asked quietly, and Briseis clenched her fists and resolutely pulled herself back
from what looked like the brink of a panic attack.

“Several wizards coming towards the gates of Hogwarts, my Lord,” she said. “They aren’t dressed like Unspeakables, but they may be them. They wear black cloaks and carry their wands openly.”

“Why didn’t the grounds tell me about them?” Harry asked, cocking his head, wondering if the new wards he had put up in an attempt to capture the use of the crystals had interfered somehow with the detection of regular enemies.

Then he heard a low, muffled pounding at the very edge of his awareness, which wavered up and down like someone beating a drum underground. Harry grimaced. He hated Dark wizards who were expert in the use of Chant Magic.

“My Lord?”

Harry raised a hand so that he could concentrate on the pounding, and Briseis grimaced but closed her mouth. This way, Harry could hear the voices separately, at least when he focused his awareness and the awareness of the grounds on them enough. Yes, there was one voice that was leading all that chanting, a strong one that Harry half-thought he recognized. Well, that wizard, whoever he was, wouldn’t get away with doing that kind of thing at Hogwarts for very long.

He was prepared to go out and battle them himself, but then he paused and thought about what Gabrielle had told him concerning the properties of the Veela-soul trees. He smiled.

“My Lord?” Briseis repeated, wary.

Harry focused on her. She had backed away from him with one hand raised, as though she understood that there was something dangerous in front of her but didn’t know exactly what it was.

Harry nodded calmly to her and murmured, “My enemies are using a form of power called Chant Magic. It blends the magical cores of several wizards under the control of a single leader, at least as long as they also blend their voices.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” said Briseis, and looked around in a way that indicated she wished she had ink and parchment so she could write it down. Harry found himself smiling. She must have been reassured by his calm naming of the enemy and his evident ability to understand and handle what force the Dark wizards were bringing in.

“Not many people have,” said Harry, and threw his cloak over his shoulders as he raised his hand. His black phoenix illusion came wafting down from the ceiling. “It’s something of a specialty of Dark wizards who live in Scandinavia, and not even they use it very often. I think someone I’ve run into before is leading the Chant.”

He touched the black phoenix’s head and breathed his will into it, and the shining bird soared out the window. “Not for very long,” Harry added casually, leaning his elbow on the sill and watching.

Briseis came up to watch beside him, breathless. Together, they saw the black phoenix soar over the gates of Hogwarts and towards the Chanters. Most of them ignored it, as Harry had known they would. Once a wizard was wound into the power of the Chant, he tended to ignore everything else.

But it wasn’t so easy when the black phoenix began to sing, a burst of music that ran easily up and down the scale, chilling the soul, thrilling it. It spread its wings and hovered over the head of the
leader, disrupting his ability to begin the next Chant with a precisely timed fling of sound.

The leader tilted his head back to glare at the phoenix, while the Chant of the ones behind him faltered, and Harry nodded in satisfaction. Yes, he recognized those black eyes and white beard.

“Watch,” he told Briseis, who was looking nervous as the wizard Harry knew as Norvald Sigursson—not his original name—pulled out his wand.

The phoenix sang until the wand was pointed at its breast, and then turned and flew a short distance towards the Forest, tauntingly. Sigursson chased it while the other Dark wizards broke up in confusion, their magic returning to them slowly, one by one, and leaving them disoriented.

“And now,” Harry said, watching the unfolding of white limbs in the darkness.

The Veela soul-trees were interwoven with the stone, and the stones moved with them as they struck. It looked like the flapping of giant wings to Harry, echoed by the movements of the black phoenix’s wings as it soared away above the Dark wizards.

But these wings were also mouths, and they drew the Dark wizards into them. The weight of the stone held them down. The living material of the tree-souls knew what to do with them. They dragged them closer, and netted them inside roots, and held them, and cradled them, and put them to sleep.

“Wonderful, my Lord,” said Briseis, in a sort of strained tone. “But what will happen to them? Surely you can’t keep them prisoners forever.”

“Of course not,” Harry said, and gestured to the trees, which were already turning so that their limbs pointed upwards and their roots pointed down again. “But the trees are going to keep them for a while. They’ll pick through their minds, Gabrielle told me. They’ll look at their memories in a deeper way than a mere Legilimens can.” He thought he heard Briseis mutter something about “mere” Legilimency, but he felt entitled to ignore it. “They’ll raise them back to earth and let them go when they’ve learned as much as they can about their purpose for coming here. And those particular wizards won’t be able to set foot on the grounds again without falling asleep at once. Unless they come in peacefully.”

Briseis said something breathless that Harry didn’t have to listen to, either. Then she said aloud, “And you really think that wizards treated that way will be future members of your Court, my Lord?”

“Probably not,” Harry admitted. “But they might be sent as negotiators. Or spies.”

“Would the trees feel it if they came in as spies?”

“Yes. Or the Veela would notice. The Veela can absorb emotions from their tree-souls, at least if the trees are interwoven with their home like this. I don’t think it works when they’re being carried from place to place.”

Briseis cocked her head slowly. Then she said, “Very well, my Lord. I did wonder at first about your decision to let the Veela stay when they’d already tried to trick you and lie to you, but they have their advantages.”

Harry smiled, and decided not to tell her that he hadn’t foreseen those advantages. He’d just done
the best he could with the magical creatures who had come to him for help, and reprimanded them
when he thought they were going beyond the limits that would allow them to coexist peacefully
with other people in the Court.

“I’m going to strengthen the wards, to make them more sensitive to Chant Magic,” he said, and
Briseis nodded. When she left the office, Harry turned inwards and descended into his bond with
Hogwarts.

He hadn’t thought about Chant Magic, but he should have, especially because he was familiar with
it. It was time to remedy that and make sure that other uncommon kinds of magic he knew about
didn’t stand a chance of hurting his people or his Court.

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Amazingly enough, while Draco had spent a rough hour with the council appointed in place of
Minister Tillipop, most of whom didn’t want to give up their power, when an attack came on him,
it wasn’t from them.

Or from the Unspeakables, for that matter. Unless the black dragon had already flown news back
to Harry that Draco didn’t know about.

There was a glow along the place where the ceiling met the wall that Draco had noticed for a
moment, but he didn’t pay it much attention. Most Eavesdropping Charms worked that way, and
Draco was putting on a performance for everyone in the room. Anyone who wanted to study that
performance, and anyone who hoped to use it to find out secrets, was welcome. Draco knew he
wasn’t being arrogant if he trusted in his ability to protect himself.

But then the white glow grew brighter, and at the moment when Draco turned his head towards it,
a bolt of lightning spat in his direction.

On Draco’s shoulder, quiet enough to be forgotten, Brightness abruptly cried out and took off in
the direction of the bolt.

Draco only understood what had happened later, at least fully; at the time, too much was going on
too fast. He saw the charm flash, he saw the silver phoenix take off, and he watched them tumble
through the air as they met. He didn’t think Brightness would be able to do much, since the
lightning bolt was meant to strike a solid target, and would pass through an illusion.

But when the light faded away, Brightness was the one who hovered in the middle of the room. A
few faint silver feathers were drifting down from its legs, and it twitched its head back and forth as
if the lightning had succeeded in shocking it. But it raised its head, tilted its beak back, and gave a
triumphant cry a few seconds later, and then drifted down and landed on Draco’s shoulder,
touching him. Draco could feel a faint pressure.

Draco stared, along with most people in the room—the ones who weren’t shouting. He had known
that Brightness was a protective illusion, but he really didn’t think Harry had endowed it with any
extraordinary powers. He had thought its main purpose was to fly and get Harry if Draco was in
danger, the way that Persephone had flown to alert people when the Unspeakables captured Harry.

Realizing that being so surprised by the phoenix’s capabilities might reveal his secret (although
they would think that Harry had told him all about what the silver phoenix could do in an attempt
to intimidate him), Draco managed to close his jaw. He reached up and let one hand rest on
Brightness’s head, taking care it didn’t sink through. He decided that looking shaken was justified, though.

“Does anyone know who that was?” he asked. “Where it came from? Or who would have the most interest in disrupting the meeting?”

“That wasn’t disrupting the meeting,” said Reynaud, looking at him as if she wondered whether he was mental. “I think it was aimed at killing you, more than it was aimed at anything else.”

“Perhaps so,” said Draco, and dipped his head. “But my questions remain the same. I have so many enemies. I thought that most of them didn’t care to adopt such direct tactics, though.”

“I’ll find out.” Reynaud’s mouth was narrow. “That could have hit several of us, along with you. I think we need to take the threat seriously.”

*That doesn’t make it easier to answer,* Draco realized, and turned with a little sigh back to continue his negotiations. He would have to ask Harry soon about the silver phoenix’s abilities. He didn’t want to look so surprised next time.

Brightness nuzzled its beak against Draco’s neck, uttering melodic little chirps that gradually calmed Draco’s pounding heart.

*Not that I’m not grateful to be alive. But I’d like to know more.*
“I wanted to see you, my Lord.”

Harry looked carefully at the man across the table from him. He seemed to be the same kind of person Harry had been interviewing lately in relation to the Court. He had a furtive look, but that probably came from dodging Ministry people as much as anything else, Harry thought. He had large hands, and a scar on the right side of his face that stood out long and silvery against his tanned skin.

“Yes, I know,” said Harry. “And you don’t need to actually call me Lord until I’ve accepted you into Hogwarts, you know.”

The man frowned. “But that’s what I need to talk to you about. I have to admit that I came here under false pretenses. I don’t want to enter the Court.”

Harry gestured with one hand, and the feet of the chair the man sat in curled around and trapped his feet. The man’s face went very still. “I mean no harm,” he said.

“You can’t mean any harm in the traditional sense, no, or my wards on the castle would already have taken care of you.” Harry put his fingers together, purely for the way that it made the man start and stare at him, and smiled. Well, you could call it a smile if you stretched things a bit. “I just want to know what you think you’re going to accomplish.”

“I was sent to sue for peace.”

Harry eased slowly back in his chair. The response wasn’t one he would have expected, and he wondered if the man would have let things go on through the proper interview and then walked away if Harry hadn’t forced the issue.

But you didn’t force it. He was the one who said that he didn’t come here for the purpose of joining the Court.

