

Title: Comes Out of Darkness Morn

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/lightningwave/13503.html#cutid1>

By Lightening On the Wave

Summary: Welcome to the third story in this crazy AU I'm writing. I strongly suggest you read [Saving Connor](#) and [No Mouth But Some Serpent's](#) before this story. Otherwise, COoDM will be nearly incomprehensible.

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*Pale, without name or number,
In fruitless fields of corn,
They bow themselves and slumber
All night till light is born;
And like a soul belated,
In hell and heaven unmated,
By cloud and mist abated
Comes out of darkness morn.*

-Algernon Charles Swinburne, "The Garden of Proserpine."

Chapter One: Reintegration

Twice in one week, all the windows in Malfoy Manor shattered. Once they broke and cracked and crazed in the shape of lightning bolts. The second time, they formed coiled serpents with Locusta markings. Harry played with them, the magic healing any wounds the glass inflicted on him as soon as they were made.

Narcissa came up beside him and repaired the windows each time, then led Harry away from the mess they'd made. Harry couldn't always remember just what she said, but later he thought there was pumpkin juice and Narcissa's voice telling stories of what had used to happen when she was a child in the Black family and lived with her sisters Bellatrix and Andromeda. They were always mild, cheerful stories. Harry listened to them, and sipped at whatever drink she gave him, and felt Draco standing as silent sentry beside the chair or the divan, until he fell asleep.

The star was five-armed, made of clear glass in the center and opaque, white glass towards the edges. Harry traced one finger away from the center and down to the points. They were sharp enough to cut. Of course they were. There would be no reason to have this gift in such a shape, otherwise.

Harry looked up and away from the star to Lucius's face. Draco's father stood, tensely, on the other side of the sitting room. He'd levitated the star to Harry rather than trying to bring it to him, considering that Draco and Narcissa both stood on either side of Harry and watched him suspiciously. But he had brought it. He was supposed to. The star was the Midsummer gift, the middle-of-the-year gift, the fifth gift in this strange dance he was doing with Harry which supposedly proclaimed he wanted a truce. He had sent a ring set with a piece of ice enchanted never to melt, and a green stone to symbolize the growth of new bonds. Harry had replied with a piece of ebony, indicating his distrust of Lucius's motives, and a red stone, to remind him of the blood that still lay between their families.

But now...

Harry gazed down at the star. The clarity of it told him how much Lucius trusted him, and the positioning of the clear patch in the center indicated that the trust could grow in any direction. Of course, since Harry still had no idea why Lucius had chosen to play this game, to pretend that he wanted a truce when he'd already hurt Harry by handing Tom Riddle's diary to him, that clear patch could mean anything. Lucius Malfoy was perfectly capable of playing along until something happened to benefit him, such as his Lord returning to life.

Harry had to reply to the star, or at least nod to show that he accepted the gift and would find a suitable reply later. He put a hand on the star and closed his eyes instead. His magic rushed to his command. It was still near the surface, churning and slashing at his thoughts whenever he wasn't using it. After so long confined, as Professor Snape had explained in one of the letters that came twice every week, it had a force of its own, nearly a personality. Harry had to use it. If he denied it, the way he had for years, then it would simply break free on its own. It had already done so, shattering all the windows in Malfoy Manor, as Harry dimly remembered.

Now, though, he could put it to a productive use, and he did so, altering the gift. As he gazed, strands of frost raced across the star, hardening it and obscuring the center, so that the glass was entirely opaque. He levitated it back to Lucius, carefully. He had to be careful with everything he did with magic lately. It took so little to rouse it to full, raw strength, at which point he smashed things. Finesse and control were far harder arts than summoning power.

Lucius accepted the star and gazed at the lack of a clear patch. Then he raised his eyes to Harry's face. He did not look offended. He merely nodded thoughtfully and turned to slip from the room.

Harry closed his eyes for just a moment, as he thought, but opened them in the bedroom the Malfoys had turned over to his use. The window was open, and he could smell the scent of roses through it. Sunlight streamed in, and the radiant songs of birds. Harry lay there and listened.

After a little while, Draco came in and put a hand on his arm. "Mother said I should go if you wanted me to," he whispered.

Harry let him stay. His hand was warmer than the sunlight, and even though Harry found it as hard to understand the things he talked about as it was to understand the birds, together they made a sharp and musical kind of sense.

Harry's memory was tattered and fogged, bits of webs clinging to each other the way they had before Sylarana died and took a large part of his sanity with her. But they suddenly tore away on one day towards the end of June, as he sat in the broad piano room and listened to Narcissa play.

Harry blinked and sat up. Narcissa looked over at him, but never stopped the graceful, swift motion of her fingers over the keys, or the low, crooning drone of her voice that accompanied it. She was teaching one of the history songs to Draco, the ones the purebloods had taught their children when the old ways had to be memorized and instinctive. Draco sat at the foot of the piano and gazed intently up at his mother, mouthing the words along with her. He was learning about the dance, the rights and rules of a host or a pureblooded wizard or witch on his or her own land, the proper ways that one treated a guest, and all the other courtesies for living life among powerful people with recourse to magic that would end each other's lives in an instant. They were rituals rarely used anymore. Draco had asked to learn them. Harry had the faint recollection that the asking had something to do with him.

But the music. The music.

Harry sagged back against the couch he sat on, and listened to Narcissa's voice caress the notes. She was telling the tale meant to seal in notions of marriage to most pureblooded children, the tragic love story of Pomona Ironbrand and Septimus Prince. They had not been equals; Pomona had chosen Septimus because she was in love with his weakness, not any strength that could match hers, and Septimus had killed her in jealousy and himself in grief. The lesson, repeated in every refrain, was to choose only a mate of equal power, or to be sure that true love existed between a mismatched pair.

Harry had known the story by the time he was six. He'd read the history songs out of books, since his own mother was Muggleborn and his father wasn't interested in holding on to pureblood customs he thought were old-fashioned and probably Dark besides. There was something different about hearing it sung.

Lily. James.

Don't think about them.

For a moment, Harry's anger trembled on the edge of control, and if his parents had been there, he would have asked them the questions that waited behind the anger. Why had they felt the need to weave webs into his mind as they had? Why hadn't they brought him up to control his power, rather than deny it? Why had they thought that the only possible place he could have in the family was as guardian and guide to his brother Connor? Yes, Connor was the Boy-Who-Lived, Voldemort's enemy, but did that really mean that Harry's childhood and very self had to be sacrificed on the altar of necessity? Why hadn't they taken more of a part in defending Connor? Why had they never come to visit him when he lay in the hospital wing after driving Tom Riddle from his head last December? He knew now that Riddle had promptly possessed his brother, and that was the reason Connor hadn't come to visit him. What were his parents' excuses?

And battling that was all the training he had received until this point in his life, or the broken remnants of it, arguing that they had done what they had done for the best reasons, that he had to understand, that he could never fully understand until he confronted them and listened to their explanation, that, that, that...

He didn't realize the music had stopped until he heard himself making jagged little noises, like a dog with a bone caught in its throat. Then Draco was beside him, a hand on his shoulder. He steered Harry through a few more rooms, each smaller than the last, and finally through a door made entirely of glass and into a small garden. This garden was the source of the roses and the birdsong that gave Harry such joy through his bedroom window. It looked nearly overgrown now, roses curling in wild profusion on the gates and the walls and the bushes, roses of all colors, white as joy and red as blood and yellow as pain.

Draco lay down on a patch of sun-warmed grass in the center of the garden and drew Harry firmly into his embrace. Harry had to lie with his body sprawled beside Draco's and his head buried in the other boy's shoulder and pale hair, because he didn't have any choice. He might have struggled to pull free at first, especially since the heat was so stifling.

But, gradually, he relaxed. The heat *was* stifling, and added to by the sunlight and the sweat that covered his own skin and Draco's. But that very closeness made it comforting. There was no way that it would pull him back and leave him alone in the center of the ice that he still remembered from his defeat of Tom Riddle. Harry's breathing slowed down, and he shifted to put one arm around Draco's shoulder in turn. He could feel the other boy smiling, but his voice was sad when he spoke.

"Not yet?" he whispered.

Harry shook his head and pulled back slightly, so that his head still rested on Draco's shoulder but he could see just a slit of blue sky.

He'd tried since he came to Malfoy Manor, even though he hadn't done it for years. Draco and Narcissa seemed convinced that, if he could do it, it would represent a victory over his years of training. And he had much to mourn—the passing of one stage of his life, the death of his illusions about his parents, Sylarana.

But still it hadn't happened. Harry couldn't cry.

A barn owl came in the middle of the night at the end of June. Harry opened his eyes and found it waiting for him on his windowsill. It hooted softly when it saw that it had his attention and hopped forward, holding out one talon. Harry stood and wavered across the carpet towards it, oddly conscious of the way that the cloth pressed on his bare feet and how the breeze through the window stirred his pyjamas around him.

The owl waited patiently while Harry took the letter from it and fumbled for a Knut from the table near the window to put in its pouch. Then it took off. Harry watched it skim over the garden and then gain height, turning north, towards Scotland. He blinked, then fumbled at the letter.

It was brief, but then, all the letters Snape had sent him over the summer holidays tended to be.

Mr. Potter:

You will find little that exhausts your magic like destruction. The power of Dark spells themselves shows this. They will tire you, and enable you to rest with a clearer head. Do what you must to keep yourself sane and whole. If that means the destruction of chairs and windows, so be it.

Severus Snape.

Harry closed his eyes and clenched his hands on the letter. He knew that it was a proper answer to the letter he'd written Snape five days ago, asking for potions or some other means to keep himself under control without destroying things. His magic raged inside him and *wanted* that mayhem. Harry himself did not. He hardly dared to face the fury that he felt against his parents and against Dumbledore. He wanted to use his magic to guard, to protect, to defend, to heal, to create, as Snape had promised him he could when he'd come and rescued Harry from the storm. Why should he have to destroy?

But this answer was simple, clear, cold, and the truth. He had to destroy because, otherwise, his magic would destroy him. Denying it and caging it was what had allowed it to grow to such nightmare proportions, to the cold voice that Harry heard whispering in his dreams. And then, when he faced Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets, his magic had absorbed power from the diary and the memory of Voldemort in a way that Harry still did not understand. Either way, he was stronger than he had been.

He had to let it free.

He sighed, dressed in a robe, and then slipped out of the Manor and over the lawn. He could feel the glow of wards around him, but the Malfoys had given him free rein as a guest for as long as he stayed with them. He stepped past them without much trouble and into the wild country that surrounded the Manor.

His magic flared, raw power that barely obeyed the confines of spoken spells any more, never mind his wand, and created a number of light wooden figures in front of him. It disturbed Harry that some of the figures looked human, but he could pretend they really weren't, in the maze of the starlight and the moonlight. He closed his eyes, and that helped, too.

He flung his first spell.

The night flared with light as the fire caught, and then Harry was hurling other spells, spells to freeze or blast or maim or chop the legs out from under the wooden figures, and he couldn't seem to stop. His magic surged through him, high and singing. It would be so *easy* to go on using it, or even to turn his back and focus his attention on a real challenge, like the wards around the Manor.

Harry pinched his lips together tightly, hearing the coaxing tones of his wild magic in those thoughts, and refused to listen. He flung spells to destroy the figures, create more, and destroy them again, all the while shielding the grass and the scattered trees from the destructive effects of his spells.

By the time he collapsed, panting, on the ground, he realized that Snape had been right: he had used the magic, and, at the same time, gotten it used to weaving through and integrating with himself, rather than shutting it up in a box in one corner of his soul or mind. He could feel the touch of magic burning beneath his skin, under his ribs. He supposed that was better than before. A little bit better.

Snape's words again returned to him, when Harry had said he didn't want to have the power he had. *"But you have it. And you should use it, Harry. Otherwise, it will make an impact on the world, and not one that you desire. It has its own personality at the moment, and its own desire for freedom. If you try to deny it, the same thing will happen again. And perhaps this time you will kill someone else, instead of trying to escape doing so... You are closer now to becoming another Dark Lord than you have ever been."*

Harry let out his breath, told himself that, yes, it was for the best, and wallowing in self-pity would not change that he was magical or how magical he was, and went to bed. For the first time since his arrival at the Manor, he slept without dreaming of dark Chambers or golden snakes.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry froze, then deliberately picked up the Chocolate Frog that Narcissa had said he could have after lunch and opened it. He caught the frog as it tried to hop away and placed it gingerly into his mouth. "Mr. Malfoy," he said, when he had chewed and swallowed the Frog and Lucius had still not gone away. He was beginning to consider it no coincidence that one of the house elves had had an accident that required Narcissa's supervision and that Draco, thinking of a question to ask his mother, had run off to find her. One or both of them had been with him at all times since he arrived in Malfoy Manor. They had never allowed him to be alone with Lucius.

I think that is about to change, Harry thought, and forced himself to lean back in his chair and look at Lucius evenly across the small, highly polished table. He forced himself to see Lucius's reflection in the table and find it amusing, rather than terrifying or as if he suddenly had two powerful, impatient, murderous former Death Eaters to face. He let his breath carefully out of his lungs, and watched Lucius's face.

"Have you seen the *Daily Prophet* today?" Lucius held the newspaper out in front of him as if it were a peace offering.

Harry blinked, then regretted it as he saw a muscle clench in Lucius's cheek. He had just lost a step in the dance by showing his surprise. He could afford to lose no more.

"I figured it could have little of importance to report," he said distantly as he met Lucius's eyes again, "given that I would have known at once if something had happened to my brother."

Lucius's eyes narrowed. Harry watched him. *Let him meditate on that, try to work out how much is truth and how much is lies.*

“There is news of other importance,” said Lucius, and then slid further around the table, coming towards Harry without making a sound. “For example, if someone who once acted in the name of the Dark Lord was coming to kill you, the *Prophet* might report on that. Surely, you would want to know.”

Harry felt his magic wake, and wondered, also distantly, if Lucius realized just then how much he was taking his life in his hands. Draco had seemed determined to protect Harry from his father. Harry knew Narcissa was wiser than that, and sometimes had feared to find her husband dead and bleeding on the floor if he pushed too hard.

“I would surely want to know,” said Harry, “if something like that was going to happen. And if the one who had once acted in the name of the Dark Lord gave me the courtesy of letting me find out beforehand.” He raised his magic higher. He knew that Lucius, like Draco, knew how to sense other wizards if they were powerful enough. Usually, shields protected him from headaches and the other unfortunate consequences of that. Let him feel pain spilling over the top of the shields, then.

Lucius’s eyes widened, and then he nodded and backed away, sitting down in a chair at the other end of the table. “Mr. Potter,” he said, dropping every pretense of the dance now that the falling of his own mask had stripped his advantage away, “you should know that I do not mean myself.”

“So this is not another of the articles exclaiming over the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived going to stay with the Malfoy family, and how inappropriate that is, and how you will surely kill me and use my blood in some ritual to raise your Lord?” Harry asked. He could be blunt, too.

Lucius winced. Then he took a deep, calming breath of his own and slid the paper across the table towards the boy. “Read this, Mr. Potter,” he whispered. “Just the article on the front page. I think you’ll understand.”

Harry glanced down. He didn’t need to read the article, actually. He needed only to read the headline, and to understand how very wrong he had been, to think that Connor was safe in Godric’s Hollow and that he could stay away for the duration of the summer.

PETER PETTIGREW ESCAPES FROM AZKABAN

Harry could make out the picture beneath that, an old photograph in which Pettigrew, caught between two Aurors, jerked his head around in several directions as though looking for an escape. Harry knew it had to be him from his parents’ descriptions, though he had never seen a whole picture. Shortly after Peter’s arrest, Sirius had gone through all the Marauders’ old photos and cut the traitor out of them.

He put out his hand and concentrated. This was something he could let the magic destroy, and gladly.

It wound up doing an odd amalgamation of burning the newspaper, shredding it, and making it cease to exist. Harry gave himself fully over to that brief burst of power, and was the calmer for it when he recovered. He nodded and looked up at Lucius, who was leaning back from him. He did not breathe fast. His face was not paler than usual. But Harry could feel him nonetheless, poised to strike, and knew that Lucius truly had guessed how much danger he was in.

“Understand,” Harry whispered. “I care for my safety. I would not have come here if I had thought I was in danger from you, or rather, that you cared more about my death than your son’s happiness. But I care about my brother more than anything in the world, and it is the seventh of July now. I should be returning home soon.”

“No, Harry. You aren’t fully recovered yet.”

Harry sighed as Draco rushed back into the room and put his arms around him. Draco meant well, of course, but he had just revealed what could be an important weakness in front of someone Harry still thought of as an enemy. Harry put a hand on his back and stared hard at Lucius over his son’s head.

Lucius did not move. He did not say anything. He watched. His gray eyes had gone so blank and his face so still that Harry was no longer sure what he was feeling.

Harry turned his attention to comforting Draco, who was watching him pleadingly. “You’ve only been here for a month,” he said. “We were going to celebrate your birthday in the Manor. The house elves were going to make a special meal just for us, and you won’t even *believe* the gift I bought for you. It’d be the first time that you had a birthday just to yourself, without Connor, wouldn’t it?”

Harry smiled gently. “It would be,” he said. “But Peter Pettigrew is free, Draco—“

Draco's face promptly took on a faintly guilty expression. Harry raised his eyebrows. "You knew about this?"

"I didn't want you to worry," said Draco artlessly. He let go of Harry, but moved around and sat in the chair beside him. "The wards on the Manor wouldn't let him through, and it's not as though you need to worry about him attacking you. Why would he want to hurt you?"

"That's the problem," said Harry. "He wants to hurt Connor. And for all I know, he could get through the wards around our house. Our parents have already proven that they can't protect us." The venom in his voice shocked him, but he forced himself to let it go and continue speaking rationally to Draco. Rationality had to penetrate that stubborn sulk some time. "I have to be there when Pettigrew arrives, just in case he tries to hurt Connor."

"He could already have Apparated there," Draco pointed out. "Please, Harry, I don't want you to worry about this." He leaned forward earnestly. "Wouldn't Connor have to protect himself sooner or later, anyway? Let him do it this once."

Harry sighed. "Can we go somewhere else, Draco?" he asked, looking towards Lucius.

Draco reached out and clenched his hand. "You can speak in front of him," he said. "He hasn't tried to hurt you, Harry. Mother and I have watched. You can trust him." He hesitated for a moment, then added, "I've read some of the older books, and I can recognize the truce gifts now. No one exchanges them up to this point if they mean to break off the treaty and hurt the other wizard." He looked at his father.

"Very good, Draco," said Lucius, in a polished voice. He was looking at Harry, and he didn't seem inclined to stop. "I am glad to see you furthering your education. It is indeed true that I have committed to an exchange of six truce gifts with Mr. Potter thus far. That leaves only ten. By this point, the two wizards are bound to continue, unless one of them sends the other an unmistakable sign to break off the negotiations." He paused, for effect, Harry was certain. "I have no intention of sending such a sign any time soon."

Draco beamed at his father, then turned to Harry. "You wouldn't end it, either, would you?" he whispered. "Please?"

Harry understood the impulse that led Draco to ask the question. After all, if Harry and his father were allies, there was no way at all that Draco would feel torn between them. Draco would never have to confront, fully, what Harry knew he was beginning to suspect: that Lucius had acted as a Death Eater of his own free will, without being under the Imperius Curse. He could follow through on the decision he'd made to face Tom Riddle at Harry's side, without losing his family.

Harry knew that, if it came to an open break between them at the moment, Draco would choose him over his father.

There were no words for how much that knowledge honored him, and for how much it terrified him and made him sick to his stomach. He did not want that measure of control over another being's life. He could hardly face ordering house elves around since the Chamber, and he knew that most of them (Dobby was an enigmatic exception) were frantically eager to serve. How could he put someone under compulsion when he'd been under it himself, from possession and the web in his head?

He did not want to. So he told the other thing, the secret he had been waiting to tell Draco until it became pressing.

"It's not just Pettigrew's escape, Draco," he said softly. "I'm feeling a pull back to my brother." He lifted his hand and touched the nape of his neck, tapping the back of his skull. He waited for the pain, and sighed in relief when nothing came. A week ago, doing that would have made reverberations race around his head for an hour. It seemed that he was finally beginning to heal. "The—the golden thing I told you about." He was not yet ready to reveal to Lucius of all people that he had a web that glowed golden and had a voice like a phoenix's in his mind. "It's tugging at me, telling me to go home. I'm already losing sleep and not feeling as hungry. I don't think it will stop until I'm back in the same house as Connor. I'm sorry," he added.

"But it didn't do that before," Draco whispered.

Harry nodded. "I know that. But it wasn't damaged then, and I think this is the way it's reasserting itself. I'm sorry," he repeated.

Draco dipped his head and gave a long sigh. "But your parents," he whispered. "Do you think that you can handle them?"

Harry nodded again. "I think so. As long as I exercise my magic, I can keep from hurting them. And since they'll ignore me anyway—" he'd told Draco about the *Fugitivus Animus* spell he'd cast on his parents that made them devote every bit of their

attention and perception to Connor “—I should have plenty of time to practice my spells.”

Draco bit his lip a few times more, then put his arms around Harry and held him tight. Harry embraced him back, and ignored the stare he could feel from Lucius’s direction. Lucius wouldn’t know if Harry was really showing affection, or only feigning it so that he wouldn’t hurt Draco’s feelings. Lucius knew nothing about the bottle he’d given Draco, which shone with the true emotions Harry felt towards him.

“I’ll send you your birthday gift by post, then,” Draco whispered. “I think I can do that.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you.” He drew back from Draco and turned to Lucius. “As I’m not old enough to Apparate by myself, Mr. Malfoy,” he asked, “may I do you the trouble of asking you for a Portkey?”

Lucius opened his mouth to answer, but a cool voice from behind Harry said it for him. “I will give you one, of course, Harry. It’s no trouble.” Narcissa stepped in, stared hard at her husband, and then glanced down at him. “If you are sure that you must leave us?” she added, her smile sad.

Harry nodded. “I am, Mrs. Malfoy. Thank you for your hospitality. It’s been wonderful here. If you can tune the Portkey to Diagon Alley, I’ll owl Remus Lupin, who’s a family friend, and ask him to meet me there.” It would do no good to try and tune a Portkey to Godric’s Hollow, since Harry wasn’t about to tell the elder Malfoys just where his brother lived, and the wards wouldn’t let them through anyway.

“Not your parents?” Narcissa murmured, but she was already stepping out of the room to hunt for some object which might make a suitable Portkey, and didn’t stay to listen to his answer.

“But tomorrow, right?” Draco whispered. “You won’t leave today?” Now his smile was wan, at least until Harry nodded back to him. He grabbed Harry’s hand. “Good. Then you’ll have time to try and guess your birthday gift.”

Harry blinked. “I thought you didn’t want me to guess my birthday gift.”

“I still want you to *guess*,” said Draco, tugging him towards the door from the dining room. “I just don’t want you to guess *right*.”

Harry nodded, then glanced once at Lucius. The pull at the back of his head had eased the moment he spoke of going home to his brother, but he could still feel the other wizard’s eyes slicing into him.

“It seems my son has found a true friend,” Lucius said, his lips hardly moving. “It is such a wonder when one finds a friend this young, and such a shame when one loses them.”

Harry inclined his head back. He could understand that statement well enough: it was the beginning of a new dance, and while Lucius would hardly break off the truce negotiations yet, that did not prevent him from doing anything else he took it into his head to do.

Harry had expected it. Lucius was still a Death Eater. And Connor was still the Boy-Who-Lived, and Harry’s brother.

And then there is Draco, thought Harry, as said obstacle gave a yank on his arm hard enough to nearly spill him to the floor. *Who is always tugging me somewhere.*

“Come *on*, Harry,” said Draco, giving him another prompting pull. “It’s even hidden in my bedroom. I’ll blindfold you, and you try to find it.”

Harry shook his head and yielded to the wonder of having such a friend as this, for a little while.

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Chapter Two: The Cartographer

Harry listened as their mother read a book out to Connor, instructing him in history that he really should have learned last summer. He kept his eyes on his own book, one of the journals that Sirius had kept when he was still an Auror. It was “racy” reading, or at least Lily had said it was last year when Harry had asked if he could read it.

Now, he could read it, and no one seemed to notice or care. Lily or James could see the journal appearing to float off the

shelf, and they would blink and frown before simply deciding that it was a sign of Connor's developing wandless magic. They were able to attribute just about any strange event around the house to Connor. The *Fugitivus Animus* spell was still in operation.

It didn't seem to work as well on Sirius, perhaps because he didn't visit Godric's Hollow as often. Sometimes Harry thought that his godfather could almost see him. He blinked and squinted often enough, as though he stared into the sun. But aside from a few whispered questions of "Harry?" that Harry could ignore easily, he never tried to do anything about it.

Remus was a different matter, since he hadn't been in the room when Harry cast the spell to darken his existence in Lily's, James's, and Sirius's minds. He could speak to Harry normally when he came over, leading to a delicate series of maneuvers on Harry's part to keep the werewolf from revealing the whole game. As it was, Remus had been getting more suspicious lately. Harry was just as glad that Remus would spend the rest of the summer at Hogwarts. The Wolfsbane Potion had finally been perfected, and Dumbledore had asked Remus to come and join the teaching staff as the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor (Lockhart having been sacked with relatively little ceremony). Remus was there now, readying himself for the position and learning how to function while on the potion.

He had been here on their birthday, and had been the only one to see the gift Harry received from Draco Malfoy.

Harry felt himself relax as he thought of Draco, and leaned his head on his arm. He could rest. It wasn't as though Lily would flutter about him the way she used to, scolding him to study and exhorting him to think of what might happen to his brother if he didn't.

He paused, startled. *I didn't know I remembered that.*

And yet there the memory was, spread in front of him like a stained-glass butterfly. He had studied on his own, voraciously, striving always for some new bit of knowledge that might let him protect Connor. But when he flagged, Lily had encouraged him, sometimes guilted him, into it.

She should have done that to Connor instead. He's the one who's going to need the knowledge.

Harry drew in his breath as he felt the book he held began to chill beneath his fingers. Connor gave him a quick concerned glance across the room. Harry managed to hold his smile and nod at his twin until Connor turned back to his studying with their mother, reassured.

Harry took the journal quietly upstairs, to their bedroom. His web, or what remained of it, was satisfied as long as he remained in the same house as his brother. But when he felt his magic leaking around his control, then he had to get away from their parents. So far, he had nearly turned James's hand to ice, nearly broken Lily's arm, and nearly sent both of them tumbling to cracked skulls or worse when his magic froze some patch on the stairs. That last one distressed Harry particularly. It seemed that his power not only found some way around all the controls he tried to place on it, but could do so without his immediately sensing it. He had to check the steps several times a day now, to be sure that there wasn't some nasty, vicious trap there, courtesy of Harry Potter.

He ground his teeth as he completed his latest careful survey of the stairs and retreated to their bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind him. The guilt was lashing him now. Harry wished he could speak about it. He wrote to Snape, but that wasn't enough. Connor wouldn't understand. And Harry had to pick and choose what he wrote in his letters to Draco, since he could never be sure that Lucius wasn't reading his post.

He hesitated for a long moment, then charmed the door with *Collorportus*. Connor might come up and find it stuck, but that was better than him stepping into the storm of wild magic Harry suspected the room might become at any moment.

He bowed his head and wrapped his arms around it, breathing as deeply and evenly as he could. That wasn't either very deep or even. Pain woke in his mind as he tried to channel the emotions the way he always would have—either accepting them because they fit with what he expected to feel, or putting them into a box because he couldn't afford to feel them—and couldn't.