Harry decided that a neutral face was the best one he could put on it right now, and nodded sternly. “Who are you representing?”

“A certain faction in the Unspeakables which has tired of this war.” The man’s eyes went back and forth between him and the bottom of the chair, as though judging the strength of his magic from the tightness of the chair’s grip. “We know that you’re powerful. But we don’t think that’s the defining fact of the relationship the Ministry needs to have with you. You’re here to stay. All right. Then we need to understand you and work around you.”

Harry snorted a little. “The way that you did the laws that would restrain the operation of the Department of Mysteries.”

“The laws aren’t made to contain truly extraordinary situations,” the man pointed out to him, so unruffled that Harry had to smile. “You’re proof of that yourself, my Lord.”

“Why are you using the title, though?” Harry wanted to know. “Most of the time, it’s only people who’ve sworn to me who do that.”
“I believe in the practicality of acknowledging power. I was the one who volunteered to come here.”

Harry glanced at the papers on his desk, then disregarded them. He was pretty sure the man wouldn’t have used his own name when applying to come to the Court, in case someone investigated, found his connection to the Unspeakables, and denied him the right to walk onto the grounds in the first place. “What’s your name?”

“Edward Ende, my Lord.” Ende smiled at him cautiously.

“It sounds like it would have suited the Unspeakables a lot better to put you in charge from the first,” Harry told him. “Why didn’t it happen?”

Ende settled more comfortably in his chair, as though it just happened to want to hold his feet on its own. “Because they wanted war instead of peace. They thought they could beat you.”

“They should have known better.”

“Feeling your aura this close, my Lord, I’m inclined to agree.”

Harry lifted his head. “You can feel auras of power?” He knew some people could, but it was rare when it wasn’t connected to great magical power itself, and he would have felt it if Ende had that kind of strength.

“Yes.” Ende gave what looked like a self-deprecating shrug. “Not actually all that useful unless there’s a lot of powerful wizards around to feel, and that’s not always true.”

“Hm,” said Harry. He would have posted Ende on the entrance to his Court—or the Ministry—to make sure that not a lot of powerful wizards were entering unacknowledged. But it had already been forcefully brought home to him that Unspeakables had different priorities. “So. What terms is your faction of the Unspeakables going to give me?”

“I have a map in my pocket. May I get it?”

Harry lifted his hand and conjured a small, intense flame on his palm. Not hard to do, and it drew Ende’s eye. “Keeping in mind what I can do to you if you play me false, yes.”

Ende paled a little, but took out the map without trying anything funny. He held it up obviously, even sort of ostentatiously, so that Harry could see it. Harry squinted at it. He had thought it would be a map of Hogwarts and the territory around it, and that the Unspeakables would want him to give up the Forbidden Forest or something. Since that wasn’t about to happen, he would send Ende back to his people just as empty-handed as he had been when he came.

But it wasn’t a map like that at all. Instead, Harry made out what looked like a series of concentric rings around something in the center that was Hogwarts. He shook his head and glanced back at Ende. “What does that mean?”

“It shows the influence of your magic, and how far it reaches out from the castle,” said Ende. “Politically, I mean, and we did some speculation about how far you could reach with your power, too, without leaving your Court.”
Harry smiled at him. “As far as I want.”

Ende swallowed, but he didn’t look daunted. “Beg pardon, my Lord, but if your people aren’t being directly threatened, then I think that you wouldn’t want to do that as often. You’ll want to stay home and reserve your magic for more direct enemies.”

Harry considered that, then nodded. “But what’s the point of showing me how far I can reach, if you believe that?”

“We’re trying to set up a series of zones,” Ende said. “Spaces where certain actions aren’t appropriate. For example, we can gather Potions ingredients near the Ministry and London without trouble, but not in the Forbidden Forest. We should be cautious and only take plants around Hogsmeade. And so on.”

“You should be cautious even with plants around Hogsmeade, if you’re taking too much or ingredients that are really profitable,” Harry said, but he was intrigued. At least this sounded like some of the Ministry was willing to leave his Court alone, and since the Unspeakables had been responsible for most of the attacks on him, he was getting rid of some of his most powerful enemies.

“I thought you would see sense,” said Ende. “I did tell them that, that you weren’t as ruthless as they wanted to think you were, but I don’t think many of them actually listened to me.”

“But this doesn’t actually stop the attacks of the Unspeakables, does it?” Harry continued, deciding he didn’t need to comment. “Just the faction you represent. How are you actually going to restrain the rest of them?”

Ende smiled tightly. “We can do it—but we need a week. It’ll take that long to remove some people from key positions and make sure that others don’t have access to the artifacts that let them get through wards and pose more of a threat.”

“I want those golden crystals gone. Destroyed.”

“We already did that.” Ende didn’t look perturbed. “They’d outlived their usefulness, anyway.”

Harry considered asking about that, but he thought he knew what it meant, and he didn’t really want to get into Unspeakable politics. “And you think that you can keep the others in check this way?”

“Yes.” Ende’s eyes met his, and he looked unshaken. Harry wished, again, that they’d sent him to negotiate in the first place. “What we need is a distraction. Someone who can keep the people who don’t agree with us occupied while we move in behind them and stab them in the back.”

At least he’s honest about what this will be, too. Then again, Harry didn’t care enough about people who had wanted to attack his people to give a shit. “But if I be the kind of distraction that you want, then what’s going to happen to my reputation with the public? They’ll only think that I’m more violent and sadistic than ever in the end. My Court will shrink. That agreement we negotiate won’t last.”

Ende shook his head impatiently. “Some of us, at least, realize the great things that you can do with illusion. You can do things that look great and impressive but aren’t damaging. We trust you that far. Hold them for a week.”
They know that my dragon and phoenixes are illusions. Harry kept his face calm. He was glad now that he hadn’t called in the black phoenix when Ende first revealed his mission. “What happens if you don’t keep your bargain at the end of the week?”

“If we lose, this will turn green.” Ende waited for Harry’s nod before reaching into his pocket again and taking out a glinting little bubble that had smaller patches of brilliant blue colors moving around near the surface. He put it carefully onto the desk, and Harry promptly cast a few spells—with his wand, since they were easier that way—to ensure that it wouldn’t burn the wood of his desk or spy on him. It wouldn’t. “If we win, it will turn blue.”

“In a week? What happens if I’m out of the room dealing with a problem that your opponents caused?”

Ende smiled. “We thought of that. It also has an alarm built into it that will shrill all through the castle. Someone is sure to hear it and bring you word.”

Harry looked carefully at Ende. It was ingenious, and he didn’t know if he should completely trust it. Then again, the Unspeakables had shown great cleverness getting around his prohibitions and attacking him. Maybe he should accept, for once, that they were also clever when they were fighting on his side.

“I’ll take this bubble and the deal for now,” he said. “If you turn on me, then so much the worse for you. I’ll hardly be accepting or polite then.”

“I understand.” Ende gestured at the chair that held his feet prisoner. “Will you let me go so that I can return to my people and report our success?”

Harry considered him closely one more time, then snapped his fingers. The chair’s feet loosened and flowed away from Ende. He stood up carefully, arranging his robes around him as though he was worried he would walk out of the castle and into a newspaper reporter.

“We won’t fail you,” he said, finally looking up from his robes and into Harry’s eyes.

“I hope not,” said Harry. “It’s going to go badly for you if you do.”

Ende’s smile this time was thin. “We fear what they can do to us more than we fear you. Not because you’re not capable of it,” he added, when Harry opened his mouth to defend the power of his magic. “I can feel that from your aura. But because we think you’re more merciful than they are.”

“At least you have the consolation of knowing they’re going to be roasted if you lose and they come against me,” Harry said.

“That is a comfort,” Ende said, and left. Harry thought he might even have been telling the truth.

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“I need to talk to you about this phoenix,” Draco said.

He thought Harry might have looked a little offended. He certainly rolled over towards Draco and frowned as though he couldn’t understand why Draco should be talking about phoenixes when
they’d just had sex. “What about it?”

Draco extended his arm to Brightness. The illusion had landed on the bedpost a second ago, perhaps summoned by Draco’s reference to it. Draco concentrated carefully on the sensation, but there was no weight behind those gleaming talons, no sign that a heavy bird had just landed on his arm.

“I want to know how much reality it actually has,” Draco said, stroking the feathers of its back. Perhaps there was a slight cool feeling when he touched them. He thought that was his imagination, though. “It saved me from a lightning bolt the other day, when I thought the only thing it could do was scream alarms.”

“A lightning bolt?” Harry went still beside him in a way that made Draco think the whole castle was listening. “Where did that happen? And why didn’t you tell me immediately?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “What was I going to say? ‘I have to stop the meeting and go report on this to the Dark Lord who’s also my lover?’ No, it’s okay. But how real is Brightness, if he could do that? It made me look foolish, when people asked me questions after that and I had to say I didn’t know.”

“The Unspeakables know about at least some of the illusions,” said Harry absently, reaching out. Brightness hesitated perceptibly before it hopped over to Harry’s arm. Draco watched and thought how strange it was that they all treated the phoenix as real, although Harry, at least, knew he had created the bird out of magic and light and nothing more. “That Ende bloke I told you about told me they did.”

“That’s something you also should have informed me about,” Draco began, outraged. That would definitely make his job harder, if the Unspeakables might think that Harry’s dragon couldn’t do anything to them and they stepped up the attacks on Draco again.

“Oh, hush. They attacked you with that lightning bolt before they told me that. And I don’t think Ende’s faction told the others that they were sure about the illusions only being illusions.” Harry tilted his arm back and forth, watching the shine of light off Brightness’s feathers and other things that Draco couldn’t be sure of.

“That’s just conjecture, all of it,” Draco said sulkily, but went quiet when Harry raised an eyebrow at him.

“It’s strange,” Harry finally said, after peering deeply into the heart of Brightness’s silver beak and breast feathers. “It’s as though he’s taken on some extra reality.”

“Will you please explain what that means,” Draco said, rolling over and moaning into his pillow.

“Of course,” Harry said, and Draco heard a crisp sound like his hand smoothing back feathers. “It means that I made him as a pure illusion, but extra magic got added to him. He was real enough to absorb perceptions. That was the level he existed on. He could only create certain perceptions, though, you know? He could be seen and heard, but not touched.”

“It sounded like you were touching him.” Draco turned over again.

“That’s because I am.”
Sure enough, Harry was cradling the phoenix, holding it like a dove with its breast in his right hand and his left hand cupped beneath its butt. Draco stared, but couldn’t see any sign that Harry was having to be careful not to let his hands go through the illusion.

“Where did he get the rest of the magic?” Draco breathed.

“My guess? Some of it was the lightning bolt you mentioned.” Harry tossed the phoenix lightly into the air, and it flew over and landed on Draco’s shoulder, nudging its beak gently against his chin. Draco felt something this time, on the edge of sharp and round. “And some of it was my love for you.”

“That sounds very sweet, but it doesn’t make much sense,” Draco said, and he stubbornly maintained eye contact when he thought Harry would have looked away. Harry sighed and looked at the floor instead.

“All right,” Harry said. “I sent—I *can* send magic to strengthen someone I care for. I did it for Persephone when she was caged by the Unspeakables. I didn’t think I would be able to get out myself right then, but I knew I could help her break free, and she could go and tell other people.”

“She did *that*,” Draco muttered, remembering the way that Persephone had lit up all the skies between the Ministry and his house. “But what does that have to do with me?”

Harry bit his lip and reached out to take Draco’s hand. Draco took it, and looked sideways at Brightness sitting proud and alert on his shoulder. He didn’t *think* this was going to be a bad thing…

Of course, he had been wrong before.

“I think I sent magic to you through Brightness,” Harry whispered. “I left open a conduit through which magic could flow if you were in danger. If I had an ally among the Unspeakables I cared deeply for, then maybe I could send magic through the black dragon in the same way if they were attacked.”

Draco viciously threw the thought of someone else Harry loved with equal intensity away from him. “That’s your best theory about what happened?”

“It is.” Harry fastened his gaze earnestly on him. “Brightness shouldn’t be as mixed in reality as it is. But that’s the only thing I can tell you for certain happened, because it happened once before with Persephone.”

Draco sighed out. Of course that kind of thing would happen when your lover was a Dark Lord. He tightened his clasp on Harry’s hand. “I’m honored that you love me as much as you loved Persephone,” he said.

“More, I think,” said Harry. “It’s just—I’m sorry. I didn’t know that would happen with Brightness. And you’re right, I should have warned you.”

“How could you have warned me against something you didn’t know would happen?” Draco countered, light-headed with relief. At least he thought it was something normal, and not something that would make Harry have to take Brightness away.

“Draco.”
Draco looked up. Harry was leaning towards him, and there was a sharp gleam in his eyes that Draco recognized and responded to.

“So, I have to create this illusory distraction for a week to give Ende’s people time to rebel against the other Unspeakables,” said Harry casually. “Would you like to help?”
Dance Into Fire

“I suppose you don’t want to tell me what you’re doing?”

Draco had wondered how long it would take someone to approach him. He turned around and looked at the woman who had finally had the courage to ask. He was near Knockturn Alley, and had been standing and staring into it. But now he did the same thing down Diagon Alley instead of answering her, and Brightness spread its wings and shrieked above his head.

“What’s going on? What’s happening?” The woman clutched her basket and looked nervously between him and Brightness, then back.

Draco let a little more silence stretch before he shook his head forgivingly. He actually wasn’t here to scare people so badly that they appealed to him for help. “I was only looking at places that might burn,” he said.

The witch looked back at the people who had paused in their own shopping, though Draco didn’t know whether all of them had recognized him. A hovering silver phoenix could get a lot of attention. “They might burn? Why? Is there—is there a lightning storm coming?”

Draco sighed, deeply. “No. It’s worse than that. The Dark Lord of Hogwarts has heard that people here are plotting rebellion against him.”

The witch closed her eyes and put her hand on her heart, although she wasn’t that old. “Who’s doing it? You couldn’t tell him that there’s no one here who would be foolish enough to do anything like that? You have his ear.”

Which meant she, at least, had recognized him. Draco gave her a kind smile. “I’m talking to him as hard as I can. But in the end, political power doesn’t mean much against magical power, you know.”

The witch nodded, a bleak look in her eyes that made Draco suspect she had come into conflict with Death Eaters during the war, and knew it as well as anyone. “But who are these people? How did the rumors get started?”

Draco looked at her searchingly. “You’re sure you haven’t heard anything solid? Names you could give me? They have to be rumors?”

“No one here would do something like that.” The woman looked around as though she would find supporters crawling out of the walls. But even some of the people who had been watching them were turning away now, as if they thought the Dark Lord of Hogwarts would slaughter them for looking sideways at his pet Minister. “There has to be—someone who’s started spreading the rumors who isn’t us.”

“But most of the people here right now don’t live in the alleys, do they?” Draco shook his head sadly. “They have homes elsewhere. So I couldn’t trust them as a source of information, anyway.”

“Has your Lord thought about——”

“He’s not my Lord,” Draco interrupted quickly, rabid though the denial made him feel. He had
sworn his loyalty to Harry on his knees, but only in a glamoured guise. But the game he and Harry were playing was necessary to their peace, so he had to maintain it. “I just have to put up with the role that circumstances forced on me.”

The woman stared at him for a second, startled out of her concerns. “And he lets you get away with saying things like that?”

“He thinks it’s amusing. The last bit of freedom I try to have from him.” Draco folded his arms and gave a shiver that would have seemed theatrical to lots of people who were thinking clearly. But the witch wasn’t, and Draco couldn’t much blame her, considering what she was threatened with. “Listen. It would help if you could give me names. At least that way, not everyone would be transformed.”

“Transformed? What do you mean?” The woman’s voice was distant and hoarse.

Draco turned his head towards the shimmer of transparent color from down the alley. “It’s too late,” he whispered.

The flames curled from the windows and doors of the shops. Draco could hear cries. If he could have smiled—which was asking a lot, given the enormous risk of the plan—he would have done it then. They had contacted the owners of those shops and arranged to pay them an enormous sum to be elsewhere. The cries were all part of the illusion.

So were the realistic forms that staggered, burning and swatting at the strange flames on their clothes, into the alley a minute later. Sometimes they lifted their arms towards the sky, as though beseeching the unseen Dark Lord not to roast them. Sometimes they fell down and lay still, but always twitching, so that the stunned spectators could see that they were still alive. Sometimes they began growing fangs and feathers right there.

Draco shook his head slowly. He didn’t think most of the people around him were paying any attention to him at the moment, but they had to think in terms of preserving the illusion of Draco’s behavior as well as the ones that Harry was creating, right now. “He warned me how it would be,” he whispered. “I didn’t take him seriously, and now, other people are the ones paying the price.”

Once again, no one really looked at or listened to him. They flinched back when the first illusory person turned into a bird, though.

Harry had a fondness for birds, Draco thought, tilting his head back to watch this one fly. Well, it didn’t matter. He didn’t think that most people outside Ende’s faction of the Unspokenables knew about Brightness and the black phoenix being illusions, and Persephone had certainly been solid enough.

And it gave Harry experience in shaping convincing wings and feathers for his newest illusions, which was all to the good.

The next one didn’t form a phoenix, but a strange eagle with red legs and eyes and blazing black, red-touched feathers. It hissed and landed on the roof of a shop, legs flaring out as though to make sure that it didn’t spill over the side when it took its perch. It stared around, and gave another hiss.

When it leaped, a small waterfall of fire flowed down the side of the house in its wake. The stones of the wall busily began to turn red and green and blue.
“I don’t know what he intends to do.” The witch near Draco had fallen back, and she had her arms crossed and her shoulders hunched as if the best thing she could do would be to make herself small, as if that might encourage Harry’s notice to travel elsewhere. “What does he think this is going to accomplish?”

“It’ll ease his temper,” said Draco, and watched as a trunk crawled out of the window of another shop. It had grown legs, and the legs curled under it and became the powerful webbed feet of a duck. It had wings, too, a second later, sprouting from the keyhole and the grain of the wood on the sides. It didn’t change any more, but launched itself into the sky after the eagle. “I think that’s the best we can hope for.”

“But people are dying.”

“Transforming,” Draco reached up and touched Brightness, what he could feel of the slightly cool feathers and the heavy feet resting on his shoulder. The phoenix gave no sign that anything was wrong, only watching the imaginary transformation of the buildings of the alley, and now and then cocking its head back as though it wanted to see to the arch of the sky. “The Dark Lord probably thinks of it that way. That they’re transforming the way the world changed when he entered it.”

“You’re just as bad as he is, if you can see it like that,” the woman whispered.

“How much time do you want me to spend?” Draco asked her, and sighed and stared at his feet. “It’s already been days.”

She didn’t have time to respond to that. Instead, the roofs of two buildings apparently fell in, smoldering ashes piling on top of them and whirling up in sparks that settled on the buildings nearby. Now everything was growing legs, and wings, and elbows, and feathers, and the fire was making new images of winged serpents and falcons with glowing talons. They swooped and shrieked over Knockturn Alley.

Draco opened his mouth. Really, the next part of the plan should have started by now. People were hurrying out of Diagon Alley to the Apparition points, or just Apparating right where they stood, and the next part of the plan wouldn’t work at all if they had no audience.

Then, Harry was there.

He appeared in front of Draco, his hands extended and his eyes shining with power. Knowing this, too, was an illusion didn’t diminish the shock of his coming for Draco. He found himself leaping backwards, while his heart performed a similar leap, into his mouth. Harry held out a hand and touched the edge of Brightness’s feathers.

Brightness rose from Draco’s shoulder and hung in the air over Diagon Alley, crooning a relentless, soft song that made at least a few people glance over their shoulders and then come back, although they hesitated as they did it.

“Listen,” said the illusion of Harry, his voice projected more powerfully than any living voice could stretch. Draco winced, both from the noise and because he knew that Harry had to be nearby to make the illusion that strong. At least he would be concealed in a safe place, not charging into the middle of danger the way he had been when he burned that apothecary in Knockturn Alley.