The webs of his mind were torn. He knew that. Sylarana, the Locusta snake who had helped him settle his emotions in the last few months before the end of second year, was dead. He knew that.

The webs of his mind were torn.

I cannot think the way I always thought.

Sylarana was dead.

One of the few people who understood me is gone.

None of that subdued the emotions he didn't know how to face, didn't know how to feel, guilt and anger at himself for feeling the guilt and guilt for the anger and anger for the guilt...

Harry let out a little sob. It had been a mistake to leave the Malfoys so early, he thought. He could have endured shortening sleep and less fulfilling meals for the sake of not seeing his parents every day and being faced with what they had done to him.

But why should I have to endure it? Why should I have to choose between suffering in body and suffering in mind? I never would have had to if my parents just hadn't placed this web in my mind.

But they did. And they had their reasons. They wanted to make me the perfect sacrifice. That was what I wanted to be. Why can't I accept that it worked out that way, and would have continued working that way if Sylarana hadn't died?

I wish she were still alive.

How could she leave me?

She didn't leave you, you idiot. She got killed saving your sorry life.

Harry scrambled off the bed and hurried across the room, aiming for a cupboard low on the wall behind Connor's bed. Whatever he tried to store in his own cupboard got moved there, Lily simply assuming that any belongings in this room were Connor's. Luckily, his brother had protested that he wanted the second bed to remain, or Lily would have Vanished that, so convinced was she that she had only one son.

Now he pulled out a smooth glass figurine wrapped in silver cloth, pried the cloth away, and held the figurine to his bare skin. He calmed almost at once. He breathed deeply, and moved back to his own bed, lying with the glass snake on his chest.

This was Draco's gift to him, sent inside a large box that it had taken three owls to carry; somehow, Draco had thought packing the snake in layers and layers of cloth was safer than just binding it tightly into a small package. The serpent was half-rearing, its mouth closed, eyes half-shut. It shone with shifting colors that Harry recognized as Draco's own emotions towards him; in that way, the gift mimicked the bottle he'd given Draco. The serpent had hardly stopped shining deep purple, the color of protectiveness, since Harry returned home.

That hadn't been all, though, as a letter packed deep in the box had revealed. If Harry touched the serpent and said, "*Portus*," it would act as a Portkey and take him to Malfoy Manor, inside and through all the wards on the house.

Harry could barely imagine how Draco had set *that* up. It had probably involved his mother, since Harry couldn't imagine it was something Lucius would agree to. But he was grateful Draco had. The promise of escape, the chance being there even if he could not grasp it, had returned him to a fragile pretense of sanity several times this summer.

Clutching the serpent, he drifted slowly off to sleep.

He woke to a knock on the door, and his brother's low voice. "Harry? Will you let me in? I have something to show you."

Harry blinked and fumbled with his glasses for a moment before remembering he'd fallen asleep with them on, rather than taking them off. He sat up, muttered, "*Finite Incantatem*," at the door, and then turned over, once again clutching the serpent close. It was faintly warm, as though it had lain in the sun. Harry knew it was Draco's magic making it so. He found it more and more difficult to let go of each time he touched it.

"Thanks, Harry," said Connor, behind him. He slipped in and stood by the bed until Harry tilted his head in acknowledgement. Then he whispered, "Here," and pressed a piece of folded parchment into Harry's hand.

"What is this?" Harry asked, unfolding the parchment. It was blank, but so old that Harry thought it must have been written on at one time or another. Why carry around an old piece of paper that didn't have at least a line of memorable poetry?

“Watch,” said Connor, and held out his wand. He tapped the center of the parchment and said, in a clear, commanding voice that Harry had also heard him practicing with Lily, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Harry blinked in astonishment as the parchment abruptly swarmed with images, forming a picture of corridors, tunnels, and walls it took him only a moment to recognize.

Hogwarts.

Harry managed to swallow, and also to control the urge to throw the map away from him or clutch it close. “Thank you, Connor,” he whispered. “What does it do?”

“Shows you people moving around the castle,” Connor said promptly, indicating a dot on the map. Harry squinted at it and saw that it said *Remus Lupin*. He blinked. “You can tell if they’re getting close to you, or if they’re where they’re supposed to be.” He paused, and bit his lip. “Father made it, along with Remus and Sirius and—and Pettigrew.”

Harry nodded tightly. Connor’s voice sank on the last name, as it had since they heard of Peter’s escape from Azkaban. It was not right that his brother be so afraid. Harry almost wanted Peter to come to Godric’s Hollow at that point. He could use his magic to kill him, or scare him badly enough that he would never consider coming after Connor and completing his Lord’s dirty work.

“Why give it to me, though?” he asked, lifting his eyes and studying Connor’s face intently.

“A few reasons,” said Connor, and shifted his arm. Harry blinked again as it vanished. “First, I have this, and I thought you would want the map so that you could keep track of me.” He swept something that sparkled faintly around himself with a flourish. “Father finally decided I was old enough for the Invisibility Cloak,” he said, from the middle of the place where his face had abruptly disappeared, and then pulled the Cloak off again.

Harry nodded slowly. “Thank you,” he said. He would be frantic if he couldn’t find Connor when he believed his brother might be in danger, and especially frantic if the Cloak meant he might walk right past him. “And what was the other reason?”

“It’s fantastically complex magic,” said Connor. “Mum showed me a picture of what the spells looked like that Father and the others used to make the map—the Marauder’s Map, that’s what they call it—but I could hardly make them out, and there were dozens I didn’t recognize.” He paused, as though considering how to word what he needed to say next. Harry just watched him, clutching both map and serpent close. “I thought,” Connor said slowly, “that you could use your magic to work on making a map like that, or at least analyzing this one. That would give it something to do. Something creative. You said you didn’t want to do anything destructive.” His eyes fastened on Harry’s face again, as though he hoped that Harry hadn’t changed his mind about wanting to destroy things.

Harry smiled. For the first time since he came home, it felt like he, himself, was behind the smile, and not some anonymous smiler. “Thank you, Connor,” he whispered. “But how do I make the map vanish again? It might be important.”

Connor tapped the map with his wand again, and said, “Mischief managed.” The image of Hogwarts sank into the parchment and vanished.

“Thank you,” Harry repeated. It was inadequate as an answer to what Connor had done for him, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Connor abruptly hugged him. Harry froze with astonishment, but his brother held the embrace until he reached up and wound his arms around Connor’s shoulders in return. Then Connor backed off and peered at him.

“I hate to see you suffering,” he said. “I know that I can’t do anything about a lot of it, but I could do this. Promise me that you’ll actually use the map and your magic, so that you won’t go crazy or—or do anything else.” He was trusting enough not to think that Harry would actually murder their parents, Harry supposed.

“Thank you, Connor,” Harry whispered back. His voice came out steadier this time, and for the first time since he came home, he also got an absolutely genuine smile from his brother.

“Good,” said Connor. “Now I have to study these books that Mum wants me to read. Do you *know* how many Goblin Wars there have been?”

“Seventeen,” Harry said automatically.

Connor wrinkled his nose back at him. “Yes, you would,” he said, but with no malice in his voice, and then went to his own cupboard to retrieve the books that Lily wanted him to look at.

Harry lay back on his bed and began studying the map. He already had several projects in mind, but he wasn’t sure if they would work. When he let control of his own magic go enough to examine the spells on the map, he sighed in contentment. Yes, there was more than enough here to keep him busy.

Harry kicked the bed, then reminded himself to keep silent. Connor was sleeping, and Harry wasn’t to keep him up simply because he had better things to do than sleep. He glanced from the Marauder’s Map to the other, seemingly blank piece of parchment that he’d enchanted. Tonight was one of the last chances he’d have to make the test. Tomorrow they were going to Diagon Alley—Connor had finally managed to convince their parents that, yes, he needed to go there and purchase two of everything they’d need for the third year at Hogwarts, just in case something happened to his books or robes or cauldron—and in the days after that, Harry would prepare himself as best as he could for his sudden reintroduction to large groups of people, and what he would do when he saw Dumbledore again.

His breath became visible in front of him, and he heard Connor shiver and snuggle further under the blankets. He forced his anger away. Yes, his rage still burned cold at the thought of the Headmaster, but it was always doing that. He would just have to put up with it.

He made his mind bright and shiny and clear again, and then tapped the Marauder’s Map and whispered, “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” The map gleamed into place. Harry nodded, then touched his own parchment, let his breath out, and murmured, “I solemnly swear I will protect my brother.”

And, for the first time, it worked, the lines that Harry wanted springing into place on his own parchment. Harry snorted and shook his head. All the work he’d done, trying to duplicate the spells in the Map just so that his own would function, and it turned out that the trigger phrase was the key. He had to have a phrase to bring up and hide his map that was like the phrases the Marauder’s Map used.

Harry rolled on his back, his *Lumos* spell illuminating the map’s surface. It showed the house at Godric’s Hollow and the area around it inside the isolation wards. He could see the dots labeled “Lily Potter” and “James Potter” inside their parents’ bedroom. He carefully tore his eyes away from them. He could not afford to stare too long, or he would become violently angry. His rage was still the hardest of all his emotions to control. He was glad for the *Fugitivus Animus* spell right now, as there were times he thought he would have killed his parents if they had spoken to him.

There were the motionless dots labeled “Harry Potter” and “Connor Potter” in their bedroom, and a dot labeled “Sirius Black” in the guest bedroom downstairs. Harry nodded. *Good. This works. And it means I ought to be able to create maps of other places.* Wherever Connor might go, he needed to have a map that showed that place.

He was about to tap the parchment with his wand and whisper, “Guardianship achieved” to clean the image off when he saw another dot abruptly appear near the edges of the isolation wards. Harry paused and tilted the map back towards his *Lumos*. Had Remus come back from Hogwarts? He would watch the progress of the dot, if so, just to make absolutely *sure* his spells had worked.

But the dot was labeled “Peter Pettigrew.”

Harry felt his breath coming short, and he sat up, staring at the map and trying to figure out if he was seeing it wrong. But no. The writing was clear, and did not waver as the dot moved across the grass towards the house.

How had Peter got through the wards? They were tuned to the Potter family and to Sirius and Remus only—

No, they aren’t, Harry thought abruptly, remembering what James had said about them long ago. *They’re tuned to the Marauders. And Peter is still that.*

Harry bared his teeth. He felt his magic rise around him, hissing through the familiar channels inside his body, glad to have a target it could use. He nodded, once, and then gathered up his map and headed for the door.

He could wake their parents or Sirius, he knew. They would be able to defend Connor. And Peter would run at the sight of

them, as he wouldn't run at the sight of one boy wizard approaching him with just a wand.

Just a wand.

Harry felt his rage stretch lazy claws inside him, and smiled.

He stepped through the front door and shut it behind him. He could not see Peter yet, but he suspected it was just a matter of time. He leaned his back against the wall of the house and breathed deeply. It was a fine, clear night, with the nearly full moon hovering overhead, and a scent in the air like flowers, though Harry couldn't see any of them, either.

He kept his gaze trained ahead of himself, and saw the grass rustle and move to the side, along with a glimpse of his *Lumos* shining off a hairless tail.

"Show yourself, Pettigrew," he said calmly, and lifted his wand to point directly at Peter. Of course, if he was foolish enough to watch that instead of the wandless magic Harry could unleash to much more permanent destruction, that was his problem. "I know you're here."

He half-expected the rat to squeak and run, but it didn't happen. Instead, a moment passed, and then Peter Pettigrew transformed to human.

Harry bared his teeth again, wondering if Peter would think he was smiling. *Again, if he does, that's his mistake.*

He moved a step forward, feeling the dew-heavy grass soak his ankles, and studied Peter. For the most part, he matched the descriptions he'd heard Sirius and James give, their voices choked with grief and hatred.

Small...fat...always tagging behind us...had to have our help to learn the Animagus transformation...we felt sorry for him...watery eyes...he always looked away from someone who wanted to confront him about something he'd done...he was jealous of James...hated Sirius...foul traitor...Death Eater...should have known that if anyone was going to be a Death Eater, it would be him...

There were two things that were different about this Peter, though. Harry could see that he was thin, his clothes—which he'd probably stolen—hanging on him. Of course, he would have dropped weight after twelve years in Azkaban.

The other thing was his gaze. When he raised his head and met Harry's eyes, Harry actually recoiled a step. Peter's eyes were blue, and so piercing that Harry felt scraped to the bone by them.

He recovered himself quickly, of course. It wouldn't do to let Peter, Pettigrew, *Wormtail*, think he was weak and couldn't protect his brother. He held his wand out before him and waited for the first blast of magic.

Instead, Peter nodded and said, in a voice that reminded Harry of Lucius Malfoy's, "Harry."

"Wormtail," said Harry. The nickname didn't make Peter flinch, though. He just went on watching. His hands were frozen near his sides, and Harry supposed that was another way that he had changed in the last twelve years. Before, as Sirius had emphasized when describing Peter, he would always have fidgeted and washed his hands together, resembling the way a rat washed its paws.

"Do you know why I came here?" Peter asked, finally, when they had passed some minutes in silence.

"To kill Connor," said Harry. "The way that you tried to when you betrayed him to Voldemort." He ignored Peter's flinch at the Dark Lord's name. Snape was the same way, and even Draco. They all preferred calling him by his title. Harry thought that was silly. "It won't work. I'm going to stand in your way, and I'm going to kill you if you try to touch him." He brought his magic up, swirling and roaring, cold music that frosted the grass around him and broke the air into small pieces.

Peter shook his head. "That's not the reason I escaped," he said. "I didn't come here for him."

"For whom, then?" Harry curled his lip and took a step forward. He felt strong, powerful, ready to strike in a way he hadn't all summer. This was an *enemy*. Harry was justified in whatever he did to him. This was the kind of battle that Lily had specifically trained him for, the kind where Connor's inherent innocence and compassion might blind him and make him leave the enemy alive. Where justice had to take place, rather than mercy, Harry could become the executioner.

“For you,” said Peter. He tilted his head to the side. “I thought, when I saw the announcement in the newspapers about the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived going to the Malfoys’ for the summer, that something like this might have happened. And I see that it has.” His voice was deep with a sadness Harry did not understand. “I knew—well, I should have known, after that night when V-Voldemort attacked, but I couldn’t remember for the longest time, you see.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Harry asked as calmly as he could. His wand wasn’t trembling. His magic was, ready to lunge and strike. Harry didn’t know if he could control it much longer, and neither was he sure that he wanted to. Peter would, of course, lie, or else he would have gone insane after twelve years in Azkaban. No one stayed sane that long there.

Of course, no one’s ever escaped from the prison before, either, Harry thought, and went on listening.

Peter let out a breath, then another, and then said, “Harry, I betrayed your parents on Dumbledore’s orders.”

Harry shook his head at once. “No,” he said. “That’s not true. You were a Death Eater. Let me see your left arm.”

Peter pushed the sleeve of his stolen robe up at once, and Harry saw the dark gleam of the skull and snake. He hissed, one hand rising to his forehead, where his scar had abruptly blazed with pain.

“See,” Harry said with gritted teeth through the agony. “You’re a Death Eater. You served Voldemort.”

“I became a Death Eater because Dumbledore asked me to,” said Peter, his eyes unearthly. “The Dark Lord approached me because he believed I would be jealous, being in my friends’ shadows all the time. When I went to Dumbledore, he saw it as the perfect opportunity to have a spy. Snape hadn’t turned his back on the Dark Lord then. And then, when I had the chance to become Lily and James’s Secret Keeper, Dumbledore said I had to take it. He explained about the prophecy to me. And he explained about something else to me, too. That was the real reason he wanted me to become everything I did, to betray your parents and go to Azkaban. I was a sacrifice, Harry, even as you were—“

Harry abruptly went to his knees, crying out in pain. The phoenix light and song had blazed up in his mind again, as though the crippled web sensed an enemy and was fighting frantically to involve itself in one last battle.

Peter was speaking, but Harry couldn’t hear him beyond the pressure of the fire. Then a hand touched his shoulder, and Peter’s voice cut off, and Harry felt the agony steadily retreat. He took a deep breath and stood.

He leaped backward when he saw that Peter was the one who had touched him, and pointed his wand at him again. Peter lifted his hands and backed away.

“I should have known that would happen,” Peter breathed. “It was the web, wasn’t it? The phoenix web? I just broke free of mine a few months ago, and that’s why I was able to escape—“

Harry’s vision flashed gold again. “Stop,” he managed to say through a clenched jaw.

“My apologies,” said Peter softly. “I can’t tell you everything you need to know, Harry, because the web will prevent you from listening if I do. But I’ll find a way to help you break it. I swear I’ll find a way to help you break it. That was the reason I escaped when I did. I could have rotted and died in Azkaban, or just run away. Merlin knows I’ve paid all my debts to them.” His eyes shone viciously as he said that, and Harry had the feeling he was seeing the Death Eater. “But if you were suffering from this too, then I wanted to help you. As one sacrifice to another—twelve years is enough, I think. You don’t have to listen to them anymore, Harry.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t believe you,” he whispered.

“Of course you don’t,” said Peter gently. “Not yet.”

“No, I mean—I mean I won’t believe you,” Harry said, bringing his wand up. It wavered. He despised himself for his weakness, but he couldn’t seem to stop it. “Why would you agree to go along with that, if it really happened?”

“Because Dumbledore is persuasive,” said Peter, shrugging. “And for other reasons that I can’t tell you yet without causing your web to cause you pain.”

“But my parents never knew—“

“Yes, they did,” said Peter quietly. “They knew, and—“

“*Harry!*”

Harry spun around abruptly. Sirius was rushing out of the house, his head low to the ground and his body already rippling with the first signs of his Animagus transformation. His next cry was as much a bark as a shout. “*Wormtail!*”

By the time Harry turned around again, Peter had transformed and was running. He scurried across the ground, aiming for the edge of the wards. In a few moments, Sirius, now a large black dog, had caught up with him, but though his head dipped several times and then rose again, he seemed to miss Peter each time. Harry watched, his head aching and his wand still shaking in his head. He noticed it, and forced his fingers to steady.

Sirius came back in a few moments, his growl rumbling up from his throat. Harry didn’t have to look at his jaws to know that he hadn’t caught Peter. He swallowed, unsure what to feel.

“*I betrayed your parents on Dumbledore’s orders.*”

That *couldn’t* be true. It *wasn’t* true. It *had to not be true*.

“Are you all right, Harry?”

Harry looked up into Sirius’s face as he transformed again. The *Fugitivus Animus* spell didn’t seem to be working any more, if the way that his godfather’s eyes were fastened on him was any indication. “You can see me?”

Sirius gave him a puzzled glance. “Of course. Why?”

Harry shook his head. The spell never had worked as well on Sirius. He supposed he would just have to put up with it. “Nothing,” he said. “And yes, I’m fine. I just came out to get some air, and he was there.”

“Talking nonsense, I bet,” Sirius muttered. “Trying to get you to join up with the Death Eaters, was he?”

“He told me some things—“

Sirius tensed like a twig about to snap. Harry wondered why.

“But it was all nonsense,” Harry assured him quickly. “I didn’t believe him.”

Sirius let out a loud breath and hugged him. “Thank Merlin for that,” he said. “Now, come back inside. I’m going to wake up your fool of a father and tell him to adjust the wards.”

Harry nodded and fell into step beside Sirius, letting his godfather lead him back to his bedroom. He deliberately didn’t think about anything until he was back under the covers, with Connor snoring heavily, reassuringly, across the room.

“*It was the web, wasn’t it? The phoenix web? I just broke free of mine a few months ago...*”

That was the thing that troubled Harry the most, and on two accounts. First, he wondered if a phoenix web—if that was what it was—placed in someone’s mind could cause that person to lie his way through the Veritaserum the Aurors would have used when they tried Peter. After all, if someone under the web believed what he was saying were true, the Veritaserum would find only truth.

And the second thing...

Harry rolled over and punched his pillow. *You know that what he said wasn’t true. Go to sleep, damn you.*

And the second thing...

Harry buried his face under the blankets, but his thoughts would not stop racing.

Harry was trying to get used to thinking of himself as a sacrifice again, the way he had unquestioningly before the damage that Tom Riddle and Sylarana’s death had inflicted on his mind. He had chosen it. He had trained for it. It was what he was. Eventually, he would have to reconcile himself to that, rage at his parents and Dumbledore or not. What he had learned about

his own mind and magic did nothing to diminish Connor's need for protection.

But what if they had sacrificed other people, too? What if Peter had spent twelve years in Azkaban, scorned by his friends, as a living sacrifice? What if Harry wasn't the only person Dumbledore had manipulated?

He was not sure how he felt about that.

Golden light roared across his eyelids, and Harry turned his attention away from the thoughts. He had to rest, had to relax, or his head would hurt.

And besides, Sirius was right and what Peter had said was nonsense, designed to trick Harry and lure him away from his brother's side.

Just nonsense, Harry repeated to himself until he fell asleep. *Just nonsense, all of it.*

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Three: Hawthorn and Rue

Sirius's hand clenched hard on Harry's arm as they came out of the Apparition and into Diagon Alley. Harry stepped away from him and took a few deep breaths. He never had liked Side-Along Apparition. It made him feel as though his stomach were being squeezed out through his ears.

Sirius glanced over at him anxiously. "All right there, Harry?"

Harry conjured a smile and nodded. Sirius had been solicitous this morning, as though to make up for ignoring Harry during the rest of the summer. Harry's skin was crawling with all the unexpected attention. He needed to get away from Sirius. He knew that he meant well, and he knew that he would have to face even more people at Hogwarts, but those people generally weren't in the habit of trying to check him for injuries and ask him if he wanted sweets at the same time.

"Connor," Lily was saying as she unfolded the list that had come with his Hogwarts letter. Connor took the chance to pass his own Hogwarts letter to Harry. It had arrived to utterly blank looks from their parents, until Connor told them that the school had probably sent two copies to him by mistake. Then they'd smiled and nodded, seeming to see Connor's name on it. "I think we should go to Flourish and Blotts first. It looks like you need more books this year."

Harry let out a little breath of relief. He could head in the opposite direction, then, and no one would think it strange. Connor gave him a sympathetic look, and then beamed up at their mother.

"That would be fine, Mum."

Lily and James herded Connor away. Harry started to turn away, only to be halted by Sirius's hand clamping on his shoulder. His magic gave a little wet snarl in his ears, and Harry felt the power battering under his skin. It was just looking for a chance to escape and hurt someone. Harry told himself firmly that it wasn't getting the chance this time, and shut it up again before he attended to what Sirius was saying.

"Where do you think you're going, Harry?" his godfather asked. "I think you should have someone with you, just in case Wormtail attacks you again."

"He probably wouldn't want to attack me," said Harry, summoning up a calm mask to cover his face, which really wanted to stretch in surprised panic. He *needed* to get away from Sirius. He *needed* some time among strangers. Even the people who were detouring around them now, staring hard at him as if they thought he was his brother, made him feel a little better than he had when trapped at home. "He came for Connor. He'd just want to spout more nonsense at me."

"And you wouldn't listen, right?" Sirius's fingers flexed and drove down hard enough that Harry thought he would probably have bruises tomorrow.

"Of course not," said Harry. "Like you said, it's just nonsense, and I know better than to listen to Death Eaters. They're all liars, just like Voldemort was when he talked to me at the end of first year."

Sirius let out a little breath and pried his fingers off Harry's shoulder. "If you're sure..."

“I’m sure, Sirius.” Harry flashed him a brave little smile that he’d perfected a few days ago. “I’ll meet you back here in a couple of hours, all right?”

Sirius nodded. Then he opened his mouth, and a shadow fell across his face. Harry braced himself. Sirius hadn’t asked about the spell on Lily and James yet. Every moment he looked like this, Harry thought he might.

But, once again, he shut his mouth and turned away. Harry watched him blend with the crowds in the Alley, heading towards Quality Quidditch Supplies, and shook his head. He didn’t know whether Sirius was hesitating because he thought it was ridiculous for there to be a spell or for it to be Harry’s fault, or because he didn’t want to confront the reason why Harry had cast the spell.

Harry wanted to think it was the first, but he suspected it was the second. That made him bitter at Sirius, and *that* made him uneasy. Yes, Sirius had been a Gryffindor, and that meant that he should have some courage. But there were all different kinds of courage. Was it really fair to demand that he should have this kind?

Harry shrugged and turned away to consult the shopping list on his letter. He was no more eager to confront the question than Sirius was.

Harry stepped out of Eeylops Owl Emporium and paused to tuck the bags of owl treats he’d bought for Hedwig in his pocket. Someone nearly knocked into him as he did so, and Harry had to stagger back and catch himself against the wall of the shop. The person turned around to apologize. Harry blinked.

“Pansy?” he asked. He had thought that all his Slytherin Housemates would have finished their shopping earlier than this late in the summer.

Pansy Parkinson gave him a distracted nod and glanced around, her eyes constantly moving through the crowd. “Hi, Harry. Have you seen a little girl holding an ice cream sundae and shrieking something about elk?”

Harry blinked again. “Um. No.”

Pansy gave a withering sigh. “I thought so. That’s my little cousin, Aurora,” she explained, to Harry’s blank glance. “I was supposed to watch her, and I met Millicent, and I only turned aside for a second, and then when I turned back, she was gone.” She ground her teeth, and then abruptly stomped her foot. “Why do they always make the older children watch the younger ones? It’s not as though I’m good at it just because I’m a girl.”

Harry just shrugged. He was afraid he couldn’t sympathize very much. His duty had been watching and protecting Connor ever since he could remember, even though his brother was only fifteen minutes younger than he was. To him, it was sacred, and it always slightly startled him to remember that there were people who disliked or resented doing it.

“*There* she is,” Pansy said abruptly, and sprinted away. Harry turned, but could see only a glimpse of a small robe waving before Pansy blocked it. The childish howl that came a moment later, though, was probably a sign that she had caught her charge.

Harry shook his head and turned away. But he’d only got a few paces when another of his Housemates fell into step beside him.

“Potter.”

It was Millicent Bulstrode. Harry found himself having to look further up at her than he had expected. Millicent had always been one of the tallest girls in their year, and she’d already grown a bit over the summer, it seemed. Millicent raised her brows in silent, mocking acknowledgement of his gaze, and then tilted her head, her eyes narrowed.

“Why are you by yourself?”

“Because I wanted to be, Bulstrode,” said Harry. He kept his voice inoffensive, polite, even boring. Millicent sometimes seemed interested in what he was doing, and sometimes did not. She usually gave up and went away if he didn’t seem to be doing anything that would inspire interest.

Not this time, it seemed. Millicent only smiled more widely and said, “What could cause the great Harry Potter to want to be

by himself?"

Harry stared openly at her, unable to help it. "What?"

Millicent sighed dramatically and examined a hand, as though she were looking at her nails. Pansy would have pulled the gesture off better, Harry thought. She actually looked as if she cared about her appearance. Millicent's nails were as broken and ragged from biting as any boy's. "Sorry, Potter. When I get chattered at all summer about you, it becomes automatic to call you that."

"Who's been chattering at you about me?" Harry slipped one hand towards his robe pocket and found his wand there, safe and secure. If he had to fend off a sudden attack of Death Eaters—and Millicent's father, at least, had been one of those accused of Death Eater activities and had pleaded that he was under the Imperius Curse—then he wanted to be ready. He was trying to force his magic to get used to his wand again, instead of simply lashing out from his body like wings and beating whoever it liked.

"Various people," said Millicent, with a vague gesture that seemed to encompass the whole Alley. "Relatives. Not-relatives. Friends. House elves. You know how it is."