The illusion turned around. Not all of its movements were as smooth as they should be; some looked unnaturally smooth, as though the Dark Lord of Hogwarts was spinning on a turntable.
Draco took an anxious step forwards. He hoped that it would look to the people in the alley behind him as though he wanted to guard them from Harry’s wrath, but what he most wanted was to prevent too many of them from getting a good look at the way Harry’s feet moved.

“Listen to me,” said the illusion again, and at least he had the audience this particular announcement needed, if only because those in sight were too stunned or scared to move. “You will not be harmed.”

Draco heard someone make a noise like air escaping from a balloon, and had to smile. At least there was someone with enough bravery to stand up to Harry. That was—not what he had expected, exactly, but it meant that the spirit of the wizarding world of Britain wasn’t as crushed as Harry had feared it would be. It was a good thing from Harry’s perspective.

“You will not,” Harry repeated. “This is a test. I wanted to see what would happen. And I can put things back the way they were before.”

The illusion turned this time to face the burning, writhing buildings of Knockturn Alley, and raised its hands. Draco was glad to see that this motion looked human, at least, with muscles bunching in the shoulders under the robes. Harry must have worked even more than he had with Draco, with mirrors that would surround him and show him from all sides, to get the creases in the cloth exactly right.

The sparks that had flown up into the air trembled and gleamed and then reversed course. They began to rain down again, gathering themselves into shapes so swiftly that Draco’s eyes lost track of them. He knew that was part of the point, of course. What someone didn’t see through, they would have a hard time thinking was imaginary.

The birds that had circled above the alley began to dive back down. The winged trunk became a trunk again, and squeezed through the window it had come out of. The largest falcon, its feathers shimmering blue and silver and other colors that were both part of and not part of fire, landed on the highest of the renewed roofs and broke apart into a huge puff of sparks. Tumbling, burning, they fell on the ground and smoldered for a second in the streets. The next second, they were the front steps of one of the buildings again.

Draco bowed his head. Let other people think it was out of fear of the man in front of him. It was in silent wonder and homage to Harry’s practice with illusions. One could create an illusion and then reverse it exactly without trouble, but someone would have noticed if Harry did that, of course. So he put the illusion back to “normality” in different ways, which meant coming up with new patterns of color and form and envisioning different ways for them to interact.

At last, the colored fire was nothing but a wind of power, green and red and blue and violet like pieces of a shattered rainbow, that flew over and settled on Harry’s shoulders and head. He raised his hands as though to welcome them home, and for a second, trembled as he absorbed the power. Draco could feel some of the same tremors coursing through their rapt, watching audience.

That, too, had been planned.

Harry finally turned back to face the expanse of Diagon Alley, and bowed. For a second, Draco thought he saw one of his hands go transparent, and grimaced. Even for Harry, something like this wasn’t easy, and he couldn’t do it with the careless grace he would have been able to make the black dragon flap its wings and hiss at the Unspeakables.
“Do you have something to say to me, Minister Malfoy?”

Luckily, Harry had managed to seize on that grimace. Draco backed up, shaking his head. “No, no, my Lord,” he whispered. “Only—only that I wanted—to remind you that technically, I haven’t been elected to the office yet.”

“And maybe you won’t be, if you displease me.”

This close, even though it was only an illusion and Draco knew most of the burning feeling in the air came from the magic of the other exhausted images, there was still a rumble through his bones that threatened to drive Draco to his knees. He shivered and held Harry’s eyes. Behind them was the intelligence of the man he was in love with, if not right here.

“But I know you’ll punish me, if I displease you,” he said, and his voice descended to a level that he’d never achieved before. He wondered if Harry would know how to react to it.

For a second, Harry paused, with one hand raised as if he didn’t know whether to bestow a blessing on Draco or a blow. Then he snorted and shook his head. “I will punish you. Transform you into one of those birds that you saw just now. And what if I don’t bring you back? Are you going to perch on the desk in the Minister’s office and squawk out orders for the rest of your life?”

_This is a game_, Draco reminded himself again. _A more enjoyable game than some we’ve played in the past. And if we can get those Unspeakables who are hostile to us looking the other way for just a little while longer, then Ende’s people can destroy them and we can end this charade all the sooner._

He didn’t think his face or his bow or anything else about his body showed that, as he bent before Harry once more. “Whatever you think best, my Lord.”

Harry waited some more, and then the hand came down in what would look a fairly heavy clap on Draco’s shoulder from the outside. Draco winced, but it was all for show, of course. The illusion had none of the reality that Brightness did.

“If you can always remember your place that well, I’ll keep you around longer,” Harry said casually. “At least until you cease to provide me with entertainment.”

Fires leaped around him again, causing Draco to take a jump back in surprise. He had known that Harry would leave—that is, banish his illusion—when the game was done, but he hadn’t thought it would be this way.

The fires burned back into the stones beneath them, and Harry was gone, along with the drift of ashes and sparks that had settled on him.

Draco swallowed and turned to face their audience. Audience gained, mission accomplished, and he knew Harry would be traveling back to Hogwarts swiftly enough that no Unspeakables could show up and threaten him.

_I wish I could be with him._

*

_I wish we didn’t have to lie to the whole world._
Harry lingered in the shop that he had taken over for a moment, even though he knew he shouldn’t, using a Far-Sight Spell to watch Draco talking to the crowd. He was calming them down and stirring them up with thoughts of future danger at the same moment, playing them the way only a born politician could.

Harry was no stranger to the longing in his eyes. He was tempted, sometimes, to chuck the whole pretense and go live with Draco in a cottage somewhere. Nothing was more important than Draco.

Except that he’d made promises to Hogwarts, and a bond. He’d said that he would provide sanctuary for people, and stability for magical creatures in contrast with a Ministry that looked increasingly unstable.

Of course, when Draco took over the Ministry, things should calm down. But Harry knew that he would still have the dance to be danced in public, unless the day came when they managed to stabilize things enough that everyone would accept the Minister and the Dark Lord of Hogwarts as acknowledged lovers.

_and with the fear that we’ve stirred up in them, that’s a long time coming._

Harry sighed. He couldn’t have complete honesty in front of everyone, but he could do his duty by his lover, and that included leaving once he was no longer needed here. He bowed his head and vanished into the wilderness of Apparition.
“What has the effect of my distraction been on others?” Harry flung himself sideways in his chair, dangling a leg idly over the arm. Briseis, who stood in front of him, gave him a severe look, but since she couldn’t keep her mouth from twitching, Harry knew she was more affected than she liked to pretend.

“They seem to have decided they should fear you again, my Lord,” Briseis said, and put the newest stack of letters and requests for interviews on the table. “There are a lot fewer people requesting entrance to the Court today.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He had recognized there would be consequences for what he had done, and if he hadn’t particularly wanted these consequences, that didn’t matter, terribly. They were the consequences he had.

“Then we’ll look through these and see what happens next,” he said, and picked up the first letter from the top of the pile. He paused and stared at the name. For a second, he knew it was familiar, but the familiarity hovered just beyond reach, like one of his own illusions.

Then he knew, and snorted a little. “She’s at the top of the list,” he said, and held out the letter to Briseis.

“She is, in fact,” said Briseis, consulting her own list after a glance at the letter. “She’s the first one who arrived for today. But you would have wanted me to move her to the top of the list if she hadn’t been, wouldn’t you?”

Harry had to grin again at the faint outrage in Briseis’s voice over the disruption to procedure, but he also had to nod. “Yes, I would. This is important, Briseis. It really is.”

“I still think that Nightshade is a pretentious thing to call yourself,” said Briseis, apparently just making sure she could still slip her two Knuts in, and then snorted and left the room when Harry didn’t deign to respond.

Harry looked thoughtfully again at the name on the letter. Yes, maybe Briseis was right and it was a pretentious thing to call yourself.

On the other hand, it was also the name of the hag Draco had met in Knockturn Alley, shortly after Harry had burned Darkest Signs. The hag who had told Draco that she could see how close they were, and how Harry should look for her when he wanted to speak to her. That she had come to him instead made Harry more than curious.

* * *

“You must realize that the Dark Lord is out of control.”

Draco halted the minute he stepped into the room where he had been told the meeting with the Ministry’s representatives would be today, yet another of the secret places located behind the public walls and offices. Instead of the group of council members, flunkies, Unspeakables, and politicians he had expected, there was a single wizard seated at the head of the table, dressed in red robes.
Draco leaned against the wall and folded his arms. The man could probably sense his tension already, so Draco would discharge it in whatever way he liked. “I don’t, particularly. Whose control?”

The man said nothing. Draco didn’t have Brightness on his shoulder right now—he was investigating a huddled, whispering mass of witches and wizards down a corridor Draco had passed through—but he would come in a second’s call. So Draco didn’t draw his wand or react defensively even when the wizard rose.

“Whose control is not important,” the wizard said. Draco thought for a second he knew the voice, grave and impersonal, but then he realized it was the tone. He’d heard that tone before, mostly when people were discussing “the greater good.” “But anyone who can do what he did to Knockturn Alley, and then reverse it, is too powerful to remain unchained.”

“And again I ask you,” Draco said, giving him a dazzling smile, “who holds the chains?” He sent a thought to Brightness, and felt the phoenix coming towards him.

“That is also not important,” said the man, and he gave Draco what Draco thought was a searching look, although the hood over his face made his expressions impossible to discern. “Why do you not understand? You seem blasé about this, when from everything I have understood about you, you are a cunning politician. You should understand.”

“I understand that you want your hands to be the ones on the chains,” Draco replied, and when the man made a gesture of dissent, “Or the hands of people you trust. You don’t trust him. You don’t trust me.”

“Who could trust him?”

The simplicity of those words made Draco laugh aloud, even as Brightness circled through the door and flew over to land on his shoulder, making the wizard start. “Have you thought about what he’s done so far?” Draco managed to add, when he’d subdued the chuckles. “The way he’s held back from destroying so many people who invaded his territory? Instead, he’s taken their wands or put them to sleep or marked them. If you think it’s impossible to trust him, then you haven’t been paying attention.”

“We could trust many a one of lesser power. His is too great.”

“Why didn’t you ever make an effort to bring Vol-Voldemort under control?” Draco cursed the tremor in his own voice, but he couldn’t just say “Dark Lord,” not when there was the risk of its being misunderstood.

“He was not amenable to it.”

Incredulity cracked through Draco, and he kept from laughing only by reaching up and resting his hand on Brightness’s back. He stroked, and Brightness crooned and dipped down his head to reach him, running a strand of Draco’s hair gently through his beak. The man watched it, motionless. “You think this one is?”

The man shifted, and Draco had the impression that he frowned, though of course that was an impression only and not something Draco could actually check by looking under his hood. “It is difficult to explain.”
“No, it’s easy to explain,” said Draco, because it was. “You didn’t try to bring Voldemort under control because he was insane and too terrible. You only think you can do it with Harry for the same reasons that you don’t need to control him: because he’s only killed one person and he keeps holding himself back. You’re terrified of him, but not terrified enough.”

The man leaned forwards. “Bold words for someone who stands alone in a room with his enemy,” he breathed.

“Well, now you’ve gone and done it,” Draco said, rolling his eyes, a second after the loud screech from Brightness echoed through the room. “You know that he’s going to know about this now. And you just declared yourself a personal enemy of mine and not only of the Dark Lord of Hogwarts. How do you think he’s going to react, to hear you threaten his pet Minister?”

The man paused in the middle of reaching for his wand, and gave Brightness a steady look. “The phoenix is not real.”

“Real enough to save me from the last assassination attempt the Unspeakables tried,” Draco told him, with a nasty smile. “Or are you going to try another one right now?”

This time, the glance the man gave Brightness was definitely one of dislike. “We should have killed the bloody thing when we had the chance,” he muttered.

That was as good as claiming responsibility for the earlier assassination attempt, as far as Draco was concerned. He kept stroking Brightness and waiting, watching, not sure what would happen next or when it would happen, but knowing that the phoenix was part of what would help keep him safe.

“Can’t you speak to him?”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “Who are we talking about here? The phoenix or the Dark Lord? And why should I convince either of them to listen to the pleas of someone who has admitted that he wanted to kill me?”

“There are other things we could do,” said the man in a low, charged voice, his gaze passing over Brightness again. Draco touched one of the phoenix’s talons in silent gratitude. Thank you, Harry. You saved my life more than you knew when you gave him to me. “Things that would leave you in power and keep you safe from the Dark Lord.”

“And I’ve already told you that he knows about those plans and my participation in them, if I was mad enough to join you, based on his spy here,” said Draco, and jerked his head hard at the phoenix, who blinked thoughtfully. “I don’t know what you want me to say, but you can’t have what you seem to want, which is control of the Dark Lord. And you can’t have control of me.”

The man sighed. The next second, a heavy blanket seemed to settle over Draco’s mind.

That marks him as fairly powerful, with the ability to cast a non-verbal Imperius Curse.

And that was all Draco knew, before the comforting numbness and softness took him and told him exactly what he should be doing.
“I suspect that your clever toy told you all about me.” The hag paused with one hand flexing on her chair arm. Harry was already too experienced with politics to think the pause was anything but artistic. “Or should we call him what he is, which isn’t your toy but your lover?”

Harry had already remembered Draco talking about this hag, Nightshade, and how she knew things she shouldn’t. That kept him from reacting as badly as he might have with no warning. But he still shook his head as he examined the woman who sat in the chair across from him, with her wrinkled skin and her huge black eyes and her blue lips. “There are plenty of people who would say that you’re taking a bigger risk by saying that than by approaching me in the first place, madam.”

Nightshade began to wheeze with laughter, her hands pressed to her heart as if she thought the next cackle would finish her off. “Madam,” she gasped at last, when Harry was on the verge of demanding to know what was so funny. “Oh, it’s so long since someone last called me that, you have no idea, boy.”

“I know that you’re using informal titles on purpose,” Harry said. “Just as you’re revealing how much you know on purpose. But I’d rather that we could get past that and just start speaking to each other informally.”

Nightshade sat up in her chair in a brisk way that made Harry sure they were finally coming to the point of her visit. “Indeed. Well. I told your lover that I have what some ignorant people have called the Sight, for the want of a better name.”

Harry didn’t know what was expected of him, other than a nod, which was what he gave.

“There are certain strange and twisted things about that are hard to see the end of,” said Nightshade, and knocked on the desk in front of him. Although Harry thought he was sitting up and paying attention quite enough already, he swung his legs to the floor and sat up straighter, and Nightshade nodded and smiled at him. “Like threads that are braided into each other, threads that twine through the center of a garment and they’re harder to see than the fringe on the outside… Anyway! I can see some of those threads, but not all the twists in them.”

“One of those twists brought you here today?” Harry asked, unable to imagine what else it would be. Nightshade was presumably one of the Dark wizards who didn’t need sanctuary and could protect herself quite well outside the Court.

“The sudden clarification of a twist,” said Nightshade, with a satisfied bob of her head. “The thread unwarped, and I could study the full length of it. I had known that a fire was coming, but not what started it or who stood at the heart of it.” She leaned forwards. “You stand at the heart of it.”

“Well, that was probably something you should have expected, with a powerful wizard running around in the world who’s already started a few fires,” Harry returned, unreasonably irritated. Nightshade promptly cackled back at him. “Indeed, yes! But the cause of the fire is also clear to me.” She paused and regarded Harry.

“Yes?” Harry didn’t permit himself to blink, no matter how childish that made him.

“The fire starts because you start it,” said Nightshade softly, “in vengeance for the pain of your lover.”
“This is today?” Harry was standing on both feet before he thought about it, his hands clenched on the edge of his desk. He smelled wood smoldering and looked down to see the desk slowly catching on fire. He yanked his hands away and focused on Nightshade. “Tell me where and when.”

“The thread can still split and fray,” said Nightshade, not seeming tense at all, which just angered Harry further. “You can still start this fire burning, and teach them all the fear of your power, make them all so afraid that your goals will be achieved and you can cow them.”

“Or?” Harry snapped out, since it was the only way he would get the information about who and what was hurting Draco and where.

“Or you can let your lover endure a little danger on his own, and still rescue him, and not burn them.” Nightshade folded her hands in her lap, eyes intent on him. “You might consider the consequences for your reputation if you create this fire. I know that you tire of the game you must play with your lover. I know you want to emerge into reality again.”

“Do you think it’ll really matter in the long run?” Harry was impressed with himself for keeping his face and voice both bland, when what he wanted was to burst out of the castle and go running to Draco’s aid. “Does anything I do have that much of a consequence on their fear? Or will they always fear me no matter what?”

Nightshade hesitated for the first time. *So she doesn’t see everything after all,* Harry thought, and waited.

“They will always fear you, some of them,” Nightshade finally admitted. “But less of them will fear you if you do not start this fire, and you will be able to emerge from hiding with your lover earlier.”

“How long?”

“Not even my intellect can answer that question without more context,” Nightshade said.

“How long until I can stop pretending to be Draco’s enemy, if I don’t burn them?” Harry clarified, through numb lips. His magic was tugging at him, and he suspected it was the part embedded in Brightness. Draco wasn’t in pain at the moment, but that meant little. He was still in danger, and Harry wanted to go to him.

“More than ten years.”

Harry’s resolve crumbled and withered away, and he shook his head. He raised his hand, and the black phoenix flew down and to him, a scrap of light and air not existing and then there.

“It’s not worth it,” he told Nightshade, and then paused and added one more explanation. “Not in the end. Maybe I’ll finally make people see that they shouldn’t attack me, and that will be a substitute for peace.”

“Perhaps you should reconsider.”

Brightness’s scream resounded in Harry’s head, and he shook it. “Your petition for entrance into the Court is granted,” he said. “But not your other one.” The floor opened beneath him, and he began the swifter journey to the edge of Hogwarts’s grounds. The black phoenix was flying behind
him, and Harry took comfort, for a moment, in the fact that this phoenix had no name, and wasn’t solid like Persephone, and couldn’t be hurt like her.

Then he turned forwards. He had Draco and another phoenix to save.

*

“Come. Sit down here.”

It was reasonable, Draco supposed, though a while ago it might not have seemed that way. The man, who had flung his hood back the moment he had Draco under control, had led Draco and Brightness through a maze of secret rooms. Brightness had screamed and cried, until the man had conjured a cage for him. That was appropriate, Draco supposed. The phoenix should be quiet, and he smoldered silver. Well, he could do that if he wanted. Just like the man could command Draco if he wanted.

This was all right and proper.

The chair was in the middle of the immense room. Draco sat and looked vaguely around. He saw crystal chains, and something that looked like a cage poised to drop on the end of one of the chains. He wondered if the Department of Mysteries—that was where they were, the man had spoken to someone who’d said so—had a problem with rats.

Big rats, from the size of the cage.

“You’re all right, Ende?” A woman stepped up to the red-cloaked man and spoke softly to him. “You know that he’s going to arrive soon.”

Ende sighed and nodded. “Yes, Gloria. And I know now that you were right. What he did in Knockturn Alley—too powerful to be trusted, even if it was just illusion. And the Department of Mysteries can’t afford a schism.” He touched his forehead. “Is that what you wanted to hear? Go and tell Michelle she was right.”

The woman looked satisfied, and hurried away. Ende turned towards Draco and shook his head.

“I did hope I could trust him,” he muttered. “I wish he’d been able to.” He glanced back at the crystal cage. “This…it isn’t ideal, but it’s the best we can do.”

Draco didn’t know what he meant. But he knew that Ende hadn’t ordered him to rise from the chair, so he sat there.

And Brightness screamed and battered his wings against the cage, and then something began to shake. Something distant, Draco supposed, grinding. It sounded like the vibration of stone against stone.

Something powerful began to tingle at the edge of Draco’s awareness. He thought it was the same thing that was making the stones vibrate.

Something was coming. Something was rising.

Draco sat back, with a vague smile, and awaited developments.
Obliteration

Harry came out of the wall with a ripple of fire. He knew that. He knew that he had traveled part of the distance in fire. He wasn’t stupid. A lot of his magic was bound to Hogwarts, but what wasn’t still had an affinity with fire. It was one reason he had chosen those particular illusions to create in Knockturn Alley, and to create phoenixes so often.

But he knew that a tunnel of fire, dancing with shimmering colors, connected him to the Department of Mysteries. He didn’t know how many wards he had burned. He didn’t know exactly what distance he had crossed, or whether he had passed through the non-space that Apparition used to work.