Harry jerked a little at the mention of house elves. Dim as twilight, a memory came to him from the end of last year, when Dobby had been muttering to him about being a *vates* of some kind. But Harry had pushed it away and refused to consider it, since none of the house elves at Malfoy Manor—even Dobby—had tried to speak to him about it again, and his own family had no elves.

"Tell me what you mean, Millicent," he said, deliberately switching to use of her first name. He drew his wand out so that she could see it. "Are you threatening me? Is this an offering of alliance? Do you just mean to tease me? *What?*"

"It's mainly an attempt to make you see that I'm not stupid," said Millicent, stopping and turning to face him. She sounded as if she were speaking with disarming honesty, but Harry was sure that was only another mask. "I can see what things are, you know. I can see what's what. And no one could have missed last year that you were the one blazing with power in the hospital wing. It wasn't your brother, and that story that he told about defeating the basilisk in the Chamber was just a bit *too* constructed. Why would Fawkes have flown the Sword of Gryffindor to him? Why wouldn't Dumbledore have come himself to battle the Dark Lord?"

Harry shook his head. "It's not like that," he said, and could feel his head aching and his sight blurring from the strain. He didn't think it was the phoenix web, but more the thought that someone else might not support and believe Connor. "You have no idea what it was really like."

"But I know who can tell us," said Millicent, and her gaze was direct. "I know who wants to believe a new story, and I can arrange for you to tell them that story. Who knows? The truth might even soothe their fear, and they might fall into line behind your precious Boy-Who-Lived the way you want them to."

Harry blinked. "You would really be able to arrange a meeting between us?"

Millicent nodded. "We've had someone watching Diagon Alley each day, hoping it would be the day you came to get your supplies," she said, and then turned and let out a soft little whistle in the direction of the shadows between the Emporium and the magical instruments shop.

Harry stiffened as several cloaked and masked figures emerged into the light. Their hoods were sufficiently lowered that they didn't need the masks, but Harry could see them anyway, and they were white. Though the cloaks were dark green instead of black, they looked enough like Death Eaters that he drew his wand.

"None of that," said Millicent, clamping onto his arm and forcing it down with unusual strength. "Play nice, Potter. They just want to know what really happened in the Chamber. That's all."

Harry breathed deeply for a few moments, considering the Death Eaters, or former Death Eaters, or whoever they were. They remained motionless and watched him. Harry could not even hear them breathing. He wondered what they wanted, if they really would go away after they heard his story, and why it seemed to matter to them so much.

After a moment, he decided he might as well tell them. At worst, it would make them see that, powerful as Harry might be, he was loyal to his brother, and get rid of any thoughts about them using him as a pawn in their games. At best, it would focus their attention on him and make them attack *him* instead of Connor. Harry would almost welcome that. He didn't want

to kill anyone, but his magic could use the exercise.

“All right,” said Harry.

He told the story as simply as he could, because he was afraid that any attempt to add emotion or humanity to his chill tone would involve tears. He froze the tears deep, and spoke of Syllarana’s death, and how that had suddenly freed his magic. He did not tell them about the damage to his mind, but represented Syllarana as the kind of familiar who had been a large part of taming his magic, so that it went wild without her presence and sought some new container. He told about the ice and how he had destroyed the diary and sucked out the fragment of Tom Riddle, absorbing his power. At that, one of the cloaked figures on the far end gave a sharp sound and made a movement that might have involved the drawing of a wand, if another cloaked figure hadn’t checked him.

Harry finished up with the storm, and how Professor Snape had come out and chided him into putting his magic away and coming back into the school. He certainly was not about to reveal how fragile his sanity was, even now.

“Why did Connor believe the way he did?” Millicent demanded.

Harry shook his head. “Because he wanted to,” he said. “It was the best explanation he could come up with for what had happened.” He wasn’t going to reveal that he had *Obliviated* his brother, either.

“And Draco?” Millicent asked, the one question he had really not wanted her to ask.

Harry held his wand high enough that they could see it. “Ask about him again, and I’ll hex you,” he said. He thought he knew who the cloaked figures were now—former Death Eaters, Slytherins, the kind of people who might associate with Lucius Malfoy more than casually. Harry was not about to tell them that Draco had chosen to stand with him against Tom Riddle and had been vital in trying to burn the diary, either. Draco’s allegiance was their secret until he was ready to announce it to the world. It was no secret where Connor stood, or Harry, either.

Millicent put her hands up. “Calm down, Potter,” she murmured, but her voice had the sound of deep satisfaction, not mockery. She stepped up to the cloaked figure at the farthest end of the line, the one who had stopped the first from drawing his wand, and leaned against him. The others turned and melted away into the shadows once more. Harry closed his eyes, trying to control his magic, and listening for the sounds of an attack in the moments he needed to recover himself.

When he opened his eyes, no one had attacked him, and the figure Millicent had leaned against had stripped his mask off. He was a dark-haired man with a large, blunt face, and Millicent’s piercing eyes.

Harry inclined his head slowly, never looking away from the wizard’s face. The man nodded, a faint smile gleaming between his hooked nose and thick lips.

“My name is Adalrico Bulstrode,” he said. “Former Death Eater, as you doubtless have guessed by now. Under the Imperius Curse,” he added.

“Of course,” said Harry, letting politeness and nothing else season his voice.

Adalrico chuckled. “My daughter did not mention how careful you were,” he said, and squeezed Millicent’s shoulder with rough affection. “She should have.” He leaned closer, staring into Harry’s eyes. “You have given a confession, and the old ways say that a secret for a secret is the way of things, yes? So. There is a force abroad in the land, a force that is trying to bring back Voldemort.”

Harry stood a little straighter, noting how Adalrico had used the Dark Lord’s name instead of his title. “I already knew that, Mr. Bulstrode,” he said softly. “I have expected someone to try and bring back Voldemort since my brother and I came to Hogwarts.”

Adalrico cocked his head slyly to one side. “Ah. But did you know that that force is gaining new momentum now? There are those who have been hurt in trying to resist it, in trying to move slowly, in trying to make sure that we are ready before anything happens. And we do not like that.” The hand not holding his daughter made a convulsive gesture.

Harry narrowed his eyes. He could not ask outright, of course, if this really meant that some of the Death Eaters—former Death Eaters, he corrected himself firmly—would be interested in an alliance. That would be losing an important step in this dance. But he could hint at it. “That is unfortunate,” he said. “I am sorry for those who have been hurt, Mr. Bulstrode. I would like to ask you that carry my condolences to them. And any skill at healing that I might offer, of course. I have been

training in medical magic, you know.”

Adalrico’s eyes shone with the same fierce enjoyment that Harry had seen in Narcissa Malfoy’s face when he danced with her. “That is kind of you, Mr. Potter,” he said, trying to keep his voice perfectly grave and failing. “Do your skills extend to healing bruises and contusions only? Or might they go further than that?”

“Further than that, I believe, sir,” said Harry, and inclined his head modestly. “Of course, to know how to heal a certain affliction, then I have to see what that infliction is first, and how much damage it has done.”

Adalrico nodded to him. “Perfectly reasonable,” he said, and glanced over his shoulder. “Don’t you think so?”

There was a long pause, and then the shadows stirred again, and one of the figures moved back out into the sunlight. With heavy, reluctant movements, he removed his mask—no, Harry corrected as he caught sight of the face, *she* removed *her* mask.

“Pansy?” Harry asked in wonder, before realizing that this had to be her mother. He squinted at her, and recalled her name a moment later. *Hawthorn Parkinson*. “Mrs. Parkinson,” he said, and bowed to her. “I am sorry to hear that you have been hurt.”

“So was everyone else.” Hawthorn Parkinson was as pale-haired as her daughter, as pale of skin, but her eyes were unlike Pansy’s blue, being shadowed hazel. Her face carried the deep-carved lines of some great strain, and her body was coiled as though she might explode in any direction at any moment. Despite that, Harry thought, she was managing to force some dry humor into her voice. “Of course, none of them truly *promised* to do anything about it. Sorrow was the only balm they felt able to offer me.”

Harry studied her again, looking for some sign of an injury or curse, and then realized what else, beyond her face, seemed so familiar about her. He hesitated, then took a risk. He might be revealing too much, but on the other hand, he was revealing his intelligence—which they would need to be convinced of if they entered into an alliance with him.

“How long have you been a werewolf, Mrs. Parkinson?” he asked gently.

Hawthorn jerked, one hand flying up in front of her as if to defend herself from a curse with bare skin, while the other fumbled for her wand. Harry merely waited. Two wands were aimed at him, now, he saw, rolling his eyes to the side to check that Adalrico was armed. That was somewhat of a relief. He would have been disappointed if they weren’t.

“How did you—“ Hawthorn asked, and the low snarl in her voice only confirmed it further for Harry.

“I’ve known werewolves,” said Harry. “How long?”

Hawthorn lowered her head and said, “Since last month, when Fenrir Greyback attacked me for refusing to cooperate in his futile attempts to raise the Dark Lord. This next full moon is my first transformation.” Her eyes reflected rage and horror and utter fear. Harry could understand. For a pureblood witch, raised with the idea that werewolves were always halfbreeds and monsters and that only stupid or worthless people became them, this was a living nightmare.

“I could help, you know,” said Harry. “Have you heard of the Wolfsbane Potion?”

The brief flicker of hope in Hawthorn’s eyes showed that either she had, or she had not but suspected what it would do. She clasped one hand around her wand. “A cure?” she whispered.

“Not as such,” said Harry. “There is no cure for lycanthropy yet, Mrs. Parkinson. This is a potion that allows a werewolf to retain his or her senses in animal form. You’ll still transform, but you won’t be a ravaging beast.”

Hawthorn closed her eyes and nodded. “That is the best I can hope for,” she whispered. “I would never forgive myself if I attacked my daughter.”

“How can you get it to her?” Adalrico asked. “How can you brew it?”

“Some is going to be brewed at Hogwarts this year,” said Harry. He was being blunt, but so were they. He only had to insure that he didn’t betray other people’s secrets, which weren’t his to betray. “Professor Severus Snape finally perfected the formula. I helped him on some of the preliminary stages. I can learn to brew it, and I can give it to Pansy, if you’re able to meet her somewhere on school grounds.”

They were silent for a long moment. Harry thought they were wondering whether to trust him, and painted his most open and guileless expression on his face.

Then Hawthorn Parkinson said, fighting to keep her voice steady and almost succeeding, “If you do that, Mr. Potter, I will owe you a debt so profound that it cannot—” She cut herself off and shook her head. “What will you want?” she asked. “What is in my hands to give, I will provide with open palms.”

Harry hissed before he could stop himself. That was an ancient saying, one that even pureblood families didn’t use all that often, probably because deep and trusting alliances between them were uncommon. One trusted family first, and outsiders only if one had to.

“Is it true that you’re a Parselmouth?” Adalrico asked abruptly.

Harry nodded at him. “It is.” He ignored Millicent’s outraged mutter to her father about his not trusting her, and glanced back at Pansy’s mother. “I’ll ask for a truce as long as I provide you with the potion, Mrs. Parkinson. You said that Fenrir Greyback bit you for refusing to cooperate with him?”

Hawthorn nodded, her eyes distant. “What he is doing is stupid,” she growled softly. The tense, wild aura around her grew stronger. “It would never work, and for him to demand my help when—” She shook her head. “It does not matter.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll ask that you continue to refuse him for as long as I provide you with the potion,” he refined his original request. “I don’t know exactly what he wants, and I will not ask unless you want to tell me. But if you continue to refuse, that’s one less enemy whom my brother must face on the battlefield.”

Hawthorn smiled, slowly, and Harry saw a shadow of the lovely, commanding woman she must be when in full possession of herself. “That is well enough. And gladly, even easily, given.” She cocked her head to the side. “You are sure that you do not want something else in addition to that?”

“No, Mrs. Parkinson,” said Harry. *Let them think me generous. Let me have a little extra space, if I need it, to maneuver and win concessions for Connor.* “Let’s not weight the bough of our union with snow it cannot carry.”

Hawthorn laughed, a soft, delighted sound, and put out a hand. Harry clasped it, and then added, “I’m afraid that I won’t be able to provide the potion for this first transformation, since I won’t be at Hogwarts until the first day of September.”

“That does not matter,” said Hawthorn, her voice gone warm. “I know how to handle this first transformation, what to do and where I must go. But to know that the others will make me safer—that I need not abandon my daughter or lose control of myself to the beast within me—” She shook her head, and apparently was unable to say anything more.

Harry nodded to her, and then glanced at Adalrico and Millicent. “With all due respect, sir, did you really seek me out because you thought I could cure Mrs. Parkinson’s disease? You couldn’t have known that I would know anything about it.”

Adalrico smiled, a deep, predatory expression that Harry had to admire for the sheer weight of glee behind it. “No, we did not,” he said. “But needs must when the devil drives. We wanted to see what a powerful young wizard might have to offer us, and we have seen it now.”

Harry inclined his head. “Of course,” he murmured, “family is still most important, especially blood family.” He could not make a clearer statement of his loyalty to Connor without being insulting, he thought.

Adalrico held up a hand as if toasting him with an imaginary wineglass. “I could not agree more, Mr. Potter. And when blood family and similar principles come together, then there is the happiest union of all. But bonds on principle alone may form between people of varying families, as they did in the case of Calypso McGonagall and Thomas Mackenzie.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. He knew that story, too, and he was not sure what Adalrico meant by referring to it. The McGonagall and Mackenzie families had been at war for generations over the kidnapping and rape of a pair of children that could have belonged to either family depending on whom one listened to, until Calypso McGonagall strode out to the middle of one of their battlefields and sent a binding spell into the air. It tugged Thomas Mackenzie over to her, made him her lawfully wedded husband on the spot, and led to an immediate consummation in the sight of everyone, just so that no one could say later that they weren’t really married.

Perhaps he means that they’ll be watching to see if I ever choose principle over blood. Long may they watch. It’s not going

to happen.

“That is true, Mr. Bulstrode,” he said, opting for the diplomatic reaction. He nodded to Millicent. “It was nice to meet your father and Pansy’s mother, Bulstrode,” he said. “I’ll see you at school.”

“Oh, call me Millicent, Harry,” said Millicent, and smiled at him. “I think we should do that now. It’s what friends do.”

“Are we friends?” Harry raised his brows.

Millicent just smirked at him.

Harry turned around, shaking his head, and nearly slammed into Pansy again. This time, she hastened over to her mother and wrapped her arms around her, giving Harry a suspicious glance.

“It’s all right, darling,” Hawthorn murmured, stroking her daughter’s hair. “Mr. Potter has come up with a way to help me.”

Pansy stared at her, and then switched her stare back to Harry. Her face relaxed and warmed considerably in the next moment, and Harry thought that a genuine smile looked better on her than a smirk ever had. “Thank you, Harry,” she whispered. “I swear that I’ll repay you for this.”

Harry just nodded cordially. He wouldn’t count anything but the alliance with Mrs. Parkinson as secure, and that only when he delivered the first vial of Wolfsbane Potion. “See you at school, Pansy,” he said, and strode away.

It was as he went to meet Sirius that he realized his magic was the quietest it had been since he left the Malfoys’. He blinked and touched his head, but it didn’t ache. His thoughts were tame. His emotions were calm.

Is it pureblood traditions that did that? he wondered. Or just the effort of having to think rather than react?

“Harry!”

Sirius grabbed him and swung him around in a hug, and Harry gave up the thoughts for now. He was about to go back to Godric’s Hollow and endure a few more days there, which only Connor’s presence would make tolerable. With parents who ignored him and a godfather who watched him too closely...

Harry shoved those thoughts aside, and concentrated instead on the new allies he was winning for Connor. That soothed him immeasurably.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Four: Choosing Their Camlanns

“All right there, Harry?”

Harry nodded jerkily as they passed into King’s Cross Station. Connor smiled at him for a moment longer before looking away as Lily began reciting a long list of instructions to him. James, on the other side of him, looked about, befuddled, for a moment, before apparently deciding that Connor must have been giving himself a reassuring talking-to. After all, as he had told Connor yesterday, who wouldn’t be nervous on going to his third year of school by himself? Sirius would be on the train, but busy arranging team practice schedules with the Quidditch Captains.

Harry closed his eyes and told himself that he had no right to feel hurt or bewildered by this. After all, he was the one who had managed to set things up like this.

“Harry?”

Harry sent a glance sideways to Sirius, who grinned at him and tried to make it look non-nervous. He didn’t succeed. Harry had never seen Sirius so jumpy as he had been in the days since Peter’s visit, even on the occasions when he was planning a major prank and wanted to be sure that no one interfered with it.

“Yes?” he asked, when he saw that Sirius wouldn’t stop staring at him.

Sirius coughed. “I—we’ll talk about why your parents are ignoring you at school, all right?” He quickened his pace and

moved towards the front of the line, cuffing Connor on the head as he passed. Connor ducked with a muffled protest, and Lily and James laughed aloud.

Harry closed his eyes. He breathed carefully, and reminded himself over and over, *You chose this. You know it was the best course. You would have killed them without it. How could anything but this be the right thing to do?*

The web gave a little prompting tug on his mind, as it had been doing since they moved out of the house. It didn't seem to think that being near Connor in a wide-open space was the same thing as being across a series of rooms from him. Harry sighed and hurried to catch up.

“Harry.”

Startled, Harry turned his head to the side, and gasped to see Peter standing behind one of the Station's pillars. He wore Muggle clothing and didn't look *that* out of place, at least as long as someone didn't look into his eyes. They remained piercing, and certainly pierced Harry in place. It was a long moment before he could draw his wand, and a longer moment before he could find his voice.

“Don't come near me, traitor,” he snarled, leveling his wand in front of him.

“I won't come nearer than this,” said Peter, keeping his own voice even. “But I thought that you deserved to know more, Harry, as much as I could tell you without the web assaulting and blinding you. Have you ever heard the name Regulus Black?”

“Maybe,” Harry hedged. Sirius had mentioned it once, last year, during his apology to Harry for being an awful godfather. Come to think, he had acted strange during that apology, too. Harry shoved the thought away and concentrated on Peter. *He is Wormtail. He only wants to confuse you, to cause treachery. He's probably working with Fenrir Greyback to return the Dark Lord to life.* “I don't know who he was.”

“Sirius's brother,” said Peter. “His *younger* brother. His *beloved* younger brother, for all that he became a Death Eater.” He paused. “Are you seeing any parallels here, Harry?”

“That's ridiculous,” Harry said, and was displeased to note that his voice was little more than a breath. He forced more strength into it. “Someone would have told me about Sirius having a younger brother. They always told me that he was an only child. Why conceal it? Mum could have used the story to strengthen my training and show what might happen to Connor if I didn't guard him.”

Peter closed his eyes. Harry didn't know what to make of the expression that worked over his face then. It looked like a mixture of rage and disgust, but what was there in the words he'd said to inspire that?

“That's true, then,” said Peter. “I wondered how much was. I only know what I heard that night. So you're guardian to Connor, then? You really *are* the sacrifice for him, and weren't just raised to be that way?” He opened his eyes and pinned Harry with his gaze once again.

“Of course,” said Harry. His web was quiet, probably because he was doing what it wanted. He plowed ahead. Perhaps he could convince Peter how ridiculous it was to try and speak to him and force him away from his family. Then Peter might run away and become someone else's problem. “I know what I am. I'm proud of it. Why shouldn't I be?”

“Harry,” Peter whispered, his voice gone longing. “There is *so much wrong* with someone simply raised to be a tool for someone else, a pawn, concealing his strength in someone else's shadow.”

Harry felt the first headache begin, but he fought through it. “I like it. I don't care.” His rage stirred in him, joining the web, but he ignored that, too. “I know that I had some things happen to me that made me not care for that duty for a while, but I have to return. Who else is going to do it?”

“Your parents,” said Peter. “Connor. Dumbledore himself. Anyone but you.”

“Why?”

“Because,” said Peter, “they made your choices for you, and you were too young—“

Harry gasped as the pain hit him like a Bludger to the side of the head. He managed to sit down before he fell down, but it

was a near thing. He cradled his forehead in his hands, and whispered the words that he dimly remembered his mother using to soothe the pain. "I am sacrifice for Connor. This was freely chosen."

The pain eased after a moment. He looked up to see Peter standing away from the pillar, one hand reaching for him. He dropped it when he saw Harry's glare.

"I feared so," he said soberly. "I shattered my web all in one go. Yours was weakened, but it's getting stronger again. I want to help you break it, Harry—"

And then he cut off, but not because of Harry's pain this time. Harry saw him shiver, saw his face turn gray. A shadow fell on him, and Peter scrambled backward, suddenly the cringing little rat Harry thought he always should have been.

Harry looked up.

In front of him floated a black creature with wispy dark robes, its oval head cocked to one side. A hand with fingers like twigs reached for him, and Harry felt his mind tremble, his thoughts dancing and swirling up and out of him.

He was in the Chamber again. It was freezing, and he knelt before the pure, icy-cold force of the magic. It showed him memories that he could not face, things that he knew could not be true...

Harry slammed his hands down beside him, trying to use the pain of the stone cutting into his palms to force himself to focus. He felt his mind waver and turn, and some of the new certainty that he had, that he really *was* destined to be Connor's guardian and that was the way things were, cracked and broke apart. Once again, he found the terrible uncertainty, the rage at his parents and Dumbledore.

Someone got between him and the creature Harry knew must be a Dementor, and its terrible regard somewhat lessened. Harry blinked and gasped and looked up to find Peter there, his face white as he absorbed the full force of the cold gaze. One hand reached out and hovered above his shoulder, and Peter made a little crumpled sound and half-collapsed. He never moved from between the Dementor and Harry, however.

Harry began to move forward in a crawl. He wasn't sure what would happen when he got there, but he knew he was going to do *something*.

Then a voice spoke, like a cold spike piercing Harry's brain. *Get away. Back.*

Harry cried out, but his voice was a weak and reedy thing in the face of his pain. The Dementor in front of Peter floated weirdly, appearing to turn the top half of its body towards the speaker while keeping its bottom half in front of him. Harry knew it made some response, but this time it was unintelligible to him.

The other speaker, another Dementor who looked more gray than black, drifted up behind the other and said only one word, for which Harry was grateful, since even that word made his head vibrate and seem to freeze.

Vates.

The Dementor holding Peter turned and darted off at once, seeming to hide behind the gray one. The gray one turned its gaze to Harry. He looked up, and forced himself to meet those hidden eyes by a tremendous effort of will.

The gray Dementor reached out and moved one hand in front of him, fingers flicking in a beckoning gesture. Harry felt his rage surge. Then he was half-blinded by a golden glow that seemed to originate from his face. When he could see again, pieces of a golden web were vanishing into the Dementor's fingers. Harry shivered. *Why is it freeing me? Why would it? And do I want to be what I will be when the web is entirely gone?*

Pain flared in his head, which Harry guessed was the last remnants of the web fighting for life, at the same moment as someone behind him bellowed, "*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*"

A silvery wolf charged into the two Dementors, making the black one cry out in a high, shrill voice and turn to flee. The gray one lingered for a moment, and Harry knew it was looking at him. He whimpered as the voice spoke again, hammering into one ear and then out the other.

We shall meet again. Vates.

Then they both turned and fled as the silvery wolf came back for another gallop. The wolf slowed to a trot when it saw that it had no more enemies left to face, wagged its tail once, and winked at Harry. Then it tattered into mist and flowed back towards Sirius, who ran over to hug Harry.

“Harry,” he whispered. “Are you all right? I’m so sorry. The Dementors are here, hunting for Peter, and I couldn’t tell—I didn’t know—“

Harry rolled his head slowly to the side. Peter was gone. Harry had expected him to be. He would hardly stay around when first the guardians of Azkaban and then Sirius came for him.

“Are you all right, Harry?” Sirius repeated, drawing back and looking at him again.

Harry looked away from him and took huge, deep, gulping breaths. Part of his control was gone again, the control he had fought so hard to maintain over the summer. He realized now that it must have been built on the crippled but gradually strengthening remains of the web. The Dementor had destroyed that. Harry did not know whether to scream or be grateful.

Well, right now he did want to scream. Sirius murmuring endearments and reassurances was only another reminder of how he hadn’t done so last year until it was far, far too late. Harry tried to counter that, tried to remember how Sirius had taken him flying at Christmas and given him a gift that had helped save his life down in the Chamber, but his thoughts were veering, crashing into one another, and his magic was rising quickly.

“Let’s get through the barrier,” Sirius was saying as he pulled him along. “I’m sure some Muggles saw the Dementors. This is work for the Obliviators, that’s for sure.”

Harry closed his eyes. He had to do *something* with his magic. He didn’t know what, but it had to go somewhere.

What can I do?

The magic offered several suggestions, all of them ways that would result in his parents’ and Sirius’s body in several thousand small pieces. Harry shook his head. He couldn’t do that. He still couldn’t kill them. He didn’t want to kill them. Harm them, maybe.

The magic seized on that, and Harry felt his lips almost part over a spell that would have inflicted gaping wounds on his parents, a spell he had read about but never had the insanity to try. With an effort, he closed his lips and fought his temper back under control. But the air around him was chill, and Sirius shivered as they stepped through the barrier and onto Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$.

Harry tried and tried to fight his magic, but it wasn’t working. It sped through the familiar channels in his body that he had created at Malfoy Manor, and demanded things to rend and split and burn. Harry could hear a scream of fury building down in his guts, and shuddered. He would cry aloud in a moment.

“Harry?”

And Sirius was making it *worse*, damn him, touching and touching and probing. Harry kept his eyes closed, knowing he couldn’t see him right now. If he saw his parents, he was sure he would strike. His walls were already weakening, and his magic prowled back and forth like a tiger that knew it would be able to escape its cage in seconds.

The only person Harry thought he might be willing to curse was Dumbledore. But Dumbledore was at Hogwarts—

Hogwarts.

Harry seized gladly on the idea and fed it to his magic, bending his will abruptly to that one goal. The magic lost its defiance as it flooded into him. Harry felt a dense resistance to what he was trying to do, but that only made him fight the harder, and kept him from striking someone dead.

Then he vanished, and passed briefly through a freezing cold space, and appeared just outside Hogsmeade with the loud *crack* of a successful Apparition.

Harry dropped to one knee and gasped, then coughed. Ice crystals fell past his lips. He shuddered. That was how close he had come to using his magic on someone else. He traced his hands up and down his arms, noting faint webs of white and the first traces of frostbite in his fingers. They were quickly warming under the morning sun, but it had been very, very close.

Well, now that he was here, what was he going to do?

Harry raised his eyes to the road that wound through Hogsmeade, towards the castle, and smiled. He suspected it was a grim smile, but he did not particularly care. Apparating this far had somewhat used, and thus calmed, his magic, but it had done nothing about his rage.

What I came here to do.

“Mr. Potter. What are *you* doing here?”

Just last year, that voice would have made him tense up. Now Harry could smile and turn around, confident that its owner meant to welcome him, no matter what he sounded like. “Professor Snape. Hello, sir.”

Snape stalked towards him, eyes narrowed and nose pointing forward as if to lead the way. The sight eased Harry’s rage. He leaned against the wall of the entrance hall and waited as Snape halted in front of him and examined him up and down with one disdainful sweep of his eyes.

“You seem to have lost your parents along the way,” Snape sniffed at him. “And a brother. And a certain Black mutt.”

“Oh, they’ll be along, doubtless.” Harry felt his smile widen. Merlin, was it really possible that he could have missed Snape *this* much? “But I wanted to come ahead of them. Get a little air, you know. See the castle before a bunch of idiot children—“ he imitated Snape’s voice “—overrun it.” He hesitated, then continued, as sure of Snape’s loyalty as he was of anything in the world. “Speak to a certain Headmaster,” he added, “about certain decisions that he made regarding me.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed further. Harry held his breath. Perhaps Snape had turned backwards in his loyalty after all. Harry would have said that couldn’t happen, after the way they had spoken in the storm, but he had almost tricked himself into becoming a useless pawn for his brother again, too.