He knew that he homed in on the tug on his magic that Brightness possessed, and that was enough.

He ended up in the room where Brightness perched in a cage. Draco was sitting on a chair not far away. Harry nodded a little to see that he was unharmed. The Unspeakables were smarter than he had thought.

But not smart enough that they were going to make it out of this.

Harry turned around, and a blast of power hit his chest. It didn’t break any ribs or damage his heart, but to be fair, Harry wasn’t sure that was the intent. The caster was Ende, and his eyes widened when he saw Harry still standing and walking towards him.

“Hi,” said Harry, and heard his voice echo oddly. Well, he was feeling a little like he had when Persephone died and he had to bind her essence back into his bond with Hogwarts. Perhaps he looked like it, too, because Ende was backing away from him and the woman next to him was following suit. “I think that you have a few things of mine. I think that you made a promise to me, and now you’re breaking it. I think you’ve annoyed me often enough.”

Ende opened his mouth to say something. Harry assumed it was going to be a protest, or a promise. He actually, literally did not care. The woman beside Ende was casting something that looked like a Patronus, presumably to summon more Unspeakables to the scene, but Harry didn’t care about that, either.

He held his hands out in front of him and blew through them. Maybe he didn’t need to do that. But the point was that it felt right and natural, and right now, he was running almost entirely on instinct.

His breath caught fire as it came out on the far side of his hands. Harry lifted his palms, and the fire danced on them, shaped like silhouettes of fingers, spreading out in waves of red and purple and white and orange, so bright that Ende flinched back from them. The Unspeakable woman didn’t, which proved she was tougher.

But maybe dumber, Harry conceded, as the spreading fire touched her and she changed. Or perhaps she had decided that since his last weapon had been convincing illusion, the same thing would be true of the weapon that he had carried into the heart of the Unspeakables’ domain.

There was a sound like a butterfly turning inside out. Or so Harry assumed. He had never turned any butterflies inside out, though he was in the frame of mind where he thought it might be fun to
A brilliant bird, like a white peacock although the trailing tail was shorter, soared away from Harry and further into the Department of Mysteries. Harry hoped she found her way out. He had no intention of letting this part of the Ministry stand long enough to house her forever.

He turned back to Ende. Ende was sweating, but he had in his eyes something of the calculating look that had brought him to Harry’s court in the first place. He slid his wand into the holster on his arm and held out his hands, palms up.

Harry waited. He had enough power swirling around him, the flames caressing the chains and what looked like a trap hanging from the ceiling, that he knew no one could charge him in the next little while without turning into a bird. He could afford to listen if Ende couldn’t do anything to hurt him.

“I wanted you to use illusion, that’s true.” Ende spoke quickly, breathlessly. “I simply didn’t understand what I was asking you to do, and the way you would respond to it. I knew it was illusion, but it impressed me as if it was real.”

“And so you panicked and decided that you couldn’t trust me after all,” said Harry. His head was filled with a great blankness, a great peace. He stretched his hands out in front of him, and the crystal trap melted and dripped, the chains turning into snakes that perched on the walls for a second and then flowed to the floor. They were dancing around each other, necks entwining. For a moment Harry thought he saw their tails melding and blending together, creating an amphisbaena right in front of him.

Then he looked at Ende, who crossed his hands in front of his heart and closed his eyes as though he was expecting to die right there and then.

“What—what else could I have done? I needed to get you here, and I needed to not hurt him. He’s still basically going to be the Minister, even if you helped try.”

He could almost hear the sound of Ende blinking, but he answered readily enough. “The Imperius Curse. I haven’t given him any commands except the ones to come here and stop fighting. He was supposed to be the bait, not someone we were going to hurt.”

“You don’t think that interfering with his mind hurt him.” It wasn’t that much of an effort for Harry to keep his voice down, almost gentle, almost a croon. Ende would be a fool if he trusted that, and Harry didn’t think he was. On the other hand, he might be desperate enough to trick himself into thinking that Harry was losing his anger.

The way he spoke next said he was. “What—what else could I have done? I needed to get you here, and I needed to not hurt him. He’s still basically going to be the Minister, even if you helped

Understand,” Harry said, listening to the chimes of his own voice in something like wonder, “I’m tired of this. And no amount of pleading is going to turn this around.”

“If I apologize?” Ende came a step forwards, although it must have cost him a lot in fear to do so. “If I say that you can have me, and I’ll be the sacrifice for all the foolishness that the others have done? You can kill me or transform me, as long as you leave the Department of Mysteries alone.”

“But you were the one who came to me and actually tried to broker a peace treaty,” Harry murmured, turning to Draco and checking on him again. Draco still had a faint smile on his lips. “There’s no guarantee that the others would leave me alone if I killed you. What did you do to him?”

He would almost hear the sound of Ende blinking, but he answered readily enough. “The Imperius Curse. I haven’t given him any commands except the ones to come here and stop fighting. He was supposed to be the bait, not someone we were going to hurt.”

“You don’t think that interfering with his mind hurt him.” It wasn’t that much of an effort for Harry to keep his voice down, almost gentle, almost a croon. Ende would be a fool if he trusted that, and Harry didn’t think he was. On the other hand, he might be desperate enough to trick himself into thinking that Harry was losing his anger.

The way he spoke next said he was. “What—what else could I have done? I needed to get you here, and I needed to not hurt him. He’s still basically going to be the Minister, even if you helped
him to steal the election.”

Harry glanced at him over his shoulder, and he really couldn’t help it, the way his lips twitched and he laughed. “Yes. Because illegality is such a concern for an Unspeakable.”

Ende flinched, but did meet his eyes. “Believe it or not, I disapprove of the vast majority of what my colleagues have done as a result of this war.”

Harry abruptly lost interest in the conversation. It was perfectly obvious where it would go, how Ende would defend the same positions again and again, and they would never come to any new conclusion because Ende was too interested in maintaining the Unspeakables’ right to do everything. Harry wanted him gone.

Harry knelt down in front of Draco and laid his hands on his shoulders, and breathed fire like the gentlest of dragons through Draco’s ears and eyes, and into the center of his mind. He burned away the bonds of the Imperius Curse, and Draco jerked and suddenly stared at him, reaching out one clumsy hand as if he thought that he would find Harry’s school tie at the base of his throat.

“Harry?”

“It’s all right now,” Harry said, and held Draco’s hand while he looked him over. “They didn’t hurt you anywhere?”

Draco shook his head, but he thought he was catching his breath. “Brightness? Brightness was—I thought he would fly and fetch you, but—”

“Becoming solid and real has disadvantages, too.” Harry snapped his fingers, and the flame-snakes danced joyously around the bars of Brightness’s cage. They burned and fell apart, and the phoenix soared and out and over to Draco. If he was singing, Harry couldn’t hear him over the crackle of the flames. “He could still alert me through the connection he had to my magic, but he couldn’t fly through walls to get to me.”

Draco abruptly looked past him, at Ende. “He heard us.”

Harry felt the tension in Draco’s muscles, and patted him softly on the shoulder. “It doesn’t matter. He’s going away now.” He turned to face Ende with a pinwheel of fire gathering in his palms.

“I don’t want to die,” said Ende. It was probably the most honest thing he had said since he started talking to Harry in his Court.

Harry held his eyes. “I’m still not killing anyone. You can’t make me into that kind of Dark Lord unless I agree to be, and I haven’t agreed.”

The furrow that creased the skin between Ende’s eyes was almost painful to look at. He didn’t understand, and he probably never would.

Neither would the Unspeakables who rushed into the room then, Harry was sure. He turned to face them cradling fire in the middle of his palms, juggling and holding it. They looked into his face and drew out artifacts from their robes.

Harry whispered instructions to the fire, and let it go. He wanted to spare the Unspeakables’ lives, but he wouldn’t spare their artifacts. There were simply too many dangerous things here, things
they could use to sneak past wards or hurt his chosen lover. Harry would take them away now.

*Along with everything else.*

The flames rose, and began to spread. Ende, springing forwards with his arms spread as if he imagined that Harry would still accept him as the sacrifice that he’d been talking about, was the first to catch fire. His arms flailed up, and came down as wings, and a phoenix launched itself down the tunnel that Harry knew led back towards the Ministry lifts, singing.

The other Unspeakables did turn tail and run, but not before they’d aimed their artifacts or squeezed the triggers on them or whatever it was that they did to activate them. There was nothing inside those weapons and crystal balls and mind-traps that Harry’s fire couldn’t defeat, though. It ate them and turned them into light, and the Unspeakables turned into miniatures of Persephone and bright crows and magpies with jeweled tails.

Harry turned and held out his hand to Draco. “Shall we?” he asked.

“The fire won’t burn us?” Draco’s eyes were steady despite the question, and Harry had to smile. Here was someone who would never turn his back and betray Harry, no matter what he might do. It was comforting to know that Harry stood in the Department of Mysteries with at least one person like that.

“No.” Harry gathered Draco close to him and Brightness fluttered around him as he prepared for the non-Apparition back to Hogwarts.

“Then I want to stay and see what happens.” Draco shook his head when Harry looked at him. “Not to be a witness for other people. How could I explain why I didn’t fight? But I want to be able to—hint at what happens when people displease you, if not actually tell them.”

After a few moments of thought, Harry nodded. He knew his fire would destroy the Department of Mysteries, but he supposed it couldn’t hurt to stay here and see the destruction.

“Come on, then,” he said, and the door on the far side of the room melted off its hinges.

* Draco had been dazed and helplessly following along when he was under the Imperius Curse. He didn’t feel much different now.

Well, of course, he was glad that the bonds in his mind had snapped and his actions were his own again. But he was still in a situation where he was the most powerless person there, even with Brightness sitting on his shoulder and crooning soothing nonsense into his ear.

The sheer scale of the fire was beyond his comprehension. He knew, because Harry had briefly mentioned it when they entered a room even brighter than the others with piles of silver and a white metal Draco didn’t recognize on the floor, that the fire was drawing some of its magic from the artifacts it consumed, and that was one reason why it was being allowed to rage the way it did. But still.

This was the illusions that had danced over Knockturn Alley come to life. Draco wondered if Ende and the other Unspeakables who had wanted to follow him, but then turned tail when they realized how powerful Harry was, had ever thought they would end up in the real version of it.
Harry abruptly drew Draco close and shielded him. “We’re coming to a room with an artifact too powerful to burn,” he murmured. “And if it’s the one I think it is…”

*There are specific artifacts here that he knows about?* But then Draco remembered Harry’s Auror career, and wanted to shake his head. Of course he would have come down here for reports, and it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility that he might have been given some of the artifacts to use on cases.

The wall curved in front of them, and a flock of birds that looked like huge hummingbirds soared away in front of them. Beyond the corner, Draco saw a veil.

It fluttered and whispered, and he thought he could hear voices coming out of it if he listened hard enough. But the sound of the fire triumphed over it, and he wasn’t tempted to rush forwards and throw himself into it, the way Harry’s clutch on his shoulder said he feared might happen.

“What is it?” he whispered, leaning against Harry once he saw the way that Harry was looking at it.

“Bellatrix used a spell to knock my godfather through it, and he lost his life,” Harry whispered back. He was gathering up some of the fire. It splashed and foamed around him like water, and when he lifted his free hand—the one not touching Draco—it was white and transparent all the way through.

“What are you going to do to it?” Draco had tensed up because he could feel the tension thrumming through Harry.

“Destroy it,” Harry said simply, and a second later the room was filled with white.

Draco clung to Harry’s arm, ducking his head into his shoulder. He wondered for a second how Harry was going to manage that, when he had just said that the Veil was too powerful to burn.

Then he felt the shiver of the power beside him, and swallowed. Yes, the artifact might be too powerful to burn, but not too powerful to *change*.

Because he might never get to see anything like this again, and he wanted to, Draco lifted his head. Harry was shaping and pushing the air with his free hand, and there was a faint frown on his face. Draco thought he had seen that frown before in Potions, when Harry was contemplating some set of instructions that unaccountably wouldn’t do what he wanted it to.

“How?” Draco whispered.

“Shh. I’m working,” Harry said, and his fingers snapped, and the fire sprang out and washed away from him, a silhouette only, a brilliant ring with space in the middle that something Veil-shaped could fill.

The silhouette settled around the Veil. Draco watched it for a second, and heard the whispering accelerate, as though whatever or whoever was behind the thing thought speaking faster would spare them from what was going to happen next.

It didn’t, of course. The fire convulsed inwards, and spun like a dragon’s neck, and then the light was closing in and the Veil bent with it, and snapped and bobbed and bubbled and was gone. What
Draco craned his head. It was a flat pool of water on the floor, as silver as a crystal ball and swirling with some of the same mysterious lights. He looked away before they could draw him in, and frowned a little at Harry. “Do you think this is really going to be less attractive to anyone who comes down here, though?”

“No one’s going to come down here,” Harry said, and breathed in the fire and breathed it out again.

Draco’s memories were a little confused from that point. He knew they made their way unharmed through bare and melted rooms, and they took the lift up and away from the fire, before they reached a point where Harry felt confident enough to carry Draco through weaves and waves of flame back to Hogwarts.

But he was never sure if Harry had made the roof fall in—the lifts from the Ministry, later, simply wouldn’t go anywhere near the Department of Mysteries, and skipped the ninth level regularly on their way to the tenth—or had really done what Draco had seen him do, which was to fill the whole of the Department with skein after skein of flame. And the flames braided together, and something like a serpent rose sleeping from the middle of them and wriggled towards the pool.

And it drank the pool up, and the magic was too thick to stand, and Harry drew Draco away, and they vanished towards the lift, with magnificent birds flying and crying around them.
“You’re alive,” said at least five hushed voices when Draco appeared the next morning in the Ministry Atrium.

Draco leaned back against the mantel and braced himself there with a single hand, nodding. “It wasn’t easy,” he added, when he saw the fascinated glances that darted at him and then were turned aside as though the people who’d given them were disgusted by their own lack of decorum. “I don’t want to say that it was easy. But at least I got away, and proved to him that I was determined to return.”

“Got away?” asked a woman who was coming forwards to stare at him. It took Draco a moment to recognize Lucy Lenneal. He didn’t think he’d ever seen her with her eyes so tight around the corners.

“Yes,” said Draco, and kept her under observation as he talked. She was the only one here, as he saw with another glance around the room, who had some knowledge of the real Harry. That meant her reaction would tell him a lot about the success of his next story. “The Dark Lord—” He stopped abruptly, paused, and began again. “He wanted someone to blame for the betrayal of the Unspeakables. I managed to convince him I wasn’t at fault, and he released me to return here again, but it was a near thing.”

“The Unspeakables didn’t betray him,” said Amos Diggory, although his face was pale and thoughtful, and Draco thought his protest was more for form’s sake. “They had no duty of loyalty to him.”

“Didn’t they betray him?” Draco curled his lip, a little disdainfully. “They tried to make a deal with him, you know. Some kind of bargain. I don’t know all the details, only that one faction wanted Dark Lord Potter on their side when they went to war against another faction.” That was close enough to the truth that he thought it ought to satisfy anyone who’d had some specific knowledge of the situation. “But that faction turned their backs on him when they saw him burn Knockturn Alley. They tried to lure him into a trap.”

“How could they have?” Lenneal shook her head. Draco hoped he was the only one to notice that her fingers were pressed into her palm, hard and sharp enough to cut. “They should know that he wouldn’t leave Hogwarts, and he’d Mark anyone who came onto the grounds.”

Draco gave a bitter little laugh and touched his chest above his heart. “They used me. They knew I was important enough to him that he wouldn’t want anyone else to break me, but I was weak enough not to be able to fight back.”

Some people murmured automatic comfort, compliments that he wasn’t weak, while Lenneal stared at him and Amos leaned forwards as if he wanted to scrutinize Draco’s heart through a layer of skin.

“The Dark Lord forgave me whatever part I may have played,” said Draco, and lowered his head to look at his own hand resting on his heart. “I wouldn’t say that I enjoyed the forgiveness, or what he did before that. But this is the important part. He has agreed to let me return to the Ministry and resume some magical theory activities, even.” He waited until he was absolutely sure that all eyes in the room were on him and no one was whispering behind their hands, even though it might have
been attractive to do so. “But he will never let us set up another Department of Mysteries.”

“They played a vital role in the wizarding world!” said a red-haired witch Draco had to search his mind to recognize. She had been part of the council set up in place of a Minister when Tillipop retired—ah, yes, Henrietta Albury.

“They did at the time,” Draco agreed somberly. “But that was the world before the Dark Lord came.”

“We should have killed him while we had the chance,” muttered someone else.

Draco kept himself from bristling only by clasping his hands slowly in front of him and giving a shrug that they could take a lot of ways, whatever way they wanted. “Probably,” he agreed. “But we didn’t, and this is the mess we’re left with. He’s—it might be best to think of Hogwarts as a hostile nation that we have to deal with.”

“But it’s the school where our children will go!” someone from the back complained.

Draco looked up and let his expression brighten. “I thought the Ministry was going to cut off contact and refuse to accept the OWLs and NEWTs of people who went to Hogwarts. Are we going to change our minds? That’s very good news. And something that the Dark Lord wished to encourage, I have to admit.”

There was silence. Draco knew the source of that silence. There were people here who hated Harry, either what he was or who he was or what he stood for, and wanted to destroy him and resist him. At the same time, they wanted life to go on much as it always had. Children sent to Hogwarts, someone in charge of Hogwarts who wasn’t the Ministry, no more war. Those were the conflicting impulses that had allowed the Unspeakables to get away with so much even after the rest of the Ministry had stopped putting official support behind their actions.

Harry was going to take advantage of that paralysis. It would be a long process, but Draco spoke the first, coaxing words now.

“I don’t think that the Dark Lord will mind if we send our children to Hogwarts. He encourages contact between children and parents, you know. Even parents who don’t live in his Court are welcome to visit if they come in peace.”

They were silent, thinking about that, other than a few snorts. It was true that the Board of Governors had rarely invited parents to come to Hogwarts. There had been many reasons for that, including that they wanted the Headmaster to be in charge of students and parents could disrupt the educational experience, but Draco thought a lot of it had to do with control. And they’d had a supporter in Dumbledore, who enjoyed being independent of both parents and the Minister.

“What would happen if we disapproved of something he was teaching?” asked Albury, her mouth a little softer now.

“You could speak to him about it,” Draco said, and shook his head at the way she paled. “He wouldn’t kill you for asking. What he gets upset about are people attacking him and taking his toys.” He jerked a thumb at his own chest. “Or trying to kill him. Even when he went after the Department of Mysteries, you know, he transformed them. He didn’t kill them.”

“That’s not very comforting.”
Draco didn’t say anything. He thought it would be comforting to know that you would continue in at least one form, but then, he didn’t know where any of the birds were to ask them that. The Unspeakables had all flown away, and first alerted people that something was happening when they streaked overhead.

“What you’re saying,” said Lenneal, apparently impatient that no one else was reaching this conclusion, “is that we really can live with him. Like the Minister of another nation.”

“Yes,” said Draco. “I know that it means diminished control, and power, but look at it this way. It’s better than the alternative.”

“Alternative?” asked someone who sounded dim.

“The Dark Lord taking over Britain,” said Draco. “Or just losing patience and turning us all into birds. He probably thinks that we’d be easier to manage in an aviary.” He gave a pointed glance at Brightness, who had fluttered up into the rafters of the room while he was making his little speech. Brightness looked down and made a cooing noise before he applied his beak hard to his feathers again.

“It’s not what we wanted,” said Amos, but he had a thoughtful frown on his face that was better than the outright dismissive one Draco had expected. “It’s not what we fought for.”

“The war, you mean?” Draco asked, and shook his head. “No, but this Dark Lord isn’t the one we fought against, either. And I haven’t heard anyone come up with a plan that could actually bring this one down.” From what Harry had told him, Draco actually suspected the defeat of the former Dark Lord had had a lot of luck behind it. They wouldn’t get someone with a curse scar linked to Harry this time.

“It’s frightening,” whispered someone.

“It’s annoying,” someone corrected her, and they sounded fierce about it.