The rage flared. Harry told it to lie down. *You’ll get your chance soon enough. And Connor is innocent. Innocent.*

“Good.”

Harry blinked, jolted out of contemplation of himself again as Snape nodded and pointed in the direction of the Headmaster’s office. “The Headmaster’s password is *Cauldron Cakes*,” he added. “I will not come with you, Mr. Potter. I trust that you can leave the school standing by yourself?”

Harry only smiled at the snide tone. “I am fairly certain of that, yes, sir,” he said gravely.

“Then get to it,” said Snape, and spun the other way, his robes flowing behind him as he strode across the hall. Harry thought he saw him halt to speak with someone when he reached the stairs down to the dungeons, but wasn’t sure who it was. Someone from Slytherin come early, perhaps?

I must remember to speak with Snape about brewing the Wolfsbane for Mrs. Parkinson, Harry thought, as he took the stairs to the Headmaster’s office. It would be a poor return for all his kindness if I simply took his supplies.

“Cauldron Cakes,” said Harry, and the gargoyle sprang aside. He stepped onto the moving staircase, his shoulders relaxed despite the second storm he could feel brewing inside his head.

He wondered which question he should ask first as the staircase bore him upward. *Why did you do it?* But he thought it was fairly obvious why Dumbledore had done it: in obedience and answer to the prophecy and the needs of war. *Why did you leave the web in my head?* But the answer to that question was the same. *Did you ever mean for me to find out about this?* Well, obviously the answer was no.

He reached the top without deciding. Harry shrugged and pushed open the door to the office proper. He would wait and see what came, then.

Dumbledore was not behind his desk. Harry halted and stared around curiously. He would have thought Snape would warn him if the Headmaster was elsewhere. Perhaps he had gone through a door hidden behind the shelves? Harry moved in to investigate.

A loud trill greeted him before he could move more than a few steps. Harry looked up, and smiled as he saw Fawkes lift from his perch and fly towards him. The phoenix settled on his shoulder, a denser weight than he looked, his head bowed so that his neck brushed against Harry's hair. Harry lifted his hand and stroked those feathers. Fawkes uttered a contented little croon and closed his eyes. Harry briefly wished Dobby were there to translate.

"Harry."

Harry turned quickly towards the desk again. Dumbledore waited there, his face grave and his eyes darting back and forth between his phoenix and Harry's hand. Harry wondered if he was more surprised to see Fawkes welcoming Harry or Harry only stroking the bird and not attacking his office.

Fawkes made a loud, disapproving sound and pressed closer to Harry. He did not look up at Dumbledore.

"He has been doing that all summer," said Dumbledore lightly, apparently deciding that he would play the part of the doting Headmaster. He walked over to sit down behind his desk. "Would you care for a sweet, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. He had gone breathless with rage, abruptly. He took his hand from Fawkes, and the phoenix flew back to his perch. Harry was glad. He thought being in contact with him when his rage began to flare bright and cold might be painful for a creature of fire.

"I want to know why you put this web in my mind," he said, when he thought he could say that and not simply burst out screaming. "I want to know what the *fuck* you thought you were doing to me."

Dumbledore only nodded, as if he had expected this question, and then bent down. Harry tensed, but he retrieved a Pensieve from the floor and set it on the desk. He nodded to it.

"This Pensieve, Harry," he murmured, "holds the memory of the day that I put the web into your mind. I invite you to enter it and see for yourself. The web can only be enacted on a willing subject, you know. You did choose this fate, though I can see how that might fail to concern you now." He managed to look stern and forgiving both at once.

Harry snarled, and heard one of the silver instruments on the shelf behind Dumbledore snap. The Headmaster did not flinch, only nodded to the Pensieve again.

Harry strode forward and dipped his head into the silvery liquid.

He found himself on the lawn of the house at Godric's Hollow, on a summer day so bright that there seemed to be no shadows. A younger version of himself lay on his back in the sunlight, reading a book. Harry blinked. He didn't remember the book as being so heavy that his arms had to strain to hold it and tilt it to the light, but obviously it had been.

Dumbledore and Lily stood conversing a short distance away, their voices audible but unimportant to the younger Harry. He was studying to protect his brother, and that was the only thing that mattered. Harry edged closer to the adults, looking back now and then. It seemed odd that he had ever been that *small*, or his green eyes so serious. Harry had had the impression that he often laughed as a child.

"I think it's time," said Lily. Her voice wavered, but strengthened as she went on. "I've—well, I've monitored him as you asked me to do. And his maturity for a boy his age is just astonishing. He knows that an evil wizard is coming for Connor, and that I want him to do his part to protect his brother."

Dumbledore nodded. "And his magic?"

Lily flinched and glanced away from him. Her eyes seemed to dart back and forth between the lawn and her son. Harry waited, his hands clenched.

"It is frightening," his mother admitted at last, her lips barely moving. "I've never felt *anything* like it. It sleeps most of the time, and so far he hasn't hurt anyone, but I think that's mostly due to his training. He fetches himself toys when he wants them, and never seems to find it strange that he's not using his hands. He poured himself a bowl of porridge the other day, perfectly, and carried it to the table without spilling a drop—and all the while he didn't look up from his book. He Vanished

all the dust in the nursery one day when it was making Connor sneeze. His use of magic is casual, and if it goes on much longer, I don't think he'll be able to stop." She shuddered. "And, Headmaster, it's just—it's hard living in a house with a child like that, even when his magic is sleeping. It's like listening to a tiger purr. It might be content right now, but you always know that it could attack you, even if it never does."

Dumbledore nodded. "I understand, Lily. I think you brave to have endured this as long as you have, a true Gryffindor." Lily lifted her chin. "What about the others? Do they suspect anything?"

Lily smiled sadly. "James could look past a herd of stampeding Acromantulas if it meant not having to acknowledge that one of his sons is Dark." Harry felt bile soak his throat. "And Sirius and Remus don't visit often enough to know what it's like. They're just pleased and proud of Harry's 'accidental magic,' as they call it. They don't know what it's like living day to day with it." She shuddered.

Dumbledore patted her shoulder. "It is all right, my dear," he said. "We both know there was nothing accidental about it, and that such powerful magic in a child is unnatural. He will be happier when he is without it, when he is more like other children." He turned to face the younger Harry reading on the lawn, and drew his wand. "Let us be about this business."

Harry fought the temptation to scoop up his younger self and carry him away. He knew this was only a memory, and he had to watch what happened. He stood there with leaden feet as Dumbledore walked over to the little boy and said, far too casually for Harry's tastes, "What are you reading, my dear boy?"

Younger-Harry blinked at him around the cover of his book. "Defensive spells," he said, as though that should have been obvious. Given that the title of the book was *A Practical Guide to Defensive Magic*, Harry could understand how he'd felt.

Dumbledore nodded. "You want to protect your brother, don't you, Harry? That's the reason that you read about defensive spells and make dust Vanish out of the nursery when he sneezes?"

Younger-Harry flicked a glance to his mother first. Lily nodded at him. Reassured that this man was someone who could know about his protection of his brother, Harry brought his gaze back to Dumbledore. "Yes, I do," he said. "I don't want an evil wizard to come and kill him."

And I still don't want that, Harry thought, sick inside as he stared at his own younger face. *That is the hell of it. I still want Connor alive. I still love him. Why couldn't you have just taught me to love him, Mum? Why did you have to make sure that I loved him? Why did you have to bind my magic?*

If that was, in truth, what the phoenix web had done. Harry supposed he would find out in a moment.

Dumbledore nodded. "And if I could give you a gift that would make sure you protected your brother all the time, would you take it?" he asked. "It will keep you from wavering or looking aside."

Harry recognized one of the phrases that Lily had taught him was a bad thing. Younger-Harry did, too. His face lit up, and he nodded. "I never want to waver or look aside," he said.

"You choose this freely?" Dumbledore had his wand loosely clasped in his hand now, and golden sparks were racing around it. Harry stifled a snarl as he recognized the sparks. They were the exact color of the phoenix web that shone behind his eyes when he did something that it didn't like.

"Yes!" said Younger-Harry, dropping the book in his eagerness. His eyes shone from behind his glasses. "I want to protect my brother!"

Dumbledore nodded, and then lifted his wand. "*Expleo penuriam cum textura!*" he said firmly, and the golden sparks went into a wild dance, coalescing around Younger-Harry's head. "*Phoenix texturae!*"

The gold tightened into a pattern, and Harry recognized one glimpse of the web as he dimly remembered it from his own wild attempts to repair his mind in the storm. He heard Lily gasp, and Younger-Harry stared at the web in fascination. For a moment, Harry saw the web bisecting his own head, as though his skull were only a shadow, or both the web and Younger-Harry were occupying the same space at the same time.

Then the sight vanished, and Younger-Harry gasped and leaned his head forward. Dumbledore nodded, stood, and carefully backed away from the boy. Harry could feel his own heart, beating in his ears as though someone were clenching a fist around it over and over.

“That will hold,” Dumbledore told Lily. “Placed when he is this young, it will do more than hold. It will reweave his mind to its purpose.” He nodded again. “You need never worry about his magic escaping it again.”

Lily bowed her head in relief, and Harry thought he saw the gleam of tears on her cheeks.

He had seen enough. He pulled his head out of the Pensieve, and made out Dumbledore’s wand aimed at him in the moment before the Headmaster began to intone, “*Expleo penuriam—*“

Harry lashed out, angrier than he had ever been in his life. He didn’t know what was going to happen. He only knew that he wanted to *hurt something*, and if that something was the Headmaster, then that was what he would do.

I am barely free, and only because my Locusta died and a Dementor helped me, and he tries to enslave me again? No!

The last word exploded out of his throat as a howl, and the pressure of his magic tore the wand from Dumbledore’s hand and forced him back against the shelves. Harry kept up the steady pressure, even when he felt Dumbledore’s own wandless magic rising to oppose him. He smiled, and it was surprisingly easy to push that magic back down, simply never allowing it out of Dumbledore’s body. Harry knew he would be no match for the Headmaster if once that magic got past his skin, but he could hold it in defensive walls.

“After all,” he whispered aloud, “you taught me to be very, very good at defensive magic.”

Dumbledore’s eyes were still clear, and he still looked at Harry with a mixture of sadness and admonition. “You know the reasons,” he said. “You know it was necessary. What if you had hurt your brother in a fit of childish temper, Harry? What if you had hurt your parents, or your godfather, or Remus?”

Harry shook his head. “Why didn’t my parents simply teach me to control my magic, then, instead of fearing it and locking it away? I surely wouldn’t be tossing you around like a toy if it came to that. I would have better control.” He was breathing fast. His power was rising out of a well in the center of him, and urging him to do more than simply hold the Headmaster against the wall.

“There is no way of controlling your power save binding it,” said Dumbledore. “We could not trust that a four-year-old child would understand the importance of that, and the phoenix web was the one binding that would work with your will to protect Connor and yet be powerful enough to stand a chance against your magic.”

“Free me from the last remnants of it,” said Harry. “I’m aware now. I understand the importance of control.”

“You are still too young.” Dumbledore’s eyes were diamonds.

Harry nodded. “I thought you would say that,” he said, and then concentrated. All his magic leaped from Dumbledore’s skin at once. As the Headmaster slumped to the floor, Harry wrapped his magic around himself.

Wards sprang into place, deep and strong, as Harry’s will pushed his power forward. He was far more willing to do this than to destroy something, and so the wards attained a strength that his attempts to kill could not have. And all his experience in defensive magic was there, too, the kind that had made *Protego* so instinctive to him. It wasn’t hard at all to tighten the wards and tie them off.

All this took only a second, as did the Headmaster’s recovery and the snatching of his wand. “*Expleo penuriam cum textura,*” he said, so fast that Harry was impressed in spite of himself. “*Phoenix texturae!*”

The spell stormed towards Harry—

And bounced. Dumbledore had to duck as the web slammed past him, into the wall, and dissolved into a crowd of sparks. He stared for a long moment, then brought his gaze slowly back to Harry.

Harry met his eyes without fear. His wards were wrapped around his mind, too, or there would have been no point. Dumbledore could not use Legilimency on him now unless Harry decided to allow him to do so.

“I’m immune to your magic,” he pointed out.

Dumbledore breathed in silence for a moment, eyes never leaving him. Harry stared back. He felt—different. He wasn’t sure

yet what all the consequences of the difference would be. Among other things, he didn't know all the effects of the phoenix web, nor how to remove the lingering pieces of it from his consciousness. But he thought he'd made a good start.

"What do you plan to do?" The Headmaster spoke in a neutral tone. Harry supposed it might be the voice he used to speak to equals or Professors, which Harry of course would never have heard.

"Nothing yet," said Harry. "I don't want to fight you, really, Headmaster." And that was true. Harry still had his horror of controlling and compelling people, and he would still prefer to use defensive magic rather than offensive. "We're still on the same side. I simply want you to cease trying to control or compel me. I can't trust that you will yet, so my wards are remaining up."

"And your brother?" Dumbledore's voice was a shade cooler.

Harry shrugged. "I love him. You saw to that." He swallowed his bitterness. There were some things he could not change, and some he could not give up. "I'll protect him, but not as blindly or as slavishly as before."

"And your parents?"

Harry shook his head. "I can't see them right now. I don't know what I'd do." He found it refreshing to be honest. His head tingled and his body rang, and Harry suspected he was in shock. Well, he would land in a short time. He had a whole new road to walk now, and doubtless it would be hard. But at least he would be freer than before.

He half-considered asking Dumbledore about Peter, but decided there would be no point. He would meet with Peter again, if he ever showed himself, and see what could be done.

Dumbledore bowed his head. "This is not the way I hoped things would work out, my boy," he murmured.

"Well, it's the way things have," said Harry, and turned for the door.

He knew his face must look strange. He *felt* strange. Beneath the shock was not fear or anger or bewilderment as he would have expected, but rising exaltation.

I'm closer to being free. I never knew it would feel this good.

He paused when he reached the gargoyle again. Two figures were waiting for him there, not one as he expected. Beside Snape stood Professor McGonagall, her eyes sharp and haunted.

"Harry," Snape said, his voice at once mocking and triumphant, "I believe that Minerva has something to say to you."

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Five: The Course of True Ethics Never Did Run Smooth

Severus had been picking at her all summer.

Sometimes, Minerva thought she should never have tried to make him comfortable at Hogwarts as a teacher, or at least not in the way she had. When he had first started teaching Potions, she had grown sick of his constant sniping at his colleagues and the sneers about how no one could possibly understand him because none of the other professors had come out of Slytherin House. *Or been a Death Eater, for that matter*, Minerva sometimes thought, but that was not something that one brought up around Severus.

Finally, she confronted him after he had yet again reduced Rolanda to stammering in incoherent rage, and asked him if he really felt as alone as all that. After listening to a long tirade, mixed with sneers, on the necessary superiority and therefore solitude of Slytherin House, she asked him, "And would it change your mind if I told you that I was almost Sorted into Slytherin?"

He stared at her. In a moment, however, he recovered his sneer. In those days, he was never without it. Minerva wondered sometimes why he thought he fooled her, who had taught him through seven years of school and knew the hurting little boy he had been.

"You are lying," he had said, his voice softly poisonous and full of contempt. "Lying out of pity, which is a Gryffindor trait if

ever there was one.”

“Tell me, Severus,” Minerva had asked him, “do you believe that one’s Animagus form reflects that person’s nature?”

“I know the theory, Minerva.” He managed to sound bored and cutting at the same time, which Minerva had to admit was quite a feat for a man who hadn’t yet seen his twenty-second year.

“Oh, *good*,” she said. “I *am* happy for you.” He’d peered at her suspiciously then, because she never used sarcasm around him. Ordinarily, Minerva thought, there was no need. “Then you might consider what it means that my Animagus form is a cat, Severus, rather than a sheep.”

She’d turned and left him gaping after her then, stifling the other things she wanted to say. She could have mentioned that four Gryffindor students who had recently left school were inveterate pranksters whose spirit she had never crushed in the name of keeping to rules. But one did not touch raw and bleeding wounds, and that comment would have torn them open for the both of them. Severus remembered the four boys who had tormented and nearly killed him all too well; Minerva remembered four prize students who were now shattered into three loyalists and one traitor rotting in Azkaban. That had been less than a month after Connor Potter defeated Voldemort, and everyone was feeling around uneasily in this strange new world.

Minerva had been content at first when her revelation proved to serve its purpose, and Severus stopped pretending that he was some martyr no one could ever understand. Of course, then he started coming to her whenever he had some Slytherin issue that he wanted someone else to agree with him about, from a student who failed every class that wasn’t Potions to the darkening reputation of his House in the school as a whole. Most of the time, she *didn’t* agree with him, but he didn’t care. They would badger and shout and storm and sneer and whisper at each other, and in the end he would leave, seemingly satisfied.

Once, she’d asked him why he didn’t go and converse with Filius, who would at least understand and appreciate the finer abstract principles behind the arguments even if he didn’t agree with them morally. Why did he want debate out of her?

He’d looked at her strangely and replied, “Because you were almost Slytherin, of course.”

And you hold onto House affiliations with a stubbornness that only Sirius Black and James Potter rival, Minerva thought, but even though that was seven years after Voldemort’s defeat, she still held her tongue on the matter of the Marauders.

Of course, the last two years had been different, since Connor Potter went into Gryffindor and Harry Potter into Slytherin. Severus stopped coming to talk with her as often, and then at all. He seemed to spend a great deal of his time giving Harry Potter detentions or private lessons. Minerva, preoccupied with trying to guard the Philosopher’s Stone and mentor both the Boy-Who-Lived and Hermione Granger that first year, hadn’t really noticed, but as second year wore on, she began to wonder.

Then she began to wonder what Severus thought he was doing, and then Albus. She’d spoken with Harry last year, almost on the brink of doing something...well, something Slytherin, was the only way she could think of it.

But Harry had so adamantly refused her help, and insisted that protecting his brother was his free choice, that Minerva had felt compelled to let it lie. Yes, she could intervene when there was no choice, when there were tears and bruises or Dark curses, and a child’s life in danger. But she had never encountered a child like Harry, who seemed to have undergone the most horrible things and yet spoke the wartime rhetoric, the rhetoric that Minerva herself had learned to obey, like an adult. She had felt it would be a betrayal to press him, to help him when he did not want her help. And when he had come back and spent so long in the hospital wing at the end of the year, she had winced, but thought he was recovering, and he certainly had not needed her help. Besides, so far as she knew, his suffering was not a result of his conditioning.

Severus had changed all that, him and his endless picking over the summer, his causal mentions of the latest letter he was writing to Harry or which Harry had written to him from the Malfoys’, his recitation of deaths caused in the First War by Albus’s tactics, his unexpected and very long discourse on the finer details of Peter Pettigrew’s trial for betrayal of the Potters (Minerva still wondered where he’d learned all that). Severus had hinted, and hinted, and picked, and picked, and given her a casual look whenever she questioned why he was doing this.

The upshot of it was that she agreed to meet Harry on the day he came back to school and ask him exactly how she could help him.

Of course, she also had a few questions of her own, ones that Severus did not know she intended to ask. He didn’t have much

of a chance to guess at them, either.

That is because he's not a Gryffindor, Minerva told herself, and waited patiently at the bottom of the stairs to the Headmaster's office, until the gargoyle moved and Harry emerged from behind it.

Minerva studied Harry carefully. She could feel his power, of course, in the way that witches and wizards of the McGonagall family had long been taught to feel it—as a wind that blew across the surface of her skin in long, cold, steady exhalations. She knew from that that Harry was very strong, the strongest wizard in the school if one excepted Albus, but she had already expected that. She was more interested in the look in his eyes and the expression on his face.

Harry's green eyes shone with a deep clarity that Minerva would not have expected from any child under sixteen, which had been the youngest age that Albus would permit students to be when they fought Voldemort in the First War. He looked as if he knew his choices and knew how to make them. It was the look of a man who had seen down the long road of consequences to the end, and determined to walk it anyway. It was the look Minerva had seen in Frank Longbottom's eyes, in James Potter's before his sudden and unexplained abandonment of the Auror position, in her own when she heard about the deaths of the Prewett brothers.

It impressed her, and it frightened her deeply. That a child could look like this, in these days when no open War raged and Voldemort had not managed to return...

And it finally, in a way that all Severus's nagging little hints hadn't managed, pushed her into a clear, cold anger.

"Mr. Potter," she said, when she had studied him for long enough that a few of her questions were answered, "I wanted to apologize. I should have pressed harder last year, when I first learned that you were a sacrifice for your brother, or intended to be one."

Harry simply tilted his head and studied her out of one eye, letting his hair fall across the other. He did that quite often, Minerva realized abruptly, remembering the times he had done it in Transfigurations class last year. He was waiting for something else, some acknowledgement that she hadn't given him yet.

"You would not have accepted my help then, I know," she continued, and at least *this* was familiar, this admitting of mistakes. She had made more than her share of them over the years. She usually admitted them to Albus, though, especially after she had second-guessed his tactics. "But still, there were things I could have done, as your professor, to insure that you did not have to return to your parents for any holidays, even the Easter ones."

"I could have chosen to stay here, too, Professor," said Harry, his voice soft. "I didn't. I wanted to be with my family just then." He lifted his head and shook his hair, and for a moment Minerva could make out both eyes and that lightning bolt scar that Severus had made several preposterous claims about. "And that's changed, but not a lot. I'm still a minor, after all. They still have legal control of me. And my brother," he added. "I could hardly run away and leave Connor there alone."

Minerva said, primarily because it was true and only secondarily because it would irritate Severus, "You would have made a fine Gryffindor, Mr. Potter."

Harry smiled at her. Severus spluttered. Minerva ignored him. Harry was more important than scoring House points, in the end. Any student who had suffered so would have been, but *Harry* was, in this case, the student who had suffered so, and it would take much to pry her from his side now. But she couldn't afford to let that through her stern mask yet.

"Mr. Potter," she said, "what do you intend to do, now that you know the truth and have recovered a good portion of your power?" His magic was near a gale now, though she felt the cold wind only on her skin and not her hair or her body. It still made the hairs on her arms stand up.

"Do?" Harry echoed as if he hadn't really thought about it, and blinked. Minerva nodded slightly. She had been right to ask, and never mind that Severus was trying to get some word in edgewise. This was important. She could hardly condone some of the actions that Harry might reasonably want to undertake right now.

"Do you plan to take revenge?" she asked him quietly. "I would not blame you if you wanted it. But if you tried to kill or maim someone else, then I would stop you. I promise you that."

"Minerva!" Severus hissed. "What the child has gone through—"

“The child is standing right here, Professor Snape,” said Harry, with more than a trace of irritation in his voice. “And she’s right. I want revenge, but how can I expect the Head of Gryffindor House to let me hold down and torture my father, or cheer me on as I kill my mother?”

Minerva peered hard into his eyes. The words were lightly spoken, and the burning clarity in his face had gone shuttered again. She was not sure if he meant what he said or not.

Either way, some truths must come clear now.

“Indeed,” she agreed calmly. “Of course, you could not expect me to stand behind you if you were intent on killing and enslaving people who had never done you wrong, as You-Know-Who did, or on controlling and compelling others, as—as Albus has done.” It was still strange to speak of him that way, the Headmaster who had saved so many lives during the First War. But he had done this, too, and if Minerva could not change the whole base of her ethics in a day or a season, she could at least acknowledge that leaders were not perfect. And this was far enough from perfection to sway her loyalties in the matter of Harry.

“I will *never* do either of those things.”

Minerva’s heart soared as she watched Harry’s face when he made that vow. He spat the words, his lip curling at the thought of either murder or slavery. She had hoped that he would say such things, and had even thought there was a good chance, since, after all, he had been a slave himself and would not like the idea. But Voldemort had been mistreated as a child and yet had not learned empathy, and Albus had loved the whole wizarding world enough to destroy the Dark Lord Grindelwald and yet had not loved a single child enough to spare him becoming a sacrifice. Contradictions existed in the world, and powerful wizards tended to embody them more than most.

More than that, Minerva thought, they impact on the world more than we do. So many people might yet feel the weight of Harry Potter’s contradictions, did he have the best intentions in the world.

“Has Professor Snape told you what my highest ambition is, Professor McGonagall?” Harry went on, his head high and his gaze directly focused on her.

Minerva shook her head. Severus had nattered on about a great many things, including how Harry could help unite the wizarding world in his unique position as the son of a Muggleborn witch who knew a great many pureblood traditions, and what he might do for the reputation of Slytherin House, and even how he could usher in a whole new era for the wizarding world. Minerva had no doubt that those were *Severus’s* major ambitions for the boy. He wanted to help Harry, she had no doubt of that, but he was already looking to what would happen when the boy had mastered his rage and his magic and was free to use both as he wished. Minerva was more interested in the immediate consequences of his actions.

“I want to be free,” said Harry, and his face glowed and his voice rang with passion. “I want to know what it’s like to wake up in the morning and have something on my mind other than duty. I want to help other people find freedom, too, and maybe even help balance their freedoms.” He shrugged, looking slightly embarrassed now. “And I also want to help protect my brother and insure that he survives his victory over Voldemort. But I don’t think those two things need to contradict each other, so they’re both my highest ambitions.”

“You should be thinking more of your own life,” Severus stepped in then to chide him.

“I am,” Harry snapped back at him, and Minerva caught and hid a chuckle as she saw the spirit flare in his eyes. This would be one of the reasons that Severus was so drawn to the child, she thought. Severus might convince himself that he would be best pleased if every student obeyed him without thought and without question, but in truth, he would be bored stiff. He needed a challenge, someone whom he could mentor and who would mentor him back, and it looked as if Harry would be that person. “I want to be free. That’s thinking of my own life.”

“And what about breaking free of your convictions of duty?” Severus asked in a drawl gone silky. Minerva was fairly certain she could have stepped away then, and neither would have noticed. Harry was glaring at Severus. Severus was looking back at him if he were a Potions ingredient that unaccountably refused to be diced up. “You know that you want to be free of them. How can you be free if you still want to protect your brother?”

“Strange as it may seem,” said Harry, his back and voice both gone stiff with indignation, “someone can want to be free, and can even be cunning and Slytherin, without being an utter bastard.”

Severus's eyes narrowed, and he was almost surely preparing to say something unfortunate. Minerva shook her head. "Harry," she said, and the boy's eyes snapped back to her. "You have reassured me greatly. Please, come to me if you are ever unsure about what you want to do next, or if you wish to know some methods for controlling your magic, or if you simply want to talk."

Harry blinked at her. "You could show me ways to control my magic?" he asked.

Minerva smiled, and felt a knot of tension that had been gathering itself in her spine at the thought of what she must do next relax. "Yes, of course. Calypso McGonagall was my ancestor, one of the most powerful witches who ever lived. She had to control her magic, or she would have destroyed Scotland several times over. And she had to come up with ways to do it on her own, as no one like her had existed in the bloodline until that point. Her methods have come down to me as part of my family history." She inclined her head slightly to Harry. "In Merlin's name, not all pureblooded witches and wizards are in Slytherin."

The boy looked as if someone had slapped him in the face with a haddock. He blinked several more times, then nodded. "Thank you, Professor McGonagall," he said. "I'll remember that."

"Thank *you*, Harry," she said. "You have made it easier to be on your side." She stepped past him and towards the staircase. She could feel both Harry's and Severus's eyes on her back. She ignored them both. There were some things that she had to do alone, and some ways in which she was not a Slytherin. Albus deserved to know that she would stand to oppose him from now on, or at least until she discovered some reason that she should not.