_Probably_, Draco acknowledged to himself. _But I also know that you would have lived under Voldemort’s rule if he had successfully taken over the Ministry. Lots of people were already adapting to it. That’s what we do._

That was what Harry had said, lying in bed with Draco. “You think I _want_ to rule the wizarding world?” he’d asked, and shaken his head hard enough that Draco feared for his neck. “Fuck, no. A bunch of people who won’t save themselves, won’t speak up for themselves. I want nothing to do with ruling them.”

Draco had agreed with that, thinking about some of the articles that the wizarding world had believed about Harry, the number of times they’d turned on him, how he could be the Heir of Slytherin one minute and the Savior the next. Harry had been right when he said that they would probably never believe in him completely, never _want_ to believe in him.

Nightshade had pursed up her lips when he saw Draco. Draco hadn’t said anything to her. She had never clarified for Harry, after all, whether her visions involved him being alive, or escaping mind-control by the Unspeakables as quickly as he had. Draco would rather live in the world they had.

Other voices murmured, and Draco began to spin the lies that poked and prodded, flattered and
absorbed. It would take a long time until he and Harry could establish even a reasonable relationship between the Court at Hogwarts and the Ministry, let alone the kind that might let them emerge from hiding.

But Draco was willing to work for it.

*

“Lord Potter.”

Harry looked up in surprise. Not only was the sound of the voice unexpected, but so was the fact that Briseis had stood back and let Rosenthal walk right into his office without some sort of introduction. He rose to his feet, intrigued. “You don’t have to call me that if you don’t want to. I know what you’ve done for Draco.”

“It’s been little enough, in the last few months.” Rosenthal peered into Harry’s eyes as if she intended to use his glasses for mirrors. “But he’s in the position that he always wanted, if not quite the way he envisioned it.”

Harry shrugged. “I would have given a lot to change that. But not relinquish my bond with Hogwarts, and not let my enemies continue attacking me. Sooner or later, an attack would have slipped through and damaged a member of my Court, if not me. I had to make them fearful enough to stop.”

Rosenthal nodded. Her gaze was still intent. “And what are you going to do now?”

“What else would I do now?” Harry asked, a little surprised. He would have thought Rosenthal would be on his side and continue being on his side, because he had arranged things in a way that ought not to trouble her. “I’ll keep the Court open to anyone who wants to enter and live here peacefully. And can get through an interview with me, of course. I’ll befriend the magical creatures and give children an education.”

“But what will you do to soothe the fears of people who would have emigrated to the Court?”

*She sounds a bit like Rita Skeeter,* Harry thought, irritated. “I’ve learned that I can’t soothe fears,” he said. “There’s always someone who’s going to fear me, no matter what. I do grieve for that,” he added, because he didn’t want Rosenthal to think he didn’t. “But I can either keep fighting to change it, which only gives them more reasons to be afraid, or I can accept that that’s the status quo and I’ll leave my Court open for the people who do want to change things. It’s literally the only thing I can do.”

Rosenthal gave a quiet little hum. She never took her eyes off him. “You don’t think that’s… excessive?”

“What part of it?”

“That you destroyed the Department of Mysteries in response to them taking Minister-elect Malfoy.”

“Like I said, anything I did would have been seen as excessive,” said Harry. “Even killing Gorenson was. And the Unspeakables could invade my grounds and torture Draco and try to kill me or capture me without being condemned by the public, while my Marking them and sending
them away was felt to be unfair. By the Department of Mysteries, if no one else. I learned when I arrived at the Ministry that the Unspeakables who had said they were allying with me were frightened of my magic and planning to capture me. I stopped caring.”

“Minister-elect Malfoy did not tell me that part,” said Rosenthal, looking intrigued.

“I imagine that Draco’s busy right now.” Harry had to smile. Draco did have what he had wanted, if not everything he had come to want. Well, they would find some way to make it work someday. That was the main reason that Harry had disregarded Nightshade’s prophecy and gone ahead to burn the Department of Mysteries. He couldn’t take ten more years of hearing his word spurned, having enemies trying to hurt him and his people, and hiding his relationship with Draco. He would take some peace this way, and bid for the peace that revealing his relationship with Draco would get him when it came.

“Yes, he is,” said Rosenthal, and stood up a little taller, her robes falling around her. “I imagine that you’re busy yourself, and I won’t take up any more of your time, Lord Potter. My thanks and the thanks of my patron.”

Harry gave her a little bow. He couldn’t wait to tell Draco how Rosenthal talked about him when he wasn’t there. Patron, no less. “You’re welcome.”

Rosenthal left, but Briseis lingered. Harry nodded to her. “Yes, what is it? Some problem with the werewolves again?” Ombershade had been making noises about bringing some more werewolves to live in the Court, and there were people debating the legal ramifications of that, as well as the centaurs to consult if the pack wanted to establish territory in the Forbidden Forest.

“No,” said Briseis. She took a deep breath and leaned towards him, balancing on her toes. Harry braced himself to learn that she was upset, that she was leaving. She had never looked at him like that before, through all the crises they’d had.

“How is this going to work?” Briseis whispered. “They’ll think that you’re torturing the Minister, and they might be too scared to rebel against you now, but what about the people who are already here?”

Harry sought in his mind for some clue as to what she meant, and finally came up with, “You mean Nightshade and Hortensia and the rest of the dangerous ones?” It was the only thing that made sense for something to be concerned about, although he still thought that Briseis ought to know the answer.

“Yes,” said Briseis, and from the way she was gazing raptly at his face, it was obvious that she did not know the answer.

“We treat them the way I’ve been treating them,” said Harry firmly. “Ordinary people. Human beings or otherwise. We offer them alliance and friendship, and a place to live. They’ll explore and do their research and perhaps teach.” He didn’t know yet if Nightshade would make a good Divination teacher, but on the other hand, it was hard to imagine that she could be worse at it than Trelawney was. “Or they’ll bring up their families here, make their homes. It’s the way it’s been since the beginning.”

Except with Draco now. And no Persephone. Harry could still feel a dull ache when he thought about her, the daughter of his soul, but he had accepted that her destruction would have happened anyway. At least this way, it hadn’t taken him and the soul-piece he’d granted her with it.
Briseis sighed, long and low, but although he concentrated, Harry couldn’t hear any unhappiness in the sound. Not as such. “Thank you, my Lord,” she whispered. “You don’t know how happy you’ve made me.”

Harry shook his head, not really understanding her. “You didn’t want to live in a place like this?”

“I’ve wanted to serve in a Court like this for years,” said Briseis, and closed her eyes, and smiled. “Even before I knew that was my desire, I think. But it wouldn’t have been easy to find, or support, or make real. I know now that I can count on you to do it. But hearing you say the words was what I needed.”

And then she smiled wider and stepped up to the desk, bringing out the latest pile of paperwork. “We have a few matters to address before you can speak to any newspaper reporter again. Let’s discuss that this time, okay?”

Harry hesitated, but she really did seem to have got over whatever fears were troubling her. Her face had a quiet glow of happiness, although the glance she sent at him was challenging.

“Yes, we will,” Harry said, and he stepped up beside her and put his hand on top of hers. Briseis gave him another smile, and dipped into the paperwork.

* * *

“Do you think we’ll get tired of this, someday?”

Harry turned lazily on his side. He and Draco had made love, hard enough, after having been parted for almost a week, that it was difficult to muster his sluggish thoughts. Brightness sat asleep on a perch nearby, and although the shimmer of the flames on his silver feathers was nothing like the glow from Persephone’s, Harry had to admit that he felt more content than he had in a long time. “What?”

Draco was lying on his back, arms folded behind his head, but that just made Harry pay more attention. That posture didn’t look lazy the way it did the majority of the time on someone else. That was what Harry mentally classified as Draco’s “worry” posture.

“Hiding our relationship,” Draco said. “Pretending love bites are the marks of torture. Negotiating Ministry business through contacts that we have to hide.” He reached out and touched Harry’s bare shoulder, collarbone down to throat. “Do you wish that you’d done something else and not burned the Department of Mysteries?”

“No,” Harry said. “They were a knife at my back, a potentially infinitely powerful and unreasonable enemy. I’m glad that I got rid of them the way I did.”

Draco nodded, but he still looked unconvinced. “Then you think that we can do this?”

“I think we will,” said Harry, and reached out and took Draco’s hand and placed a kiss in the center of his palm. “I told you what Nightshade told me about the future?”

“Yes.” Draco said, and rolled towards him. “That’s why I’m asking the question at all. I’m wondering if you regret not taking that other fork.”
Harry shook his head. “I chose this path. This is the one I’m on, and I won’t regret not being able to change it.”

“That sounds awfully fatalistic,” Draco said, but the challenge was back in his eyes the way it had been in Briseis’s, and Harry smiled wider.

“I rescued you,” Harry said simply. “I got rid of my enemy. I knew I was going to pay a price. I decided this was the better one. Someone else would have made a different choice. You, maybe.” He paused, but Draco said nothing. Maybe he knew that so many circumstances would have had to change for him to be in Harry’s place that he had no idea what he would have done with the chance. “But this is the one I made. This is the price I can live with. At least I have you, and some people in the Court who know the truth, to share it with.”

Draco lowered his head a second. Then he said, “And you love me.”

“I love you more passionately than I can think through,” Harry said, and embraced him, hard enough that Draco jumped. “I sacrificed a future for you. That’s love.”


It is.

Draco felt some doubt, some nigglng roiling creature inside himself that wouldn’t leave him alone no matter how many times Harry said the words, subside at last. Yes, Harry was right. To have someone give up everything for you—a possible world, a different universe—was love.

And if Draco might resent some of the costs that came with it, there was no way he could resent the gesture itself.

“I love you, too,” he whispered, and settled his head on Harry’s shoulder, and closed his eyes. His breathing could match Harry’s, he found, if he breathed gently enough. They sounded the same in that, despite the differences in power and the public personas and all that separated them.

Harry touched him, and he looked up. Harry smiled back at him with the eyes that had reflected transforming fire, touched him with the hands that had created a black phoenix, surrounded him with the magic that had animated Hogwarts.

And Draco felt safe, and beloved, and joyful.

This is love.

The End.