"Be careful, Minerva," said Severus.

"If I don't come back, Severus," she said, without glancing back at him, "take care of my Gryffindors."

She could feel him making a horrible face. She ignored that, too, and rode the staircase upwards, thinking of a battle that Harry would only have read about and Severus had not fought in—the battle that had secured her loyalty to Albus Dumbledore.

"Back! *Back!*"

When Frank Longbottom sounded the call for a retreat, the battle had turned for the worse. Minerva maintained her position for a moment longer nevertheless, sending curses at the Death Eaters in front of her without a pause for breath. One of them returned her spell for spell, and the other was holding a weakening Shield Charm. Minerva broke that one's protection with a spell she had developed herself, and had the satisfaction of seeing that wizard fall, screaming, before she followed the others.

Around them, the gray skies and green grass of Ireland glowed ferociously, as if to make up for the burned patches where curses had struck and the blood shed by fallen bodies. It had been a vicious battle, Minerva saw. Over twenty Death Eaters were dead, and nearly as many on their own side. As she fled, she wondered why Frank had sounded the retreat at all.

Then she glanced over her shoulder, and saw Voldemort coming.

There was no mistaking the Dark Lord's arrival. His darkness spread out from him, visible, lifting wings. Those wings were part of a spell that he'd created, and which the Order had no way of countering, but which they called the Black Plague in honor of those it left dead. Minerva held her breath and ran madly for the Portkey point. Anti-Apparition wards were already in place around the battlefield, maintained by both sides. Neither wanted their foes to simply flee.

The ground shook as Minerva gained the safety of a small copse of yew trees, and she grimaced. There were giants coming. You-Know-Who had made a treaty with them that no one could figure out the terms of; the giants were allowed to ravage as much as they wanted, but also obeyed Voldemort's battle instructions. If they showed up, the battle would turn, swiftly, very bad.

"Minerva!"

She turned at Alice's call. Together, they touched the small silver ring that would bring them to the safety of Hogwarts.

It didn't work.

Minerva swallowed heavily. She had not sensed any spell blocking the operation of Portkeys on the battlefield, though of course there could be one. She reached out, and felt nothing behind the anti-Apparition wards. She shook her head.

“He’s found some way of making the spells undetectable,” she said, and Alice nodded.

Then she coughed.

Minerva quickly cast the Bubble-Head Charm on both of them. It would not hold for long against the Plague, but it might matter. She turned and saw other bubbles of clear air sprouting around the Order members.

Except for one. Young Cassiopeia Marchbanks was on her knees, already hacking. Minerva felt Alice stir as if to go to her, but Minerva grabbed her arm. If Alice touched her, there would be nothing anyone could do to halt the Plague’s spread into her, too.

They had to watch as Cassie writhed, her body wriggling and straining like a sack full of kittens about to be drowned, and then burst. From her skin, black polyps burst, and a thick black liquid ran out, staining the ground. Dark spores launched into the sky, seeking for victims. Minerva eyed them, and decided the Bubble-Head Charms would keep them safe for now, at least until the spores found another victim. The second-stage Plague could not be stopped by the Charm.

A high, cold laugh announced that Voldemort had arrived. Minerva turned, holding on to her temper and her pride. She would die as a McGonagall died, as a Gryffindor died.

The Dark Lord was a point of red light at the center of a whirling cloud of darkness, his Black Plague and the power that boiled off him so thickly it was actually visible. His eyes were red, his wand glowed red with the curse he was preparing, and his hands were red, too, Minerva thought, or should be, given the amount of blood he had spilled.

We are going to die, Minerva realized. This was the first time she had seen Voldemort so close since the War began, and she knew, now, that there was utterly no trace of anything human left in him. She raised her wand.

Voldemort had opened his mouth to speak the first words of the curse when a piercingly sweet song rang out over the battlefield. The Dark Lord turned his head, eyes narrowing.

The phoenix that came down and almost took out his eyes—he ducked at the last moment, cursing—was one Minerva knew. She began to breathe more easily, her eyes following Fawkes as he rose and circled, cutting a swath of light through the storm of the Plague, his song heartening the warriors of the Light. Could *he* really be here?

But he had been miles away, on a battlefield in England—

And then he was there, after all, Albus Dumbledore, striding along under his phoenix. He glowed white, from his beard to his robes to the air around him. This was his own power, Minerva knew, the power of the Light, which she had never seen manifest like this. It was like warm wind across her skin, which built up to broiling desert wind as he stopped, facing Voldemort.

“You have come out of your school to die before me then, Albus?” Voldemort asked, his voice high.

“I have come to fight you, Tom,” said Albus, his voice calm and mild.

And then they began to fight.

Minerva could remember surprisingly little of the battle, for all that she had been as close as anyone. She remembered stormclouds of Light and Dark, writhing white fire that withered the Black Plague cloud, a red curse that turned Leda Swanswallow inside out, and through it all a high, steady phoenix song. But there was little more than that, until the moment when the Portkeys abruptly activated again and snatched them away from the battle to land safely in Hogwarts.

Albus remained. If he had tried to leave, Voldemort would have followed at once, and probably managed to inflict damage on a good many other people. Instead, he stayed, his anger at Albus up, and then turned tail and ran when his fear overcame his rage.

Albus saved twenty-six lives that day, twenty-seven if one included the child that Alice Longbottom had not yet known she carried. And he did it again and again, fearlessly, coming incredibly close to sacrificing his own life each time, knowing the lure of killing the Light’s strongest hope would bring the Death Eaters, and Voldemort himself, to the battle.

Minerva had never forgotten it. Albus asked much of his troops, but he never asked more than he was willing to give himself. He had made decisions that no one else could have—he had been the first one to realize that the Black Plague could not be cured, either, and that bringing victims of the second-stage spores along merely insured that others got sick and died in violence and shrieking pain—and he had stuck by them. Her loyalty was his.

Until now, Minerva thought, as she stepped off the moving staircase and into Albus's office. *Old friend, why must you have stumbled at last, asked for one particular sacrifice that you had no right to ask?*

She found Albus sitting behind his desk, staring at nothing. When she came in, he looked up. He did not even seem surprised, his eyes sorrowful and intent. *He knows what I have come about*, Minerva thought, and knew it was true.

“Albus,” she said. She had planned an elaborate speech, but found it wasn't necessary. She merely leaned forward and placed her hands flat on his desk. She needed just one word, other than his name. “Why?”

Albus sighed tiredly and looked at the perch on the other side of the room. Fawkes was gone, Minerva saw. Her heart gave a slow, steady thump, heavy as the fall of a coffin lid. It felt as though the world had just confirmed what she already suspected. She stepped slowly away from him.

“I made one sacrificial decision too many,” said Albus softly. He sounded as if he were talking to himself, not her, as if he had forgotten she was even in the room. “I wanted so badly to spare one I loved from the perils of having to make a harsh choice. I found someone who was willing to agree, to make that choice instead. And it cost him. Oh, it cost him. But the cost was willingly paid.” He let out a shuddering breath. Minerva thought she had never seen Albus look so old, not even when the news of the Children's Massacre came from Ottery St. Catchpole, where the Death Eaters had crucified dozens of Muggleborn children and left them to die.

“And past that point,” Albus went on, his voice a murmur now, “there were other decisions to make, things that might have hurt someone else unless they were stopped and checked. When one bitter, bitter sacrifice is made, what is another? There were those who said I should have murdered Tom Riddle when he was a babe in the cradle, should have killed him when he was a student, should have smothered his magic when first it showed itself in its power. And I hesitated. I remembered my own long struggles to master my magic, and wondered if someone else would have looked at me, declared me a danger to the wizarding world, and killed me. For the good of wizarding kind, of course.”

He closed his eyes. Minerva waited, listening.

“I let him grow,” Albus whispered. “And that was a mistake. When I found a child who seemed to be part of his legacy, whose magic was deeply unnatural in more ways than one, what was I to do?”

“Not kill him, of course. But bind him? Yes, that was an option. And what better way to bind him than to ask him if he wanted to be a sacrifice, and to accept his answer?” Albus closed his eyes again.

“You should have known,” said Minerva, “that he was too young to make that decision.” She kept her voice iron. His words affected her, of course they did, but she was a Gryffindor. It took more than pretty words to sway her.

“He made it,” said Albus, and looked up at her with a face as weary as time. “And it *must* be kept as made, Minerva, or have consequences that you cannot conceive of.”

“Do you really believe that Harry Potter will become a Dark Lord?” Minerva folded her arms and stared at him.

Albus shook his head. “It is not even that,” he said. “It is worse. It is the opposite.” He smiled, but it was a horrible rictus of a grin, and Minerva was not sure what he found funny. He stood and looked at her evenly. “I must put him under the phoenix web again. It can be renewed. Once the choice is made, it is not so easily taken back.”

“I stand to oppose you, Albus,” said Minerva.

“You are following your heart, Minerva?” Those blue eyes looked deeply into her. “And not the call of power? You are sure?”

“If it were the call of power,” said Minerva, “I would still be yours.” She found her breath coming short. There were so many

old loyalties falling to pieces here, so many things changing.

“True enough,” said Albus, and looked away, releasing her from the grip of his eyes. “To both sides of this struggle, then, Minerva. I would rather have you for an opponent than anyone else in the world.”

Minerva crossed the office to the door. She hesitated for a long moment, until Albus looked up at her.

Then she swept her palm in front of her as she bowed her head, the old pureblooded salute of a challenge given and accepted, and departed.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Six: A Day and a Night

“But you *weren't there*.”

Harry checked a sigh as he and Draco slid into their desks in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, followed by the rest of the third-year Slytherins and a good number of third-year Ravenclaws. The Ravenclaws tended to glare threateningly at Harry, no doubt thinking about the time last year when they believed him to be an evil Dark Lord. Harry ignored them for the most part. Draco was far more annoying.

“Yes, and I told you why,” he said, hearing the edge to his own voice. “I *had* to get out of there. I would have killed someone otherwise.”

One of the Ravenclaws gasped. Harry would have glared at her, but Draco leaned around and did it for him. The girl squeaked and concentrated on her book instead.

“You could have come to the Manor,” said Draco fiercely, lowering his voice. “That’s one of the reasons I gave you that Portkey.”

“Yes, and appeared alone in the house with your parents,” said Harry. “That would have gone over wonderfully well.”

“Mother would have Apparated you to Hogwarts,” said Draco, who seemed determined to find an answer for every argument Harry could possibly offer, as long as it meant not having to admit that Harry had a legitimate reason for not riding the Express. “She would have firecalled me when I arrived and told me where you were. I wouldn’t have to spend seven hours fretting and wondering and waiting.”

“Well, you did,” said Harry, pulling his inkwell from his bag, “and then you saw me at the Slytherin table. That is the *end* of the story, Draco.”

Draco shook his head. “Someday, Harry,” he said loftily, “you’re going to have to learn that other people have a right to be interested in your movements.”

Harry opened his mouth to argue back, and then Remus swept into the room. He was moving well for a werewolf who’d been subjected to the full moon yesterday, Harry thought—which meant his face was pale, but not the color of parchment, and his hands trembled when he laid the book he carried down on his desk, but not noticeably. He turned about and smiled at the students.

“Third-year Slytherin and Ravenclaw,” he said. “I’ve been looking forward to this class. My name is Remus Lupin. You may call me Professor Lupin.” He paused as one of the Ravenclaws’ hands went up. “Yes—your name?”

“Elise Swansallow,” said the girl, and leaned forward intently. “I’ve heard Connor Potter talk about you. Aren’t you his godfather?”

Remus smiled pleasantly. “Yes, I am.”

“But isn’t that going to cause a conflict of interest?” Elise tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder. Harry decided that he didn’t like her, and this time it wasn’t the web’s fault, for making him dislike everyone who spoke ill of his brother. Her eyes were too wide and innocent, and she looked as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. “After all, you’ll be tempted to give him better marks just because he’s your godson.”

The smile slid away from Remus's face. "Miss Swanswallow," he said, "I would ask you to give me the benefit of the doubt until such time as that actually happens."

As always with Remus's mild rebukes, Harry thought, it took a moment for the sting to set in. Elise flushed then, and lowered her eyes to the desktop. "Sorry, Professor," she said meekly.

"Quite all right," said Remus heartily, as he picked up the list of students. "I'm used to being questioned. Now, let me make sure that everyone's here who should be. Millicent Bulstrode?"

As they strolled through the list of names, Draco muttered to Harry, "Should he be teaching when he looks like that?"

"It's just full moon," Harry muttered back. "He'll be fine. And most people don't know anything about his condition, so I'll thank you not to discuss it." Draco pulled back with a flinch, and Harry sighed to himself. He'd probably been more annoyed than he should be, because Draco would not stop *picking* at him. He was fine. Why should it matter?

"...Turtledove," Remus finished, and nodded as the last Ravenclaw girl murmured in response. "Good." He laid the parchment down on his desk and leaned forward. "I understand that your last Defense Against the Dark Arts professor did not spend much time on the distinction between Light and Dark magic."

"He did his best," said Pansy, a little stiffly. Harry rolled his eyes. He was coming to accept that Pansy was a great deal more sensible than he had thought she was, but she still had a crush on Lockhart that meant she tried to defend him at every opportunity. She had actually been disappointed when she found out the golden git wasn't coming back to Hogwarts.

"I'm sure he did," said Remus, with a smile that soothed Pansy immediately. Harry hid a smile of his own. Remus tended to *be* soothing. Just being in his presence made Harry let go of a lot of the tension he'd developed during the summer. "But since I can't find anything in his notes that indicates he explained things like this to you, I'll explain anyway."

He waved his wand, and a gasp rose from the class as motes of light spun out from it and into two distinct shapes. Harry leaned back in his chair. Remus had always been good at illusions, and it was fun to watch him dazzle the rest of the class.

"Here," Remus said, pointing to the illusion on the left, of a girl with nondescript brown hair and eyes, "is someone we'll say is under a Light spell." He nodded to the figure on the right, the same girl. "And this is the same person under a Dark spell."

He waved his wand again. The girl on the left continued smiling, but the one on the right grimaced horribly, as though she were fighting something. Harry swallowed and had to look away. Sometimes Remus was *too* good at illusion magic.

"*That* is the primary difference between Dark and Light magic," said Remus softly. "Not that one is pleasant and the other unpleasant. Most medical magic is pretty unpleasant." He was making a horrible face, Harry saw when he looked back. A majority of the students giggled—even Pansy, who looked surprised at herself. "Not even that one affects the body and the other the mind. There are plenty of spells classed as Light and spells classed as Dark that do both. If we eliminated all the spells that did anyone harm, then we'd have to quit teaching most of Charms and at least half of Transfigurations. And of course we'd have to eliminate all the poisonous plants from Herbology, and the poisonous Potions ingredients.

"No, the main difference between Light and Dark magic is the difference between compulsion and choice."

Harry froze. He'd never heard it explained like that before.

"Light magic is either done with the subject's consent," Remus continued blithely, sending his illusions back into spinning motes of light, "or it does not need consent—when you Transfigure a table into a chair, for instance—or it is done for the cause of letting someone continue to give consent, as when you try to preserve someone else's life. Even there, intent matters, the choice of the original caster. A Light spell could become Dark if someone performed it against his or her will. Likewise, a Light spell performed to maintain life when the person who cast it only wanted his target to stay alive so he could suffer torture would be Dark." Remus ran his eyes across the class. "Remember that, all of you. Light magic takes account of your will, but also of other people's wills."

Harry blinked, and blinked again. He'd never encountered a theory so unified and yet so simple. Most of his reading on the subject was on Ministry laws that forbade the use of certain spells, and *why*. Most of the books had argued strenuously that the restrictions should be loosened. Harry, thinking of ways in which he could use the spells to defend Connor, had agreed.

But what if someone else didn't agree to them? What if he cast a spell and it was not what someone else wanted, but that person wasn't Connor?

Rationally, Harry knew he'd learned nothing dazzlingly new, but it had still hit him hard. He barely listened as Remus went into the next part of the lecture.

"Dark spells, on the other hand, thrive on compulsion," Remus went on, his voice growing grim. "Dark creatures are those who usually subdue the victim's *will* so he can't escape. That's why Dementors are considered Dark creatures and dragons are not. Dragons are dangerous, but they can't hold you in place, suck out your memories, and corrupt your mind the way that Dementors can."

Draco put up a hand. Remus nodded to him. Draco put his hand down and gave an innocent smile. "Are werewolves Dark creatures, too?" he asked.

Remus jerked, but it was a movement so tiny that Harry didn't think anyone would see it who wasn't looking for it. Draco smirked, then yelped as Pansy abruptly pinched the back of his neck.

"Shut *up*," Pansy whispered. Her voice was so deadly that Draco paled. Harry turned to listen to Remus's answer. Remus's eyes were narrowed speculatively at Pansy, but he smiled quickly.

"Yes, werewolves are Dark creatures," he said lightly. "But it's not because they kill people. Dragons can do that, too, after all. It's because the bite is a curse, a sickness that's spread without consent, and the werewolf himself usually loses his or her mind to the ravening beast on the nights of the full moon."

The Ravenclaws were scribbling away, Harry saw, and even some of the Slytherin quills were moving. He supposed he should do the same thing, though he was so far into shock that he was having trouble thinking.

So Dumbledore was right, he thought, as he finally began to take notes on the special varieties of Dark magic. *The phoenix web is technically Light magic, since it was given with my consent. But something like the Imperius Curse is still Dark magic, perhaps the purest form of Dark magic, since it subdues its victim's will.*

And that means that the Memory Charm is Dark magic, too, or should be. And since I know what Dumbledore was trying to hide by casting Obliviate on Remus, and I don't agree with it any more...

I have to free him.

Harry looked up as Remus cast another illusion, this one a ramified tree explaining the varieties of Light and Dark magic. His face was content, and he seemed more energized than Harry had ever seen him this close to the full moon.

I'll have to tread carefully. Snape said a carelessly snapped Memory Charm could cost the victim his sanity. But I'll do it. I have to. I owe it to him. He would have fought for me, and he had his will taken over without his consent.

Bastard, Harry finished, and wondered if he meant Dumbledore or himself.

Harry paused as he entered McGonagall's classroom, and frowned. Connor sat near the front, talking with Ron and Hermione. But Slytherins never had Transfiguration class with Gryffindors.

Draco pressed in behind him, looked over his shoulder, and said, "What?"

Harry shook his head and went slowly to the side of the room where they usually sat, still looking at Connor over his shoulder. His twin had noticed him now, and was blinking much as he was. Harry studied his face, but saw no sign that he'd known about this.

Pansy started complaining the moment she saw the Gryffindors. Parvati Patil fired insults back, and things would have descended to hexes very soon if McGonagall hadn't swept in just then and eyed them all sternly.

Hermione's hand was immediately in the air. "Professor McGonagall," she said. "Why do we have class with the Slytherins?"

"I wanted it that way, so I rearranged the timetable, Miss Granger," said McGonagall, looking the picture of offended pride. If Harry hadn't seen that she could smile yesterday, he would never have believed it. "Besides, one might as well say the

Slytherins have class with you.”

Hermione dropped her hand and gaped at her teacher. Harry calmly took out his book. He thought he saw what was going through McGonagall’s mind now. She wasn’t going to strive to separate Slytherins and Gryffindors any more, assuming she ever had (and since she taught no mixed Slytherin-Gryffindor classes except for the sixth and seventh years, he thought she had). Besides, changing things at all would send a message to Dumbledore.

Harry found he rather admired her.

“Today,” McGonagall announced, adjusting her hat on her head as she spun across the front of the room, “we will begin a lecture on Animagi. I want you to know the theory behind it, though of course *no one* will attempt a practical demonstration.” Icicles were in her voice. “I will also want you to write essays in pairs, and one group of three, so that you may pool your knowledge. I will assign the pairs and the topics. Draco Malfoy, Hermione Granger. Blaise Zabini, Parvati Patil. Harry Potter, Connor Potter.”

Harry nodded as he gathered up his books and went to Connor’s side of the room. He was sure that Draco would sit where he was and make Hermione come to him. That meant he could at least be away from Draco’s whining that they weren’t paired together.

“Harry.” Connor’s voice was welcoming, if cool. He pulled his bag off the nearest chair so Harry could sit down. “Do you know why she has us working together?”

“To make a point,” said Harry, and elaborated when he saw his brother’s blank look. “For inter-House unity, I think.”

“Oh.” Connor looked thoughtful. As they waited for McGonagall to assign them a topic, he whispered, “Did I tell you that I found a teacher for my compulsion gift?”

Harry hid a sigh. He had hoped the compulsion gift really would disappear over the summer, that it had come from the presence of Tom Riddle in Connor’s head and wasn’t his at all. It made him slightly ill to think about his twin possessing such magic. But he made his voice enthusiastic. “That’s wonderful, Connor. Who is it? The Headmaster?”

Connor shook his head. “Sirius.”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“Yes,” Connor went on, oblivious to Harry’s wide-eyed shock. “He—“ They had to wait while McGonagall came to them and assigned them their topic: why Animagi had to register with the Ministry. Connor wrote it down painstakingly, with a dedication that Harry didn’t remember him showing last year. When he was finished, he continued as if they hadn’t been interrupted. “He has the gift himself. He doesn’t use it carelessly, of course,” he added quickly. “But his parents trained him in it, and I don’t think you could ask for stricter teachers than the Blacks as far as Dark magic goes. I mean, look at Bellatrix Lestrange, and Narcissa Malfoy. They’re *great* Dark witches.”

Harry swallowed. *I think that’s why Sirius was able to slip my Fugitivus Animus. His mind is trained, like Snape’s.* “Narcissa Malfoy never used any Dark spells that I saw.”

Connor cocked his head. “Oh, yeah. Sorry, Harry. I just keep forgetting that you stayed with the Malfoys. It’s strange, you know?” He shook his head. “Now that I’ve been reading history, I can see how far back the devotion of the Potters to the Light goes, and how far the devotion of the Malfoys to the Dark. Just because Mrs. Malfoy didn’t practice Dark spells in front of you doesn’t mean she doesn’t.”

“I know,” said Harry, because he did, and friendship with Draco didn’t mean his parents didn’t use Dark magic. He felt the first premonition of what might come, like a fishhook in his heart. He was loyal to Connor, he knew that. He wanted to protect him. He *had* to protect him.

And he was loyal to Draco, too. He didn’t want to say that his parents used Dark magic (despite the fact that he knew Lucius Malfoy had done so). He didn’t want to prepare to fight him or his family one day (despite the fact that he would have to do so, unless the Malfoys unexpectedly declared for the Light). He didn’t want to think of giving up their friendship or his Portkey.

I never thought I would be the one being pulled, Harry thought. *I always thought it would be Draco, because I would go with Connor without trouble.*

And now?

Now...he didn't know.

Harry swallowed. Freedom was terrifying, then, as well as thrilling. Again, it felt like something he should have known, but something he was learning for the first time nonetheless.

What am I, if not a person who would uncritically choose my brother over everyone else?

He hesitated, then found an answer he could live with. *Someone who would try to reconcile both sides for as long as he could.*

"Harry?" Connor peered at him. "I think you drifted off."

Harry shook his head and sat up again. "Sorry."

Connor nodded. "That's all right. I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to be training with Sirius this year, and continuing my studies of history." He clenched his jaw, and gave a grim smile. His hazel eyes blazed. "Tom Riddle was good for me, you know? In an odd way. He let me see that you've been right, that I can't just run around playing all the time when I should be preparing for the war, that I have responsibilities if I'm the Boy-Who-Lived."

Harry nodded. He said nothing more. Saying that he, himself, was suddenly uncertain of his own responsibilities would have sounded as though he were whining for pity, however true it was.

Snape nodded at the knock on the door of his office. One thing that hadn't changed in Harry, and which he hoped never would, was the boy's punctuality, whether he was coming to detention or to a private lesson as this one was.

At least, Snape assumed it was a private lesson. Harry had simply found him that morning and asked to come visit him that evening. Pleased that their argument after Minerva left them yesterday hadn't driven the boy into a sulk, Snape had granted his permission.

Harry came in now looking half-haunted, rubbing his arm and biting his lip. Snape narrowed his eyes. "Has someone hexed you?" he asked.

Harry blinked, and Snape realized how far away he must have been. "No, sir," he said. "I had an argument with Draco." He shifted his sleeve up his shoulder, but not before Snape caught a glimpse of a bruise in the shape of a hand.

"And what did you and Mr. Malfoy argue about, Harry?" he asked, leaning back in his chair and evaluating the boy. Harry didn't flush and stammer the way he might have when confronted with an uncomfortable truth last year; nor did he lie his way out of it, his eyes on the wall behind Snape's desk so the professor couldn't use Legilimency on him. He just looked perplexed.

"I don't know, sir," he admitted. "I knew that he didn't like my being absent from the train yesterday, and he didn't like it when Professor McGonagall paired him up with Hermione in Transfiguration—"

"I had not thought Miss Granger was in that class." Snape quashed his irritation at Minerva's apparent do-gooding. He had known when he tried to bring her in on the boy's side that she would go her own way, and do things in a Gryffindorish fashion however much he might try to persuade her otherwise.

"Well, she didn't used to be," Harry admitted. "But the professor moved the timetables around so that we're having class with the Gryffindors now."

Snape nodded, slowly. He supposed Minerva had her reasons for that, and he would find them out if he ever grew irritated enough with her to ask. "Very well. How does that lead to an argument of the kind that you appear to have had with Mr. Malfoy?"

Harry shrugged. "I don't know, sir," he repeated. "I teased Draco about the train, said that I felt like a pet he was trying to haul around on a leash so that it didn't get too far away from him. Then he flew into a rage and accused me of wanting to get

away. We, ah, we started arguing about Connor, and about my coming to Malfoy Manor, and all sorts of things that I didn't know bothered him. Then I said I was coming to a meeting with you, and he grabbed my shoulder and tried to hold me there." Harry paused, and his eyes darted off to the right.

"Out with it, Harry," said Snape, making sure to keep his voice mild and not accusing. He had to encourage the boy to confide in and trust him, if he wanted to have a chance at being Harry's mentor, and perhaps an actual guide and teacher in more subjects than Potions.

Harry shook his head. "My magic flared, because I was angry by then. I didn't think he had any right to keep me there. And Draco immediately let me go and apologized, and said that I should come along before I was late and made you furious at me." Harry stared hard at Snape. "Do you know of any reason that would have caused him to do that, sir?"

Snape sighed. He could think of one, but hearing it would cause Harry much grief. Yet better, he supposed, to cause some little grief than to lie to the boy, as everyone around him had done for much too long. "I think he was afraid, Harry. He has seen what your magic can do."

Harry bit his lip. "Yes. I was afraid it was that, sir." He clenched his hands, and Snape felt the magic lift around him, a buzzing pressure that leaned against his Malfoy-inspired shields but did not pierce them. "There are times I *do* want to put my magic away," Harry said passionately, "just so that it won't frighten anyone anymore."

Snape stood. This had been the core of their argument yesterday. He had said that Harry should concentrate on taming his magic more than anything else. The more he insisted on that, the more Harry insisted on staying loyal to his brother and defending him. It was time to take a different tack, then. Snape had suspected it would be. Indirect tactics worked best with Harry.

"Do you think Dumbledore was right?" he asked.

Harry frowned. "Of course not. I told you that I didn't intend to put the phoenix web back the way it had been."

Snape concealed his wrath—Harry had explained in more detail about the phoenix web yesterday, too, and it had set Snape thinking of spells he hadn't used in years—and sneered. "And yet, the phoenix web was meant to bind your magic. If you are thinking of tucking your magic away simply because it might cause consternation and fear in those weaker than you are, you are conceding to Dumbledore, saying that he was right to enslave you in the first place."

Harry stiffened, and his magic lashed around him. "I am *not*."

"Yes, you are," said Snape, and paused until he felt Harry's power and temper both build. Then he added, delicately, "Unless you are saying that Dumbledore and your mother put you under the web out of some other emotion? Kindness, perhaps? Worry for your delicate constitution?"

Harry looked away. Snape waited. He had led the boy back to this point before, and he would lead him back as often as was necessary. Harry might not want to talk about the memories aloud, but he couldn't stop thinking about them, anyway, at least not when someone else forced him to confront them.

"They wanted to keep everyone safe," Harry murmured. "And that's what I want, too."

Snape cocked his head. "And, of course, binding your magic has worked so *well* in the past to do that," he said. "It must be someone else's magic that grew its own will and personality and did its best to destroy Hogwarts. Do forgive me. Shall I ask Mr. Malfoy how well he remembers that night, perhaps? Or your brother?"

Harry turned around and snarled at him. Snape could feel the magic grow claws and teeth against his shields.

He kept the sneer in place. If this was what Harry needed, then he would do his best to be that kind of person. Someone to rage against, someone he might come close to hurting but would not actually hurt in the way that he might his parents or Dumbledore, someone he appeared to trust despite having many small wounds inflicted against that trust.

And all the while that he might threaten to tear open Snape's mind with his power, he was *not* caging it, *not* letting it rot or rot him, *not* doing the same thing to himself that his parents and Dumbledore had wanted to do.

Snape fully intended to see Harry mix his magic with his own being, not cage it and not restrain it. He also fully intended to live to see the day when that union would be complete.

And then, he thought, his eyes lingering on the lightning bolt scar just barely visible above Harry's agitated green stare, then you will be more than a force to be reckoned with. You will be a force to make peace with, a force to change things with, a force to unite those who have gone shattered and fragmented too long.

Snape had been reading, when he could, about what a *vates* was over the summer. It had been...enlightening.

"That's the thing, though," Harry said abruptly, in an unhappy tone, and Snape realized he had managed to calm himself while Snape was lost in daydreams. "I want to protect and defend and heal and create, the way you said I should. But the magic only wants to destroy. I don't understand."

Snape shrugged. "I do. You are growing more successful at harnessing your power. You have not harnessed your rage."

Harry laughed. It was not a sound that Snape wanted to hear ever again. "Sometimes I wonder whether it matters," he said. "Our parents left me alone this summer. Sirius is being stupid, but I can deal with him. My brother has finally learned what responsibility means. I want to free Remus from the *Obliviate*, but once I do that, do I really have to face them? Couldn't I just sort of...stay away from them?"

"You already know the answer to that, Mr. Potter," said Snape, using the boy's last name to get his attention. "You cannot. You must face them, at one point or another, or your rage will not be quiet. And they will never leave you in peace. I saw the way the Headmaster watched you at every meal in the Great Hall today. He will renew that web if he can."

Harry bowed his head.

"And even if you could stay away from them, if they would leave you alone," Snape added quietly, "what do you think the werewolf will do when he gains his memories back? What do you think Minerva will do now that she is convinced those who should have loved you betrayed and harmed you—"

Harry looked up swiftly. "They still love me."

Snape paused, then decided to let that one lie. It might be true, for all he knew, though he could not call the elder Potters' behavior loving. "You have never seen her in battle, Harry," he said. "I have. She is terrifying. There are the Malfoys. There is, perhaps, your godfather, and your brother." He let himself sneer in doubt. *If Black and Potter have not yet awakened to every terrifying consequence, they are not going to.*

"And there is me," he went on, when he found that Harry's eyes were wide and fixed on him, drinking in what he said. "I had to stop myself from brewing—certain potions a dozen times this summer. Potions I have perfected, potions that would inflict extremely painful death."

He had actually been unable to stop himself from making one particular potion, but he had put it on the very back shelf of a locked cabinet and promised himself he would never use it. Probably.

Very likely, at least.

"Would you stop us from doing what we wish in your name?" Snape asked.

"I'd stop you if you were trying to kill someone else," Harry said, and his eyes were wide and clear, his voice as firm, as it had been yesterday when Minerva questioned him on possibly taking revenge.

Snape nodded. "But you cannot stop us from feeling outrage and grief and hatred."

Harry gnawed his lip.

"Why is this so hard for you to understand?" Snape persisted. *Perhaps this particular direct tactic will work.*

"Because I—it's me," said Harry. He gave an angry shrug when Snape simply looked at him. "I don't know. Don't ask *me* to explain it," he said, and his magic stalked around the room like a prowling beast, rocking the vials on their shelves. "But I would understand perfectly if my parents had been abusing Connor and someone found out about it, or if Lucius was casting Dark curses at Draco all the time and I found out about it. Then the outrage and grief and hatred, sure. But I keep trying to put those emotions in the same place with what happened to me and—it doesn't work." He shook his head.

Snape tamed what he wanted to say. His thoughts went to the potion on the back shelf of the locked cabinet instead.

Harry took several deep breaths, then looked directly at him. “Actually, sir, I came to ask if I could get your help brewing the Wolfsbane Potion.”

Snape considered pressing the issue, but let it go in the end. Harry was not yet ready. “Afraid that I won’t brew it right for your precious Lupin?” he mocked. Harry’s eyes flashed, and Snape smirked. *Good. Get him angry.* “I am sorry to disappoint you, Potter, but I value my reputation as a Potions Master more than I value the thought of getting revenge on that wretched beast.”

A vial on the nearest shelf shattered, and Snape regretted going so far—though more for the abashed look on Harry’s face as he surveyed what his magic had done than because of the lost potion. It was a Boil Cure potion, easily replaced.

“No, it’s not that, sir,” Harry said, now looking anywhere but at him. “I promised...well, you see, someone I know is a werewolf, and I promised to brew the Potion for her.”

Snape stared at him. Just when he imagined that he understood Harry, the boy came out with a surprise like this. “Who?”

Harry hesitated, then sighed. “Hawthorn Parkinson.”

The Red Death. Snape concealed a wince. For all that he had been stronger than the witch when they both served as Death Eaters, he had been wary of her nasty talent for curses involving the blood. “And how exactly did you meet Hawthorn Parkinson?” he asked.

“A meeting in Diagon Alley,” said Harry. “I think Millicent arranged it. Maybe. I don’t know. It was strange. But I promised Mrs. Parkinson I would try to help her. She got bitten by Fenrir Greyback for refusing to help in some insane plan he has to raise the Dark Lord.”

Snape nodded at once. He could see why this would be important, though he suspected he was not seeing it as important for the same reasons Harry was. The boy needed as much training and protection as possible before the Dark Lord returned. Someone who might actively oppose that was to be encouraged. And if Harry could win her gratitude...

Well, there are many less valuable things to have than the good opinion of the Red Death.

“Fetch me unicorn hair and fairy wings from my stores,” he said, nodding towards the appropriate cabinets.

Harry moved at once to get them, seeming glad the conversation was over. For that matter, Snape shared the sentiment.

Every time I think we are making progress, he thought, as he eyed Harry’s back in resignation, I am reminded how much further we have to walk.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: Mothers to Sons

September 5th, 1993

Dear Connor:

Yes, you can trust Sirius to teach you the full extent of his compulsion ability, even though he might not want to. I know that it reminds him of the Blacks, of the house that he grew up in and the family he fought so hard to escape. He is a hero, Connor, a hero because of that if nothing else.

But he had to use his compulsion ability to force his family to let him go after he was sixteen and ran away to live with James, and he used it several times on the Death Eaters, too. He knows how to wield it. He knows what a useful weapon it can be. And now that he knows you have it, he would push you to use it, if only to get it properly trained. With the War coming, he will do more than that.

I’m sending you the books that you asked for, [A Practical History of Goblins in the North](#) by Griphook Fishbaggin and [Making the Most of Your Unexpected Dark Gift](#), by Shadwell Willowbranch. I almost thought there was someone else I ought to tell you to share that last book with, but now I forget who it was. In fact, the more I think about it, the more I would

urge you to keep that book somewhere safe and secret. Officially, we aren't supposed to know about this, but unofficially, I've had owls from Dumbledore. The Minister, Cornelius Fudge, has apparently been receiving threatening letters from former Death Eaters. The Ministry is moving to restrict the use of Dark magic and the presence of Dark creatures in wizarding Britain. The Wizengamot is already considering ways to restrict the shipping of dangerous Potions ingredients.

I can promise they won't hurt you, Connor, not when you are and will be their hero, but you'll have to keep your head down for a short time.

So much love for my brave, heroic son,
Lily Potter.

September 5th, 1993

Dear my son:

I hope you are well. Please remember the last tales we have talked about. In return, I have another tale for you.

Julia Malfoy lived six hundred years ago. You have heard of her, I am sure. Her portrait hangs in the front hallway—the tall woman with the blue crystal and the enormous gray hound. Lucius likes to refer to her as his Fearsome Aunt. Most of the Malfoys do. She was indeed fearsome, very strong in her power, about which more in a moment, and apparently aunt to a dozen children without having one of her own.

But she was not childless, Draco. I have finished my investigation of our family's private papers, and I have found evidence that I can only call evidence of a conspiracy, to conceal the birth of Julia Malfoy's only child, a son, and pass it off as someone else's. Do you know who that someone else was, Draco?

Octavius Malfoy, who was one of the next generation of Malfoy children whom Julia grew up mothering. He became Lord when his father died, because it was believed that he was the son of Julius Malfoy, Julia's twin brother and the Heir of the line, and his wife.

I have investigated further, and I am convinced that, in this case, your Fearsome Aunt did not become pregnant by some commoner and thus slip baseborn genes into the Malfoy line because the Lord could not sire a child. Octavius was, in fact, Julius's son. Julia seduced her own brother, so that the child would be born purebred Malfoy.

I can imagine your face now, my son. You will be making a horrible one. Not too horrible, of course, because someone else might see you and question it, but a grimace nonetheless.

The important thing about Julia is not that she committed incest, nor even that she passed her son off as the next Lord Malfoy—when, truly, he was. It is that she was willing to go to such lengths to insure the Malfoy line's continuance, and she had the magic to do so. Her brother could not resist her call, but she did not enslave him, either with Imperius or some other spell. She was simply so powerful than when she asked, he did as she bid, dazzled by that which we all crave.

Draco, you will understand in time. I am sending you certain books with my next owl. For now, remember this: I come from the Black family, but no Black mother was ever less determined to protect her children than a Malfoy mother was. I will move mountains for you, Draco. You have only to speak the word, or have a certain look on your face. I have interpreted several such expressions already. Do not fear, my darling. You shall have what you need.

Your loving mother,
Narcissa Black Malfoy.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seven: Rise, Like Lions After Slumber

Harry paused when both Draco and Blaise followed him out of the common room on Saturday morning. "Why are you coming to the library?" he asked.

Blaise put his nose up. He was doing that lately. He seemed even more nervous around Harry than he had been last year. Harry supposed the rumors about him spending some time with a Dark Lord in his head had something to do with that. "I'm meeting Patil in the library to discuss our project for Professor McGonagall's class, of course."

Harry blinked. “But I’m meeting Connor to discuss it.”

“And I’m meeting Granger,” said Draco, and they all looked at each other.

Harry shook his head. “They must have arranged to meet us all at once, then.” He shrugged. He could understand the sentiment. Connor would probably have been willing to meet Harry on his own, but Hermione had no reason to like Draco, and he would be extremely surprised if Blaise and Parvati knew each other.

“Are they scared?” Blaise muttered as they walked towards the library. “Scared of the big bad House of Slytherin?”

Harry and Draco exchanged glances. It had only been a week back at school, and already *they* had noticed what had changed. Blaise had to be blind.

Except for the few members of other Houses who’d already had friendships with Slytherins, like the small group of Hufflepuffs who’d befriended Harry last year after he’d saved Justin Finch-Fletchley from the basilisk, most of them were avoiding Slytherins. Whispers trailed them. From somewhere had come the rumor that Snape had once been a Death Eater, which, while not exactly a secret, wasn’t very common knowledge either. Harry had heard a few people hissing in the corridor at him yesterday. By itself, that would have struck him only as students intent on resurrecting the Parseltongue scandal from last year, but as part of the larger pattern of abuse and isolation towards Slytherins, it was worrisome.

Draco shrugged now. “They probably are,” he said lightly. “Merlin knows we outmatch them in magic, in brains, in beauty, in blood purity, in everything that matters.”

“Because, of course,” said Harry, taking care not to look at Draco this time, “you weren’t moaning to me the other evening about how you hoped Hermione would do more than half the work on your project, because you know next to nothing about Animagi.”

“There may be gaps in my knowledge,” said Draco, his chin lifting until Harry thought his neck must hurt. “That doesn’t actually mean that Granger is *smarter* than I am.”

Blaise snickered. Harry resisted the temptation only by a great effort. The back of Draco’s neck flushed.

“You could agree with me once in a while, you know,” he whined at Harry.

Harry raised his eyebrows as they turned into the library corridor. It was true they’d been fighting all week, and over the silliest things—who had snickered at Harry when he got a gob of food stuck to his hair in the Great Hall, how much time Harry spent studying as opposed to talking to Draco, who had said what in a half-remembered argument from the night before. But how could Draco expect Harry to agree with him all the time? Harry was under the impression that that would have bored Draco, anyway.

“I do agree with you,” he said. “I think the Gryffindors are nervous and wanted to meet us in a group. But that doesn’t mean that I think you’re smarter than Hermione.”

Draco pouted at him. That was at least better than shouting, and Harry felt in a relatively good, even hopeful, mood as he stepped into the library and looked around for the Gryffindors.

He spotted Hermione and Parvati almost immediately, sitting at a large table already covered with books. He couldn’t see Connor anywhere. He frowned and approached them, then halted as Ron came out from between the shelves and sat down next to Hermione. He’d thought Ron was working with Vince and Greg, who had been firmly snoring in their beds when the other boys left their room.

Ron without Connor to restrain him was trouble. Quite apart from the grudge the Weasley family had always had against the Malfoys, Lucius had tried to get his father sacked permanently last year, and only Sirius’s intervention had saved him. And Ron didn’t like or trust Harry that much.

Yet he just sat there and watched as the Slytherins approached, and never said a word, though Harry saw him rub his shoulder as though he were wondering if his arm was strong enough to throw a punch that would bring down all of them. His eyes were cool and assessing, though, a look that Harry had never seen in them.

He remembered, abruptly, that Connor had said Ron was an excellent chess player, one who always pounded him into the

ground when they played. Harry had the feeling he was seeing the chess master now.

Trying to ignore his own uneasiness, he nodded to Hermione and Parvati. “Hello. Do you know where my brother is?”

“He said something about training,” said Parvati, pushing her thick dark hair behind her ears. She was pretty, but the way she was frowning at Blaise somewhat marred it. “He said to tell you he was sorry, but he didn’t think he’d be able to get together with you and work on the project today.”

Harry blinked, even though he knew where Connor had to be—with Sirius. “Oh.” He hesitated as Draco and Blaise took their places at the table, opposite their assigned partners. He was acutely aware that, other than a brief contemptuous flick in Draco’s direction, Ron’s eyes had never wavered from his face. “I guess I’ll go back to the dorm, then, and talk to him later, so we can arrange a different time to meet.” He started to turn away.

“Wait, Harry.”

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Now he *knew* something was off. Ron didn’t call him Harry, at least not without a lot of prompting. “Yes?” he asked, leaving off the name altogether, since he wasn’t sure which to use.

“Stay and work with me,” Ron proposed. “You can get your work done, and I’ll get mine.” He snorted abruptly. “Not that Crabbe and Goyle could help me that much anyway.”

“You take that back,” said Draco. “Vince and Greg are *good* friends.”

“Shut it, Malfoy,” said Ron. “I was talking to Harry.” He turned entirely away from Draco, who was left gaping. “What do you say, Harry?” he went on, as if they did this all the time. “It’ll give you a head start, anyway.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Hermione piped in. “I’ve already written most of the essay—“ Draco’s relieved expression didn’t escape Harry’s notice “—but there’s so much *fascinating* information here. Did you realize that the Animagus form always reflects the wizard’s or witch’s internal nature? Without exception? And that it’s the nature they really have, not the image they present to the world?” She began to flip through the book she held. “It says here that Hilda Hufflemark was *completely* disappointed when her Animagus form turned out to be an earthworm, but—“

“We know, Hermione,” said Ron, in a long-suffering fashion. “Come on, Harry.” He tapped the table. “We should get started on this, you know.”

Harry slowly took the chair. Perhaps he would understand what was going on if he simply spent more time with the Gryffindors, then. He eyed Ron as he opened the first book, but Ron just went on staring at him. It was starting to feel familiar.

It *did* feel familiar, Harry realized suddenly. It was the way Lucius had stared at him the first time he met Harry, when he went to the Malfoy Manor for Christmas that first year. He hadn’t cared about how rude he was being, because the dance he was dancing required bluntness, even rudeness, to get its point across. He was letting Harry know that he considered him a threat and would size him up accordingly.

But I didn’t think any of the Weasleys would teach their children the dances, Harry thought in confusion.

Very well, then. Harry hadn’t felt inclined to question Lucius’s staring. He would question this. Lucius had already known that Harry didn’t trust him. Ron might not know that.

“Stop that,” he said, sharply but quietly enough that it just stayed between them, leaning forward. “What do you want?”

“To figure out why my shoulder’s hurting,” said Ron, and touched his right shoulder blade.

Harry blinked, lost.

Ron raised an eyebrow for a moment, and his face melted back into the expression that Harry was more familiar with, impatience mixed with contempt. “You really don’t *get* it, do you?” he asked.

Harry settled himself again. This was familiar. He could deal with this. He wanted familiar things that he could deal with. Enough had changed in the past year. “Of course not,” he said. “I have no idea what your shoulder blade hurting has to do with our Transfiguration project.” He turned back to the book in front of him. *The Ministry has long required that dangerous*

wizards and witches register with them, but in the present time, only the Animagus Registration is specifically required, for a number of reasons...

Ron tapped the page in front of him. "Come with me," he said, and he had the chess player look in his eyes again. He walked away between the shelves.

Harry hesitated, but Blaise and Parvati were arguing, almost nose-to-nose, and Hermione was rattling off a long series of facts to Draco, who was playing the captive audience well enough to half-fool Harry. No one seemed to notice as he stood and slipped after Ron.

I have to keep having mysterious meetings with people in shadowed corners, don't I? he wondered as he came to a halt in front of Ron near the back end of one aisle. "What—" he began.

"Shhh," said Ron.

Harry rolled his eyes, but was quiet. Someone on the other side of the shelf finally moved away, and Ron relaxed and glanced at him. "My shoulder blades have been itching all week," he said. "It felt like I was going to sprout wings. And Percy's been feeling the same thing, and the twins. The twins just claim it's one of their products, of course." He eyed Harry.

"How do you know it's not?" Harry had to ask. He had seen last year that the Weasley twins would prank *anyone*. Ron shouldn't be excepted just because he was family.

"Because," said Ron patiently, "I *know* what it is. I think Percy does, too, but he just gets a scared expression on his face whenever I ask him about it. He's always going to talk to Headmaster Dumbledore. I think he's involved in something he doesn't want the rest of us to know about. And Fred and George refuse to take it seriously, of course." He shrugged. "It's the way the Weasley family feels a powerful wizard's magic. You know, like the way that the McGonagall family feels it as wind across their skin."

"How do you know about that?" Harry asked.

"I was taught it." Ron looked more confused. "I thought you were being obtuse to act all cool and Slytherin about it, but you aren't, are you? You really *didn't* know."

Harry shook his head. "I—Draco can feel my magic, he's told me so, but I thought it was just something he was trained to do, some special ability he had. I didn't know that other pureblood families could do it, too." He tried to push aside any worry and give in to his curiosity instead. "Can all pureblood families do it?"

"I suppose so." Ron shrugged again. "I don't know all the signs. But it's an obvious survival skill, isn't it? After all, purebloods were the only part of wizarding society that was really accepted for a long time, and—well, don't tell Hermione, but even if there were powerful Muggleborns then, it wasn't like anyone was going to *admit* it. They got killed instead. But we had to know how to spot a powerful wizard or witch right away, just in case he or she started wanting to conquer us or gather followers." He sounded as if he were quoting someone, and grinned abruptly, lapsing back into his normal voice. "Don't tell Mum, but I always hated that part of the lecture. She sounded as though she was about to faint."

Harry snickered in spite of himself, but he had gone back to confused again. "All right, you can feel my magic. Sorry. I'll try to tone it down. But why did you stare at me the way you did?"

"Because I want to know what you're going to do," said Ron. "So do the rest of us, really." He scowled. "Except Fred and George. They just assume that you'll play the *best* practical jokes, because that's what they'd do, and they're waiting to see what happens, so they can take notes."

Harry shook his head. "You don't have to worry about me. I'm going to protect Connor."

Ron peered at him skeptically. "You're going to use all that magic just to do that?"

Harry shrugged. "Sure. Why not? It's pretty complicated, anyway, since my brother's got You-Know-Who after him." There were other things he might do, but whenever he thought of them, he tumbled into the deep pit of rage that Snape had made him explore every night Harry visited him so far. He wanted to do something to strike back against his parents, but he knew he would regret it the moment he did. He regretted thinking about it.

"It's more than that, though," said Ron. "The powerful witches and wizards in the past always *did* something. Maybe you can

turn Malfoy into a toad.” He looked hopeful.

Harry rolled his eyes. “He’s my friend. I’m not going to do that.”

“A ferret, then?” Ron suggested. “He looks like a ferret.”

Harry shook his head and turned back towards the table, deciding their conversation was over. Ron clutched his arm and held him back. Harry glared at him.

Ron promptly dropped his hand and backed away, his palms spread in a gesture of surrender.

Harry swallowed. “Why are you doing that?”

Ron cocked an eyebrow at him. “Because your magic surges when you’re angry, mate. And right now I feel like I’m going to sprout feathers.” With a grimace, he scratched roughly at his shoulders. “I don’t want you to get angry at me and do something to me,” he added.

“Is everyone going to think that?” Harry felt a deep curdle of fear in his stomach. It had been bad enough when Draco seemed to be afraid of him, but Draco had seen the full extent of his magic and knew what he was capable of, so Harry could understand even though he didn’t like it. But if everyone started fearing him just based on his anger... Harry would have no option but to bind and hide the rage again. Snape would just have to understand.

“Every pureblood wizard, anyway,” Ron corrected him. “I think some of the Muggleborns might feel you, too, like Hermione. She’s strong,” he added, as if Harry wouldn’t have known that already. “But that’s why you tell us what you’re going to do. If you’re not going to go crazy and enslave the world like—like You-Know-Who—“ Ron glanced around as if Voldemort might be hiding behind the History of Magic books “—then we shouldn’t have a reason to be afraid of you.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m going to protect my brother.”

“Not enough, mate.” Ron’s eyes were kind, but appraising once again. “No one’s going to believe it. Do you think anyone would believe Headmaster Dumbledore—I mean, *really* believe him—if he said that he was going to live in a little cottage and grow roses for the rest of his life?”

“Maybe,” Harry muttered, his rage flaring again at the thought of the Headmaster Ron winced and touched his left shoulder. Harry tried to calm down. “What’s the phrase? Famously eccentric?”

Ron laughed. “Yeah. But he’s earned the right to be left in peace, really. We know that he killed Grindelwald and everything. We trust that he’ll use his magic for good, and we know that You-Know-Who will use his magic for evil. We don’t know what you’re going to do, yet.” He tilted his head. “I wonder if that’s what’s got Percy so nervous. I know that he had to follow you last year. Maybe I can ask him what he saw that the rest of us didn’t.”

“Or you could ask me,” Harry had to point out, “since you have me right in front of you.”

Ron rubbed the back of his neck as his face flushed. “Yeah. Sorry. What did you do last year? Why couldn’t we feel you then?”

Harry shrugged. “I have no idea.” He was lying, of course. The phoenix web would have bound his magic much more strongly then, and kept a good part of its full strength beneath the surface of his mind. “If it helps, Draco’s been able to sense my magic since first year,” he added, to get Ron’s mind off the potentially dangerous track of what might have happened last year. He didn’t mind if Death Eaters knew what he had done in the Chamber, not when it might intimidate them or make them think of him as a better target than his brother. He didn’t want Ron, who was a Gryffindor through and through, to find out that Connor hadn’t really been a hero.

“Yes, but you were a git first year,” said Ron. “Maybe it was just a case of gits drawing together.”

Harry glared at him. “Sometimes I don’t know if you’re really serious or not about wanting to know what I’m going to do,” he said.

“Of course I am,” said Ron, his smile melting. “I was trying to make *you* more comfortable, Harry. I really don’t want you angry. No pureblood wizard in the school wants you angry anymore. The sooner you get this settled, the better.”

“And how can I possibly tell everyone what I intend to do for the rest of my life?” Harry demanded.

Ron shrugged, unconcerned. “You could file an announcement with the Ministry, to be read in every part of Britain, if you *really* wanted to. Maybe not,” he amended, when Harry gave him a horrified glance. “Or you could just tack a sign up somewhere to reassure everyone who’s been feeling the magic and doesn’t know where it’s coming from what happened, and that you don’t intend to harm anybody.”

“It’s none of their business,” said Harry.

Ron raised his eyebrows. “When you’re *this* strong, it becomes everybody’s business, Harry,” he said. “Just like the Minister has to know everything about Dumbledore’s movements, and everyone gets nervous of You-Know-Who. That’s just the way it is. You’re realigning power structures just by walking around.”

“But—“ Harry swallowed back his panic. He couldn’t say why he got so nervous about having attention paid to him without drawing more attention, and talking about the way Lily had trained him. And *that* really was not everybody’s business. Harry would sacrifice privacy about his magic before he would talk about his training. “I’m just thirteen years old. No one’s going to listen to a kid, anyway.”

Ron shook his head slowly. “That’s just going to make them more nervous.”

“What is?”

“That you have this kind of power, and you’re so young.” Ron cocked his head and eyed him thoughtfully. “This time you have right now is really a gift, you know. No one’s sure what’s going on. They think you might still be good. Or they don’t know that you’re the source of the magic. I was only sure when you walked into the library this morning, and Fred and George *think* they know, but they’re more enchanted with the idea than anything. But people are going to write to their parents soon, Harry. People outside Hogwarts are going to pay attention. You haven’t got long before someone tries to assume custody of you, for your own good.”

“My parents—“

“Don’t seem to have trained you to take care of your magic,” said Ron. “That’ll probably be the first argument they try. *Watch out*, Harry.”

“Why are you telling me about this?” Harry whispered, closing his eyes. He could feel his heart pounding as walls seemed to close in around him. He didn’t want this to happen. He wanted to be as normal as he could, to go back to the shadows he’d been guarding Connor from. Just because he knew the truth, and a few other people did, didn’t mean *everything* had to change. And now this was happening.

“Because,” said Ron, “you’re my best mate’s brother, and that makes you kind of like my brother, too.” Harry opened his eyes to see him grimacing, probably at having to call a Slytherin brother. “And you’re something really special to Connor. Did you know that? The way his face lights up when he talks about you...” Ron sighed. “I’d give a lot if someone’s face lit up like that for me. Ginny, maybe.”

“But you still don’t like me much,” Harry summarized.

“You’re a Slytherin,” Ron answered bluntly. “And that makes me nervous.” *Gryffindor honesty*, Harry thought, meeting his eyes. *They’re not supposed to be nervous, but if they are, they usually admit it, even to people they really shouldn’t be admitting it to.* “And now you’re dithering on what to do. That’s just *stupid*, Harry. I’ll grant that you don’t know much about this, and I thought you did, and I’m sorry for that. But you know now. You’ve got to *move*.”

Harry closed his eyes. “And what do you think the rest of the school would do, if I announced that I was some powerful wizard?” he whispered.

Ron’s hand clasped his shoulder. Harry let his eyes blink open under the unexpected touch. “Some Ravenclaws will probably want to study you,” said Ron casually, “and the rest will panic. Slytherin’ll probably think you’re just great. Another powerful wizard who talks to snakes? Wonderful!”

Harry tried to pull away, but Ron kept him there.

“The Hufflepuffs might stand by you, at least your friends, while the rest of them panic,” he said. “And we’ll fight you if we

have to. I know that you think Gryffindors are unfairly favored—“

“I never said that.”

“All Slytherins think that.” Ron waved a hand. “You can’t help it, I suppose. The thing is, one reason Gryffindors are favored—my parents told me all about this—is because of the First War. Everyone else dithered around trying to decide what to do, or slunk away to join You-Know-Who. Gryffindors were the ones who went down there and *fought*.”

“And died,” Harry whispered, remembering a list of casualties he’d once seen divided by House affiliation. Gryffindor had outnumbered all the rest combined. Harry had thought it was because Voldemort hated them the most and sought them out at first, or because they were overrepresented in the Aurors. Now he wondered if it really was the kind of rash courage Ron was praising.

“Yes, that too.” Ron sounded surprisingly unruffled. “But that means that you’ll have a whole bunch of people who fight you if you turn out to be an evil wizard. But look at it like this: we’ll fight *for* you if you turn out to be a Light wizard. Our house is strongest in the Light.”

Harry thought of arguing that, but could only scrub at his eyes instead. “Why are you doing this?” he asked. “Why talk about fighting and dying for someone you barely knew?”

“Connor wrote to me a lot over the summer,” said Ron, and his face clouded for a moment. “He told me about the Chamber, and the battle with Voldemort first year in detail, and—and other things, things he’s dreamed about.” He stared hard at Harry. “I know why he isn’t here today.”

Caught speechless, Harry could only nod.

“So he said he understood if I wanted to stop being his friend and go befriend someone else less dangerous.” Ron shrugged. “I thought about it a lot. But I finally wrote back and said I still wanted to be friends with him. And if that means thinking about fighting and dying, then I will.”

Harry eyed him. Ron appeared utterly sincere. Harry thought he might be less than sincere if he was on the other end of a Death Eater’s wand.

But...

There was courage here, too. And no one in Slytherin had told Harry about what consequences his magic might have. He nodded at Ron.

“Thanks,” he said, his voice hoarse with something that sounded embarrassingly like gratitude.

“No problem,” said Ron. “At least now I know why you weren’t doing anything. But do something soon, all right?” He abruptly turned his head to look at the end of the row of shelves. “What do *you* want, Malfoy?”

“I want to know what you’re doing with my friend, Weasley.” Draco sneered at him and stared hard at Harry. “And what you were doing with him.”

There was no mistaking the jealousy in his voice. Harry shook his head. It wasn’t worth arguing about. “Talking about chess,” he said, and Ron caught his eye and gave him an odd half-smile.

“Yeah,” he said, and walked past Harry and around Draco, giving him a sneer of his own for good measure. It wasn’t as practiced as Snape’s, Harry thought, but not many people’s were. “See you later, Harry.”

“What was that all about?” Draco demanded.

Harry glared at him. “Strange as it might seem, Draco, I don’t have to explain every one of my movements to you.”

Draco clenched one hand. He couldn’t explain why this was so important without making Harry misunderstand him. And anyway, he’d tried all week, and Harry just kept being stubborn at him.

Why do you need to know where I go, Draco?

Why do you care what time I come back to the dorms, Draco?

Why does it matter to you that I wasn't on the Hogwarts Express, Draco?

And Draco wanted to say that he felt as though he gave everything he had to the friendship with Harry and Harry gave him back nothing in return except what he gave everyone, unconsciously, and the least he could do was reserve that unconscious giving for Draco himself.

But Harry wouldn't understand. Draco had seen that already. He didn't *grasp* that he was important enough for Draco to feel jealous over, that he was important enough to want to have private conversations with, that Draco was in agony every day over the mental and magical damage he was still suffering.

Oh, he could understand those things when they were applied to other people. He felt jealous over the time his brother spent with other people, that much was plain, and he respected the private conversations that Draco had with Vince and Greg over people they'd known from childhood, and he worried about Draco in every aspect except the ones that had to do with him. But the most he could do with the emotions people felt for him was accept that they existed. He couldn't understand *why*.

It was killing Draco, slowly—that this was happening, that he couldn't do anything to take revenge on the people who'd done it to him without hurting Harry further, that Harry wouldn't understand even if Draco did take revenge, that it was costing him so much of himself and he got so little in return.

He turned abruptly and ran out of the library, ignoring Harry's startled cry behind him and the shrill voice of Granger as she tried to command him to return to their table. He hurried upwards, heading steadily for the Owlery. No one should be up there at this time of the day on a Saturday. Sensible people were asleep or outside.

No one *was* there, and Draco stood in silence amid the shifting rustles of feathers and legs and the deep smell of owl pellets. He'd taken several deep breaths, filled his lungs with the musk, and started to think about offering a treat to Imperius, his own owl, when a tawny owl spiraled in through the window and aimed straight for him.

Startled, Draco let the bird land on his shoulder. It had a letter bound around its leg, and he unbound it and scooped up a handful of treats from another owl's bowl to put in the bird's pouch. It hooted disapprovingly at him, but flew over to another perch and settled down to eat.

Draco read the letter.

It was from his mother, and while he did make the horrible face she talked about in it, he was more intrigued by the last three lines.

I will move mountains for you, Draco. You have only to speak the word, or have a certain look on your face. I have interpreted several such expressions already. Do not fear, my darling. You shall have what you need.

Draco closed his eyes. He wondered for a moment if it was entirely fair to ask his mother for what he needed next.

Then he decided, *To Azkaban with fair. I need this. I need her to help me heal Harry, to make him stop hurting.*

He turned hastily to fetch parchment and quill, to write back. The possibility of an end to the pain was as glorious as it would have been to have Harry come to him, all apologetic and humble, to ask Draco to explain what was going on.

He felt considerably lighter of heart as he watched Imperius wing his way into the sky, bearing his letter.

Mum will make it better again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eight: Omens of a Leadership Accepted

Harry lay on his bed in the Slytherin dorms and gnawed on his lip as he stared up at the Marauder's Map. He could see both Sirius and Connor clearly—positioned in a room on the seventh floor. They hadn't moved in hours.

He was fighting down the temptation to go and ask if his brother was all right. Connor had spent both days of the weekend with Sirius, as Harry had learned from a run-in with Ron that morning. He didn't appear to do any homework. He hadn't come to the Great Hall to get something to eat. He wasn't doing anything that Harry would say was normal and everyday for Connor to do.

Could he really be taking his duties as seriously as that?

Harry sighed and started to speak the words to clear the map, then paused as one of the dots abruptly left the room. He watched as "Connor Potter" moved downwards through Hogwarts, and only admitted the truth when he saw the dot approaching the dungeons.

He's coming to see me.

Harry scrambled off the bed, tapping the map with his wand and murmuring, "Mischief managed." Luckily, no one else was in the dorms right now; Vince and Greg were Merlin knew where, Blaise had gone to the library, and Draco was curled up in the common room with some books his mother had sent him earlier today.

Of course, Harry would have to cross through the common room to get to the door. He hesitated, sighed, then decided it couldn't be helped. Besides, it wasn't like he was *afraid* of Draco.

More like afraid to make him afraid of me, he thought, as he cautiously crept down the stairs and into the common room.

Draco looked up when he passed through the door, but returned immediately to his book. Harry told himself he was pleased, not worried. If Draco was reading, then he couldn't be fighting with Harry.

I wish I knew what he was reading, though. The books had no titles, on either the spines or the covers, only designs. Harry had recognized one of them—the rearing silver serpent of the Guile family, the last member of whom had been killed fighting in the Dark Lord Grindelwald's army. It didn't surprise Harry that the Malfoy library would include books about or by the Guiles, but he hoped Draco was careful in what he pulled out of them.

And, I'll admit it, madly curious to know what's in there, he added, as he came out of the common room door just in time to meet Connor's running charge.

Connor paused when he saw him, blinked, then said, "Oh, right. The map. Of course." Grinning, he shook his head and charged on, catching Harry up in a hug. Harry hugged him back, surprised. He always forgot that Connor was a little taller than he was now until reminded of it by his weight and size.

Harry waited until Connor danced back from him, grinning like an idiot, and then managed, "To what do I owe the honor?"

Connor laughed, the sound rising like water in spring. "Harry! I've been reading one of the books that Mum sent me, and then Sirius told me about something he heard once, and I put it together, and he said it was right, and it *was!* It was *right!*" He laughed and spun around, his hands raised above his head.

Harry cocked an eyebrow, unable to stop the smile, and then said, "Connor. I can't share your head. Tell me what you're talking about, please?"

Connor managed to calm down, though he was still grinning. "Sorry, Harry. But—well, look. Have you ever heard of an author named Griphook Fishbaggin?"

Harry frowned. "That sounds goblin."

"He was," said Connor, and then shrugged. "Well, except I don't think goblins have last names, so maybe he was adopted by them or something. Anyway, he wrote a book that I asked Mum to send me, because I'd read about goblins being allies of wizards and enemies of wizards, and I thought I should know if they were likely to be my allies or my enemies. And he mentioned this—thing." Connor waved a hand. "Concept. Idea. I don't know, it's hard to explain without seeing the whole thing. He gave it about sixty different names, anyway. There are whole pages in his book just devoted to explaining what the names mean in Gobbledegook."

Harry nodded. "And you figured out what the thing was?"

Connor grinned. "Yes! The closest human name is probably *prophet*. The goblins have a rumor, or a prophecy—except

Fishbaggin always insists that it's not that, but then he translates the word as prophet again—that someday a great leader will arise and be able to command them. He'll have all these different duties. And they'll help him face his enemies, including this 'one of darkness.'" Connor paused for a long moment, and Harry waited. He knew when his brother meant to speak another word.

"And the best thing," Connor whispered, "the *best* thing, Harry, is that Fishbaggin always uses the same word to talk about the duty of command."

"What was it?" Harry asked.

"Hm? Well, I don't know. I don't know how to pronounce the Gobbledegook." Connor's eyes were shining. "But I mentioned it to Sirius, and he translated it for me. It means someone with the compulsion gift, like I have." He looked up, face on fire. "That means it's not Dark after all, Harry! I asked Sirius about that, and he confirmed it. How *can* it be, when prophecies are running around saying that I have to have it in order to be this sort of prophet to the goblins?"

Harry blinked, and then had an armful of his brother again. Connor hugged him hard, then broke away. "Sorry," he said. "I've got to tell Ron. He'll be wondering where I was, anyway. But I wanted to tell you first."

Harry looked at him sideways. "Why?"

Connor's stare back was blank. "You're my *brother*," he said, as though that explained everything, and it probably did. Then he was gone, with a cheerful wave, dashing up the corridor and towards the steps out of the dungeon.

Harry leaned on the wall and closed his eyes. He wanted to believe Connor. He wanted to be sure that his brother really did carry a Light gift and not a Dark one, if only for his own peace of mind.

But he could still hear Remus, saying that the Dark Arts were based on compulsion. He'd confirmed that *Imperio* was the quintessential Dark curse when Harry asked him. And if what Connor—and Sirius—could do was a version of that, then how could it be Light?

Harry took a deep breath and got his thoughts under control. *You're letting your prejudices run away with you*, he snapped at himself. *You didn't even congratulate Connor on this new position of his—one he's thrilled to accept, one you would have been happy to see him accept, too, last year. It's so good that he's finally standing up and taking responsibility, isn't it? And you and your silly prejudices are going to ruin it all. He's stuck by you since he found out that you weren't really a new Dark Lord, just possessed. Why shouldn't you stick by him? So you have this uneasiness with compulsion. That doesn't mean it can't be done in the name of war or to justify a greater good.*

But that made it sound as though what Dumbledore had done was right.

Harry made up a thought and repeated it to himself. *My brother is not Dumbledore. Connor is who he needs to be, who he was born to be, who Voldemort marked him to be. He always will be. He's good. He's right about the potential of this gift, and it turns out the Dark has never touched him. That's all.*

Now he only had to repeat that thought to himself, again and again, until he believed it.

Harry. Can you meet me in the Charms corridor tonight at seven?

The note was unsigned, but Harry recognized Connor's handwriting, and the owl that had brought the scrap of parchment was certainly one of the school owls. He looked up, caught his brother's eye across the Great Hall, and nodded. Connor looked confused for a moment, then smiled at him.

Just as well, Harry thought, tucking the note into a pocket of his robes. *That will give me an excuse to avoid Draco this evening.*

Draco had spent the first three days of the week ignoring Harry as he read, but that day, Thursday, he'd come out of his trance with a vengeance. Now he was staring. He peppered Harry with random questions—his favorite color, what kind of food he liked best, whether he *really* wanted to stick his fork into his mouth while acting just like a barbarian or a Weasley and talking all the time. Harry had tried to answer as patiently as he could. He was afraid his patience was about to run out.

He had tried to ask Draco, and a few other members of Slytherin House, why they hadn't told him about the power that Ron sensed. Millicent just smiled and looked secretive. Pansy changed the subject to ask how the brewing of her mother's Wolfsbane Potion was going. Blaise made up moronic excuses and fled when Harry didn't believe them.

Draco just didn't let him get a word in edgewise, and now he was at it again.

"What was that note, Harry?" he asked. "Who was it from?"

"No one important," said Harry, trying to concentrate on his treacle tart. It had been Sylarana's favorite treat. Currently, one of his self-tests, along with avoiding his rage as much as possible and controlling his magic, was to see how often he could approach the memories of her and turn them good instead of evil. Granted, he would often feel a hitch in his breathing or a burn in his eyes during one of the tests, but that was better than the horrible closeness to tears he'd endured before.

"Tell me," said Draco. "I want you to tell me."

Harry glanced sideways. Draco was staring at him again—Ron's intent gaze, Lucius's intent gaze, the gaze of a pureblood in the dance. Harry shook his head slightly. "I don't want to."

Draco reached out and put a hand on Harry's arm, near the place where he'd bruised him last week. Harry felt his anger, and his magic, flare at the thought of being manhandled like that again.

Draco at once dropped his hand and smiled at him. "That's all right, Harry. You don't have to if you don't want to."

Harry blinked at him. And a moment later, Draco's face went hard again and he nodded, exactly as if he had confirmed something about Harry that he had been waiting to ask him.

It was too much strangeness for one evening. Harry stood up. "I have to go to the library and work with Connor on our Transfiguration project," he said.

"Your brother hasn't moved from his table." Draco leaned back in his chair and studied Harry coolly.

Harry shrugged. "He said he'd be along later." He walked away from the Slytherin table, knowing that everyone could tell he was agitated from his stride, and not caring. Of course, now that he was aware of it, he could see heads turning at the tables he passed, hands rubbing noses or eyes or arms, and suspicion dawning into certainty on many pureblood faces.

You have to do something, Ron's voice rang in his head, and Harry clenched his teeth. Yes, he had to do something, he had accepted that, but he didn't have to like it.

He calmed his magic with an enormous effort, reminding himself that the last time Connor had met him privately, it had been to tell him good news. He would probably have more good news to tell him this time. Harry was looking forward to it after such a trying day.

He reached the Charms corridor and cast the Disillusionment Charm on himself to keep him hidden until Connor came. A few students ambled past him, talking about nothing particularly exciting. Harry was glad. He used the minutes he was alone to close his eyes and count to ten. He'd learned the words for the numbers in Gobbledegook and Mermish specifically to give him something to pass the time with. Figuring out how to pronounce the rush of goblin consonants or the insistent twanging of Mermish, which was really meant to be spoken underwater, took almost all his concentration; he'd never been that gifted with languages.

"Harry?"

Harry blinked. Connor was in front of him, peering around as though he thought Harry might not be there yet. Harry dispelled the charm. "Connor, there you are."

Connor grinned at him. "Yes. Here I am." He let out a little breath. "And, Harry, I have a favor to ask you." He squinted and licked his lips as though he couldn't wait to ask the favor and didn't want to ask it at the same time.

Harry raised his eyebrows. He was thrilled at the thought of doing something for his brother, but letting that show would result in questions he didn't want to answer right now. Connor still didn't know about the full extent of his training. "Yes?"

"Well, see..." Connor scuffed his trainer on the floor. "The problem is Ginny Weasley."

Harry blinked. “Ron’s little sister?”

Connor nodded. “See, she has a crush on me or something.” His cheeks grew bright red. “I don’t know why. But lately she’s been tagging after me wherever I go. The Great Hall, the Gryffindor Tower—and to lessons with Sirius. And I don’t often see her. She’s really quick, and clever.”

“You want me to stop her?” Harry asked doubtfully.

Connor nodded. “I thought of a way to do it, but I don’t have the skills, and Hermione is Ginny’s friend. Could you—could you brew the Polyjuice Potion, so you could look like me, and distract her sometimes?”

Harry cocked his head. “The Polyjuice Potion isn’t quick, Connor,” he warned his brother. “It would take some time before I could have it ready, and in the meantime, Ginny would still be following you everywhere. Besides, maybe she’ll get tired of it before the Potion’s finished.”

“Even knowing that it would take a while, I’d still welcome it,” said Connor. “And Ron says she *doesn’t* give up. Ever. She waited a whole year once, but she got Percy back for turning her favorite teddy bear into a snake, even though it was an accident. I think she’ll still be following me around in October. And Sirius says he has to step up my training.” He pouted. “Please, Harry?”

Harry sighed, then nodded. “All right. I need a piece of your hair, though. Otherwise the Potion won’t work.”

“That’s no problem,” said Connor with relief, and plucked a hair from his head, holding it out to Harry.

Harry took it and felt a jolting tingle race up his arm. A moment later, he felt the very familiar sensation of the cracked and broken phoenix web attempting to repair itself.

He tried to jump, tried to shout, tried to reach for his wand. Instead, he stood still, caught in a full body-bind, and watched as the illusion of Connor in front of him melted away to reveal Albus Dumbledore, stern-faced and sad-eyed.

“I am sorry that it must come to this, my boy,” he said, holding up his wand. “But I cannot allow you to reverse the choices that you have made, nor turn the whole world topsy-turvy for the sake of your magic’s freedom. You will be happier when the web is restored, I promise. Right now you are not only unhappy, but making others so.”

Harry tried to open his hand, tried to let the hair fall, and found out he could not. His wards, too, the ones that kept him immune to Dumbledore’s magic, were gone as though they had never been. It had to be the hair, he thought. Dumbledore had enchanted it with spells to dispel the wards and hold him still, and once it touched bare skin, that had been the end of it. Or maybe it really was Connor’s hair, and depended on the blood connection between them.

Dumbledore waited a moment, as though expecting Harry to nod or say something in agreement, and then seemed to remember he was under the body-bind. He sighed.

“I am sorry,” he repeated. “*Expleo penuriam*—“

He cried out abruptly, and turned, his wand falling from his hand in shock and pain. Harry had time to see a small gray rat clinging furiously to Dumbledore’s ankle before it rolled off, dodging a bright white spark that leaped from Dumbledore’s robes, and transformed into Peter.

“I’ve been watching,” was the first thing Peter said, backing up so he was in between Dumbledore and Harry. Deftly, he reached out and plucked the hair from Harry’s hand, and Harry relaxed and let out a loud breath. His magic rose up around him. Peter didn’t seem to notice, his eyes still on Dumbledore. “Did you think I’d let you get away with this?”

Dumbledore didn’t say anything, but a bright red curse leaped from his wand, even though it was lying on the floor, and came for Peter. Harry realized that Peter didn’t intend to move aside.

He growled, exasperated—standing in front of danger and turning it from other people was *his* place, not Peter’s—and called his near-instinctive *Protego*. It manifested in front of Peter and bounced the spell back in Dumbledore’s direction. Of course, the curse dissipated harmlessly before it got that far.

Harry was left riding his magic, which had a hard core of the substantial, silent rage he’d locked in his box. The wall behind

him had already turned to ice. He breathed, deeply and quietly, and told his magic, *No. We are defending only.*

It didn't object, but the air in front of him turned cold enough that he could see his breath. Dumbledore was watching them thoughtfully, as poised as though he had never lost control and fired a curse. If he noticed the frost creeping towards him, he preferred to give no sign that he noticed it.

When he spoke, his voice was laden with sadness. "Peter, Peter, Peter. Do you know what you have done? Do you know that you may have put the wizarding world itself in danger with your reckless actions?" He shook his head, slowly, his eyes disappointed. "So little remains of the boy I once knew, the boy who swore he would give up everything to save his friends."

Harry felt the touch of the truth like a wind on his neck. *Is Peter—did he really go to Azkaban on Dumbledore's orders, then? Did he really leave us open to attack by Voldemort because Dumbledore wanted him to?*

That would mean that Dumbledore had left *Connor* open to attack.

It was only the channels that Harry had carved into himself over the summer, the ones that he knew and which his magic usually tried to run in, that kept them all from dying then. He felt the building of an explosion that would have torn his body and Peter's apart at the same time as it would have killed Dumbledore, and sealed the channels.

No.

He rocked on his feet as the magic roared at him for his balking and turned on him, scraping his mind with harsh claws. He could feel his mouth straining in a silent scream, but he forced it back down, forced the magic back down, forced the impulse to destroy back down. *He* was master of his magic, and master of himself. He needed no one else challenging him for that title.

It took him a long moment to come back to himself, to still the washing tides of magic in him as they sloshed from one side to the other and ceased to wound him. Only then could he attend to Peter's voice, which had lost the mockery it held earlier and gone straight into incandescent rage.

"...look at him, Albus. Look what you've done. This is a *child*, a bloody *child*, Lily and James's *son*. You once claimed to love them, you said you'd do anything for them, you moved mountains to help them. And Sirius and Remus, too. You kept any of us from being expelled after Remus nearly killed Snape. Is this the proof of the love you offer? Is this what happens to our children even if it doesn't happen to us? Look at him and tell me you can do this."

"I can do this," said Dumbledore, his voice still sad beyond measure. "I must, Peter." His face was stern when Harry looked at him. "You knew the cost when you paid it. Harry knew the cost when he paid his."

"I changed my mind," said Peter bluntly. "And I've shattered the web, Albus. I'm here on my own, not because the insanity that you forced me into pretending finally took me."

Dumbledore had a moment of clear and obvious shock. Harry blinked. *He didn't expect Peter to say that.*

Does he think the web can't be broken?

Dumbledore had already recovered, though, and his face was beyond stern. It reminded Harry of the face he'd seen in the Pensieve memory, when Dumbledore had come to Godric's Hollow to bind him. "Certain choices cannot be changed, Peter. I told you this when I gave you the web. Still you swore to me that you wanted it, that you were doing this of your own free will."

"You never gave Harry that choice," said Peter. "And that *sickens* me."

Dumbledore shook his head. His power was rising around him, and Harry knew that he would attempt to break through the *Protego* shield in a moment. "Harry had his choice and his chance. It was only the greatest of misfortunes that led him to question it. It was damage Tom Riddle wrought to his mind that led him to question it. He is only wavering in his duty because he was wounded, Peter. You must realize that." He looked past Peter and caught Harry's eye. "If his mind were whole, he would know his duty and he would be happy."

"The web would have stayed buried," said Peter. "How young did you put it on him? It must have been—"

"Four," said Harry, since he thought he could speak now instead of utter a wordless scream. His head still hurt as though

someone had tried to flatten it, and the magic was still curling around inside him, snarling and making little forays against the limits of his control every now and again, but he thought he could say this. "I was four."

Peter didn't look at him, but Harry could see the sudden stiffness in his shoulders and guess at the expression on his face. "Four," he said, his voice utterly flat.

Dumbledore probably thought there was nothing to be gained from speaking any more. His next attack was a hammer sent at the *Protego* shield. Harry had never felt such force behind any one spell. It was like a battering ram.

He reacted instinctively, the way that Snape had taught him to escape from such strong attacks in Occlumency. He grabbed Peter and rolled to the side, letting the Shield Charm splinter. The force of the hammer went through and sent rubble flying from the wall. Harry stared at it a moment.

He knew Dumbledore was in precise control of his power. He was sure the spell would have stopped before destroying him, because Dumbledore didn't want him dead.

It would have killed Peter.

Harry had had enough. He pushed at Peter, to get him further down the corridor, and then faced Dumbledore. "*Haurio!*" he said firmly, holding up one hand up.

A green shield spread from his palm and fingers, and then grew further, engulfing both him and Peter. This should absorb any magic Dumbledore threw at them, Harry thought. And it would give Peter time to run.

When he turned, he realized that Peter didn't have any intention of running. He was trying to get around or see around the green shield, probably so he could fling some more insults or accusations at Dumbledore.

"Get *out* of here, for Merlin's sake," Harry snapped, shoving at him and resisting the temptation to make a very Snapeish remark about dumb Gryffindors who wasted all their wits charging into battle.

"I want—"

"You can't tell me anything or protect me or whatever you came to do if you're dead." Harry shoved him again.

Peter paused for a moment, and then a faint smile flitted across his face. "You're right," he said. "Thank you for trusting me, Harry." A moment later, he'd changed back into a rat and was gone, scampering down the hall in a mad flight for his life. Harry spared a moment to hope that he wouldn't run across Mrs. Norris.

He turned his attention back to the shield. Dumbledore was still stronger, and was using that power in a very unrefined way, the same kind of raw force that Harry had used to break the windows and heal himself at Malfoy Manor, without channeling the magic through spells. Harry knew he could do the same thing.

He wanted to do the same thing. His rage, at least, would have been happy with him if he did.

But he remembered Hogwarts, and Remus's voice echoing in his head, saying that one had to consider the wills of others when considering whether a spell was Dark or Light. If he destroyed the school, as would happen if he let his magic fly now, how would that make him better than Voldemort?

He maintained the shield a moment longer, then dropped it and rolled out of the way. He still felt wind catch him and slam him hard into the wall, but though he was bruised, Harry knew he hadn't broken anything. He knew what a broken rib felt like, thanks to Quirrell's *Crucio* spell from first year. He got to his feet at once, and met Dumbledore's eyes.

They were still calm. Harry envied him for that—that he could call on his magic like that and not be incapacitated by the sheer fury it took.

"Where is Wormtail?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. As if I would tell you even if I did," he added, with a snort.

Dumbledore inclined his head slightly. "Now that I know Pettigrew has been sighted on school property, I have no choice but to accede to the Ministry's request and let the Dementors guard Hogwarts. They will find Pettigrew if anyone can."

“You could at least call him Peter, like I do,” said Harry, and rubbed his aching head.

“I hope that you will have occasion to avoid calling him anything in the future.” Dumbledore’s voice was a knife now. “That was foolish of you, my dear boy, very foolish. How could you put your life in danger protecting him like that? How could you believe his lies? He would have hurt your brother, killed him if he could. He was the one who betrayed your parents and lied to them, saying that their sons had been taken elsewhere, so that Voldemort could enter Godric’s Hollow unopposed.”

Harry shook his head. “I know. I know.” It was all confused and tangled in his head. Even if Peter had done what he had done on Dumbledore’s orders, did that mean he was any less to blame? He had still put Connor in danger.

But Dumbledore was the one who put him in danger in the first place, and when he should have been protecting him.

Harry looked up as Dumbledore sighed. “Come with me, Harry. We can check you for traces of a Confounding Charm. I fear that Pettigrew might have been charming you into believing his stories.”

Harry set his teeth. “I didn’t say that I believed him absolutely, not yet. But I don’t trust you, either.”

Dumbledore had the gall to look shocked, as though that were the last thing he would have expected. He opened his mouth to say something else, but a spell abruptly struck past him and hit the wall. From its color, Harry suspected it had been a Jelly-Legs Jinx.

He turned, staring, to see Millicent Bulstrode standing at the end of the hall, lowering her wand. She was blinking innocently at Dumbledore.

“Oh, I’m *so* sorry, Headmaster,” she said. “I didn’t know that was you. Of course you wouldn’t have hurt Harry. I just saw a threat standing over him, so I attacked without thinking.” She trotted forward, making a variety of soothing noises that Harry wouldn’t have believed could come out of her throat, just as simpering and wide-eyed as Pansy could act. She put one arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Come on, Harry, let’s get you to the hospital wing. You *poor* thing. It looked like it hurt when you hit the wall. And it looked like you had an enemy. That’s too bad, but you should take comfort. You always have less of them than you think. And your enemies might have more.” As she spoke the last words, she was looking straight at Dumbledore.

The Headmaster simply looked back at her. He stood where he was as Millicent escorted Harry in the direction of the hospital wing. He tolerated the pretense until they were around the corner, then tried to shake her arm off. “I’m fine, Millicent,” he said.

“Of course,” said Millicent. “That’s why you’re pale and quivering like a pudding. And of course *fine* people are always clutching their heads, and smell like a thunderstorm.”

Harry guiltily snatched his hand from his head, then paused. “I do *not* smell like a thunderstorm.”

“To me, you do,” said Millicent. “The Bulstrode trick, you know. It smelled like the mother of all storms in there. And you need the hospital wing and bed, Harry. It’s not every day that your own Headmaster tries to kill you.”

“He doesn’t want *me* dead,” said Harry, and then regretted the emphasis he’d put on the word as Millicent gave him a sidelong glance. “Now what are you going to do? And give me a straight answer for once.”

“What, and watch you die of shock?” Millicent mocked him, but she obliged him. “Someone’s been talking to us, someone who goes by the name of Starborn. He said we should watch you, that you could be a far more useful ally to us than we had suspected.” She smiled like a cat stretching. “And you *are*, Harry. You outfaced Dumbledore. Now our families have a real choice. They don’t have to go crawling back to the insane followers trying to put the Dark Lord back together or obey Dumbledore, whom none of them trust not to compel them. They can follow you.”

“I’m going to be protecting Connor,” said Harry flatly. “So you’ll be really following him.”

Millicent patted him on the head. “Aren’t you cute,” she said.

Harry remained silent the rest of the way to the hospital wing, but didn’t feel much better, since Millicent settled for knowing sideways smiles when she couldn’t get him to talk. Madam Pomfrey got one look at him and put him to bed with a Strengthening Potion and a Calming Draught. Harry drank them in resignation and lay back in his bed, staring at the ceiling.

Do something, Ron said. Well, I fucking did something.

Now I just wish I knew what the hell it was. And I wish I could tell someone that I'm not going to be a leader or compel anyone and have them believe me.

He sighed and closed his eyes.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Nine: Gifts At Autumn's Turning

"Because," said Millicent, giving him a strange look, "the rest of us had seen the way you reacted when someone told you that you had power. There was the way you reacted when you thought that we might prefer you to your brother. There was the way that you didn't *want* to win that race we set you up to win last year—"

"Oh, Millicent, do be fair," said Pansy, who was sprawled on one of the divans in front of the hearth in the Slytherin common room. She opened her eyes and smiled at Harry though the mess of blonde hair covering her face. "Harry won that race on his own merits, didn't you, Harry?"

"I certainly hope so," said Harry, glancing back and forth from one girl to another. "But..." He trailed off, unable to express just what he thought.

Millicent shrugged at him. "Like it or not, you do have a tradition of refusing to live up to your potential, Harry. If we'd tried to talk to you about it, or talk you through it, we thought we'd just get another speech about your brother being the powerful one and could we all shut up now and blah blah blah." She laughed, and Harry caught a glimpse of how genuinely happy she was. The laughter was without a hint of mockery, despite what she'd just said. "We didn't know that this time you might have been willing to listen because you sensed your own magic. So we just started doing the practical thing—attending to our own needs, and waiting for you to catch up or wake up."

"Those 'needs' don't really include orbiting around me, though," said Harry, leaning back on the couch at last. He was still tired, though he'd been out of the hospital wing since early Saturday, and it was Sunday evening now. Now, at least, he knew why the Slytherins hadn't told him about the power Ron had sensed, and it was a reason he believed. "There's no *reason* that you have to choose me as leader, or whatever other insane plan you had in mind."

Millicent shrugged. "Your magic," she said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

Harry shook his head. "Voldemort and Dumbledore have more than raw magical power, you know that. You'd be safer with one of them, if you really wanted protection from the other one." It struck him as somewhat ludicrous that he was encouraging some of his Housemates to follow the Dark Lord, but pureblood politics often ended up being like this, the same way that Lucius had been proud last year when his son had out-danced him.

"Of course we know that," said Millicent. "And we also know that they have established principles that are going to wreck and destroy the way we are."

Harry peered at her. "I thought Voldemort was all about defending pureblood ideals."

"Pureblood ideals aren't about killing Muggles," said Pansy. "They're about staying away from them, maybe. But—listen, Harry, my mother was a Death Eater. You must know that by now." She sat up and stared at him. "And you're helping her anyway."

Harry glanced away. "And don't think I haven't asked myself why I'm doing it," he muttered. How *could* he brew the Wolfsbane Potion for a woman who had set the blood of several witches and wizards boiling until it scalded them alive from the inside? He didn't know, so he kept his eyes on his hands when he made the Potion, and not on the mirror that Snape kept in his office for the purpose of preparing some of the more obscure brews.

"You're *doing* it," said Pansy. "That's the important thing. And you didn't demand some kind of sacrifice from my mother."

"I demanded some things from her," said Harry, glaring at her.

"I know," said Pansy patiently. "But they weren't sacrifices. They were an equal bargain. That's the *difference*, Harry.

Dumbledore would sacrifice us, or want to, if we went to him. That's what he has a habit of doing." Her eyes flashed viciously. "And the Dark Lord asks for more than sacrifices. By the time he's done, there's no one left to give anything more."

"Doesn't that make it sound as though Dumbledore is the one you should be asking for help, then?" Harry pointed out.

Pansy gave him a flat stare. "No," she said.

Harry shook his head. "I can't help you," he said. "Not much. I'm *thirteen*. I'm still not as strong as Dumbledore. I'm going to follow and serve my brother. My magic is making everyone uneasy right now, not content."

"And do you know why?" Millicent asked, her hand plucking at a blanket someone had slung along the back of her chair.

Harry shook his head.

"Because it *appeared*," said Millicent. "Or so it seems. Powerful wizards don't just walk out of the broom closet every day, you know—oh, sorry, here I am, rather got lost for a while."

Harry frowned. She was mocking him again. "And so?"

"So they're rushing around like a Pegasus with a gadfly up its arse," said Millicent bluntly, "trying to figure out what to do. And sooner or later they're going to calm down, and then they're going to start asking questions. And one of those questions is going to be why they couldn't sense your magic before, why it burst out at full strength instead of building slowly for years. If it had just built naturally, if everyone knew you were powerful over time instead of suddenly, then they wouldn't panic. They'd just acknowledge that sooner or later they'd have to deal with you, and go about their lives. But this—" She shook her head. "Harry, this *doesn't happen*. It won't be long before you hear people whispering *unnatural*, and wondering if this is a side effect of your possession from last year, and all kinds of other things."

Harry closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead with one hand. *Another thing to thank Dumbledore for, I suppose*. "Ron suggested that I make some kind of announcement to the wizarding world, telling them I don't plan to do anything evil, and outlining what I do plan to do," he said. "Would that work?"

"Trust a *Gryffindor* to come up with that kind of plan," said Pansy. "Of *course* it wouldn't work. For one thing, it'd make you seem weak, as if you were conceding to the Ministry, when you don't need to. For another, why should you have to declare all your principles and allegiances right now? Tell them to go talk to your parents, and go right on living. And brewing my mother's Wolfsbane Potion," she added.

"But I thought that I had to do something," said Harry. "Otherwise, the Ministry will start trying to take me away from my parents, and—"

"Oh, they'll make *noises* about it, sure," said Millicent, waving one hand. "But they can't do anything unless they find out that your parents actually abused you." She stared at him. "And they'd probably prefer to leave you right where you are. They don't want to split apart the family of the Boy-Who-Lived, after all."

Harry nodded. He'd seen the headlines in the *Prophet* lately, the ones that swirled around Connor's every minor doing as if it were proof that he was about to drop dead or save the world. There had been a front-page article on the fact that Connor had argued with Ron the other day. "Then all that I need to do is hide—"

He cut himself off abruptly. He sometimes forgot, in the sheer camaraderie of speaking Slytherin to Slytherin, that only Draco and Snape knew any details about his home life.

"Hide what?" Millicent asked. "Your magic? I don't think you can, not now."

Harry shook his head and glanced away from her too-sharp eyes. "Nothing."

"So long as the 'nothing' doesn't interfere with anything you need to do," said Pansy, standing up and yawning. "I'm going to bed."

Harry nodded to her and watched her go to the third-year girls' dorm, then turned to find Millicent still watching him.

"Draco's not the only Slytherin who can watch, you know," she said. "And I don't need strange books from my mother to

help me notice things. I notice things, Harry. The way you forced down so many emotions last year. That almost slavish devotion you have to your brother. How you immediately leaped to thinking about consequences for your power, instead of just glorying in the fact that you have it. How you went home with the Malfoys last summer, and your parents didn't object."

"I know you notice things, Millicent," said Harry, yawning himself. "But I'm not going to tell you anything."

"I'll make you a bargain," said Millicent. "One piece of information from you, and in return I'll teach you a spell that will make sure Dumbledore can never try the trick he pulled last night."

Harry eyed her warily. "Why would you know a spell like that?"

Millicent shrugged. "My mother works with the goblins at Gringotts. She knows most of the spells they use to determine which coins are real and which are false." She smiled abruptly. "You wouldn't believe how many wizards and witches think they're the first to have the brilliant idea of counterfeiting Galleons."

Harry closed his eyes. A spell like that would presumably help with the illusion that Dumbledore had been under.

He *had* thought of a way to deal with Dumbledore on his own, but it wouldn't cover every instance, and it certainly wouldn't cover Dumbledore putting a glamour on someone else and sending him after Harry.

"All right," he said, opening his eyes. "I think about consequences for my power because that's the way I was raised, studying history and magic from the youngest age possible. I've read about the First War, and I've seen what happens when wizards don't watch out and just lose their power in any random direction they want to. And since I've been here, I've had the example of Dumbledore's magic to remind me every day of that."

He wondered if Millicent would demand more, but she just nodded at him and held out her wand. "The spell is *Aspectus Lyncis*," she said, "the Lynx Sight spell." She showed him the wand passes he had to perform, and intoned it carefully, her voice stressing the second syllable of the first word and the first syllable of the second. Harry nodded, and then performed it himself, being careful to use his wand. He was still trying to get his magic used to using that first, instead of flying all over the place.

He blinked when several wards flickered into sight, positioned around the Slytherin common room. All of them had the trace of Dumbledore's power around them. Harry frowned and decided that he would study them later as a jaw-cracking yawn nearly sent him from the couch.

"Good night, Harry," said Millicent, standing up with a faint smile. "I'll see you tomorrow. And remember—not everyone who wants to follow you or who's interested in you is only doing it because of power."

Harry just blinked at her as she went up to the girls' dorm, and then went to his own room. Vince, Blaise, and Greg were already asleep. Draco was lying on his back, reading a book by the look of the *Lumos* spell through the curtains, but he didn't respond when Harry softly called out to him.

Harry shook his head and put his pyjamas on. *If he wants to ignore me, that's just fine. I can ignore him right back.*

But, he admitted as he crawled into his own bed and drew the curtains closed, it *did* hurt.

Harry took a deep breath and added the final drop of sphinx blood. The potion stirred briefly, as though it would reach up out of its cauldron and bite him, and then fell back. It began to steam at once. Harry stepped back and looked at Snape.

Snape nodded, once. Harry let the breath out. *One Wolfsbane Potion, correctly brewed.*

"I'm going to take this to Pansy," said Harry quietly, as he began fetching vials, and dipping them into the cauldron. "She'll want to owl her mother at once, I think—"

Snape shook his head. "The Red Death is waiting for you at the edge of the Forbidden Forest," he said calmly, as he turned back to the cauldron he was brewing for Remus. "She owled me this morning and told me so."

Harry stared at his back for a moment, blinking, then said, "Why did she tell you that?"

Snape spoke without looking at him. “It seems that she wanted to make peace with me, once she knew that you would be brewing the potion under my direction.” He had a smile in his voice. Harry knew from the sound that it was a nasty smile. “So easy, after all, to settle a long-time grudge with a little poison in the wrong place. And this is a complicated potion, very easy to get wrong.”

Harry nodded uneasily. “And she knew that this would be the day I finished the potion?”

“She apparently has people watching you,” said Snape blandly, as he added another pinch of demiguise hair to his own potion and stirred it once. “I can’t imagine why.”

Harry cursed under his breath and continued filling and corking vials. He thought longingly of Connor’s Invisibility Cloak, then shook his head. Connor was making use of it right now, sneaking outside the walls to meet Sirius in the old Shrieking Shack. Besides, he didn’t think his brother would want him using the cloak to go and meet a former Death Eater specializing in blood curses.

“Harry.”

Harry glanced up, startled, to find Snape watching him. He had a faint smile on his face. It could have come from anything.

“Well done,” said Snape.

It took Harry a moment to realize why that sounded so familiar to him. Snape had told him the same thing at the end of first year, when he had told the story of fighting Voldemort to him under Veritaserum.

Harry shook his head, unwilling to visit the bitterness that still remained in him about that incident, and slipped out the door, holding the corked vials of potion close.

Luckily, no one was there to see him as he slipped up the dungeon stairs and across the entrance hall, though he did pause briefly to let Percy Weasley go by. The boy was hurrying along with his head bowed, muttering to himself. Harry hesitated when he heard him saying, “But how *could* I do anything that would hurt my family?” but decided it was none of his business. He would hardly want Percy sticking his nose into Harry’s private wonderings about Connor, after all.

He cast the Disillusionment Charm on himself as he emerged from the school. It was a pleasant evening, the wind brisk but not cold, the leaves on the trees that edged the Forbidden Forest just beginning to turn. Harry briefly turned his head in the direction of the Whomping Willow that hid the Shrieking Shack, and wished that he could be there with his brother, helping him train.

Sirius does that well enough, he reminded himself, as he skirted Hagrid’s hut and headed deeper into the trees. *And you’d only make him uncomfortable anyway, since you’re so uncomfortable yourself around compulsion magic.*

That was another thing he would have to train himself out of, Harry reflected as he reached the edge of the Forest and began to scan carefully for Mrs. Parkinson. Connor was his beloved brother. No rift must ever come between them, either in reality or in appearance. Harry had been through that, and he didn’t *want* it to happen again, but it would if Harry insisted on being uncomfortable around compulsion magic. He didn’t have to be. Dumbledore had used it harmfully, but Dumbledore was not his twin. Harry was sure that Connor could do much more productive things with it.

He caught a glimpse of a dark cloak beneath one tree edged with leaves like fire, and halted. While he watched, the cloak moved again, and he caught a flash of pale hair he was sure was Hawthorn Parkinson’s.

He dispelled the Charm, and heard the woman’s soft exclamation before she stifled it. Then she came forward and held out her hand wordlessly, and Harry placed the vials of the Wolfsbane Potion into her palm.

Hawthorn studied him, her hazel eyes quick and bright. She looked better than the last time Harry had seen her, though he supposed that might be because it was further from the full moon. She still appeared tired, but there was a resolve, a fire, in her that Harry had seen in Pansy when her blood was up.

“Thank you,” said Hawthorn at last, and then shook her head. “I wish I had something else to say. Thank you is an inadequate word for what you have done for me. The transformation was not so painful as the madness that followed, in which I lost every trace of the witch I am. I would pay much not to have to suffer it again.”

“What you promised me before is all I require,” said Harry fiercely. “That you stay away from Fenrir Greyback and his

attempts to raise the Dark Lord, or whatever it is that he's doing."

Hawthorn nodded once. "That is all you require, but it is not enough to settle my sense of a debt," she said. "Have you heard of Starborn?"

Harry blinked. "Millicent mentioned him. She said that he's been telling you to watch me."

Hawthorn smiled. It was a strange smile. Harry wondered about it. "Indeed," she murmured. "He has had an opportunity to observe you closely, and he has liked what he had seen." She reached under her cloak, and Harry tensed, his magic rising in readiness around him, but instead of her wand, she tugged out a book, which she held towards Harry. Harry accepted it and tilted it towards the moonlight.

He caught his breath. *Bindings of Magic*, the title said, a book that Merlin himself was supposed to have written. He looked up at Hawthorn in wonder. "I thought this was destroyed."

Hawthorn shrugged. "Well, it is hardly an original; it is a copy of a copy, and there may be some errors in it. But, errors or not, there are many things in there that most modern wizards believe about compulsion magic, webs, and other forms of binding."

Harry frowned at her at the mention of webs, and Hawthorn winked. "As I said," she murmured, "Starborn has had the opportunity to observe you *very* closely." She tilted her head and laid her fingers over her lips. "And he is no friend of Dumbledore's," she added softly.

Harry took a deep breath and looked back at the book in his hands. For all that he knew Hawthorn must have ulterior motives for giving it to him, this was a priceless gift, since he knew it spoke of the many ancient kinds of magical bindings that might tie wizards together, such as life debts and sacrifices of love, and included the basis of more modern kinds of magic. It might contain the information that he needed to free himself completely from the phoenix web; in fact, if any single book in the world did, this one would.

"Thank you," he whispered. "I don't think you only did this to repay the debt, but thank you."

Hawthorn smiled faintly at him. "You are right," she said. "Pansy has been writing to me, and Starborn has been writing to me, and there is a crystal phoenix in my home which sings when great power comes into the world. It has sung since the end of last spring. It is a relief to meet you at last." She bowed her head slightly. "At the same time, you might not be the kind of leader we need. Raw power proves nothing."

"What about a lack of taste for leadership?"

Hawthorn smiled again, more fully this time. "So that part was true," she said. "Well, Starborn has written me about that, too. I do not believe you are the kind of wizard who would grasp at enslaving others."

"Tell that to the Ministry," muttered Harry, tucking *Bindings of Magic* into a pocket of his robes.

Hawthorn's smile widened still further. "When you do what you must for love and duty," she said, "as I believe you will, they will have no choice but to see it."

She turned and slipped back into the Forbidden Forest before Harry had the chance to ask her any more. He sighed, frowned at nothing, and slipped away himself, back to the castle.

The book rode in his pocket, calling his thoughts.

She was wrong. This book doesn't repay her debt. It makes me owe her a greater one.

"I have to know," said Millicent, as they sat at breakfast on the first day of autumn. Harry jumped a bit; he'd been thinking more about what he read in *Bindings of Magic* the night before than he was about the people around him. He glanced at her, only to find her motioning to the staff table. "What did you do to Dumbledore, that he hardly dares to look at you any more?"

Harry grinned and glanced in Dumbledore's direction. The Headmaster was keeping his eyes strictly on his food.

“A variation on a mirror spell,” said Harry happily. “When he looks at me and thinks about casting spells on me, the spells start affecting him instead. If he was thinking about putting me in a full body-bind, for example, he would start feeling his legs go paralyzed.” He happily bit into a pumpkin pasty.

He looked up to find Pansy and Millicent exchanging glances. “What?” he asked.

“That shouldn’t be *possible*,” said Pansy frankly. “A shield that bounces spells when they’re active, sure. But not when he’s just thinking about them.”

“Well, it’s not when he’s just thinking about them, I told you,” said Harry, talking through his pasty. He ignored the girls’ looks of disgust. It was part of his cunning campaign to discourage them from thinking of him as a leader. He could be subtly Slytherin, too. Or maybe he was just hungry. *I wonder if part of being Slytherin is learning to lie to yourself, too.* “It’s when he looks at me and thinks about them. The sight aspect is important.”

“It’s still incredible,” said Millicent. “Not many students can invent spells like that, you know.”

“It’s a variation on the mirror spells,” Harry insisted. “I didn’t make it up.” Perhaps talking with his mouth full wasn’t enough to discourage them. He wondered if talking willingly to Gryffindors other than his brother and Neville would.

“Yes, but—“

A sudden ruffle of wings announced the arrival Harry had been waiting for—though he had half-wondered if Lucius had given up, now. *No*, he thought, as he tilted his head back and watched the great horned owl, Julius, sweeping once around the Great Hall before he descended on the Slytherin table.

Harry reached out, curious, to take the bundle from Julius’s leg. There were two possible gifts that Lucius could choose for this autumnal equinox gift, since it was the last one in the year-cycle he’d chosen. The next, Yuletide gift would mark a year since he had been truce-dancing with Harry. *This* one was the point where he had to choose to take the truce down one of two paths: the continuation to a true pact, or the graceful backing-out, both of which would take another year. Harry was almost certain he would back out, but even then, the gift this time would be both beautiful and useful.

His breath caught when the bundle opened and a small mirror fell out. He picked it up with trembling hands, and tilted it back and forth. As he suspected, it showed not his face, but the view from a similar mirror in Malfoy Manor, which bent and skewed as he turned his own glass. When he concentrated, he could push his gaze and attention through that mirror, and out from the room it hung in, and conjure a floating, present-time vision of any corridors and rooms in Malfoy Manor.

Lucius had granted Harry license to see into his home, the private sanctum of his family. More than that, he could look at any time he wanted, and see whether plots against him were taking place.

Lucius intended to continue the truce dance.

Harry managed to breathe again, with a massive effort, and picked up the note that had come with the mirror.

Mr. Potter:

In light of the regard I bear you, on this first day of autumn, may you step past the barriers between us that are falling like leaves.

Lucius Malfoy.

Harry put the mirror down gently on the table. He swallowed once. He knew what the proper answer would be: a mirror that allowed Lucius to see into his own home.

Into Godric’s Hollow.

If he chose to continue this dance. Harry would have to think about that carefully. His relationship with Narcissa and Draco—even with Draco as distant and strange as he was now—was far different than Lucius’s relationship with his parents and Connor.

“That’s a princely gift,” said Pansy, shattering the awe.

“I know,” said Harry simply, and tucked the mirror into a pocket. He watched as Julius took wing again and flew through the window.

He glanced down the table, but Draco had his nose buried in one of his mother’s books again, the one with the Guile serpent on the front, and was ignoring Harry. Harry smothered his flicker of irritation. *You have no right to be irritated with him. You didn’t treat him very well when you had his attention.*

He stood, ready to make his way to the first class of the day, History of Magic. He was looking forward to the chance to sleep while Binns droned his way through history Harry already knew by heart. He’d had the dream of the two dark figures last night—one screaming in a cramped space, one writhing on a bed and whimpering—for the first time in a long time. He’d lain awake after that, tense, waiting for an attack from Tom Riddle before he finally figured out it wasn’t coming and fell asleep again. By then it’d been almost dawn, and Blaise had had to threaten to dump cold water on him to get him out of bed.

He was just about to leave the hall when he heard a loud cry and a sound of shattering glass. Eyes wide, he turned back to see Snape on his back on the Hufflepuff table, one hand on his wand.

Clutching his throat, and making it impossible for him to get his wand up and cast a spell, was Sirius.

He was snarling, yelling words that Harry couldn’t make out, so choked as they were with spittle and rage. Snape replied in a much clearer voice, despite the grip on his throat. “Have you lost your *mind*, Black? That never happened!”

“Yes, it did,” said Sirius, more clearly this time, “and you are going to *apologize*.” He abruptly transformed, and now it was a huge black dog with its teeth near Snape’s throat. There was a long moment of trembling tension, and Harry knew Sirius would bite. He might well tear Snape’s throat out.

He started to call on his magic, but Snape must have managed a nonverbal, wandless curse. Padfoot abruptly went flying backwards, smashing into the wall behind the Gryffindor table and tumbling down it. Connor was on his feet, face red with fury and wand out and aimed at Snape.

“*Enough.*”

Harry felt the wave of compulsion that attacked the Great Hall, similar to the time last year when Dumbledore had calmed the other students after Harry admitted to being a Parselmouth. He felt it worming into his mind, and closed his eyes. He didn’t have Sylarana to root Dumbledore out this time, but he knew the Headmaster was there, which was an advantage he hadn’t had last year, and he had his Occlumency shields and his utter hatred of the Headmaster to sustain him.

I may not be able to face you on the battlefield yet, he thought. Connor might still need any protection you can give him, and it isn’t time to make you answer for endangering him yet. But it will be.

He threw off the compulsion a moment later, and he opened his eyes to see Snape looking similarly disgruntled. But everyone else was calm—

Until Sirius, who had transformed back into a man, began to sob.

Harry stared at his godfather. He looked like a trembling, broken shell, as though he and not Peter was the one who had gone to Azkaban for twelve years. He hid his face from everyone else and wept as though his heart was breaking. Connor, visibly shocked, started to step towards him.

“Severus, Sirius,” said Dumbledore, his voice implacable, “please follow me to my office at once.” He nodded at the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables. “I am sorry to deprive the third-years of their teacher for Potions class, but it should be for only one morning.” He swept out the door.

Snape followed a moment later. Sirius picked himself up and stumbled, sobbing, along behind.

Harry stood frozen. He wanted to go after them, to figure out what the hell had happened, but Millicent was tugging on his arm.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Professor Snape will tell you later.”

Harry had to admit that was probably true, and anyway, he didn’t think he could be in the same small room with Dumbledore safely right now. He forced his feet to move, to carry him out of the Great Hall.

He might have gone to Connor, too, but a whole horde of Gryffindors had descended on him. He had to trust that his brother would be all right.

Harry closed his eyes and breathed, carefully dealing with the anger, and the unexpected source of the anger.

I'm furious with him. I'm furious with Sirius for assaulting Snape.

Shouldn't it really be the other way around?

He wondered, gloomily, what new and disturbing discoveries about himself this portended.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ten: Memories, Such Haunting Memories

Snape had been passing the Hufflepuff table, on his way to the dungeons to teach his morning Potions class, when Black had assaulted him.

And that is what it was, he reminded himself, subtly shifting his robe and wincing at the cuts and scores and scratches that ran down his back under the cloth. He'd heard cups shatter, and probably a few plates. Black was going to *pay* for wounding him in that manner, and Dumbledore was going to pay for hurrying him out of the Great Hall in such an undignified manner that Snape had had no chance to subtly heal himself.

For now, he kept his glare on Dumbledore's back and his stride swift and even. He would leave the wounds for evidence, if he needed them, of how unstable Black had gone.

Not that it matters, he thought briefly, his glance darting back to scour the man who followed them. *I know I will only hear some excuse for the instability, and some half-hearted apology, and a scolding for not being more tolerant, and that will be the end of it. Black is Dumbledore's Golden Boy, has been ever since that damned Hat touched his head and shouted him for Gryffindor. Why should things have changed?*

Yet he had dared to hope that things *had* changed, since he had contacted Black over the summer and asked him to formally dissolve the bet they'd made over Harry last year, since they had both acted like school-children. Black, sober and earnest—

For once.

--had accepted immediately, apologized, and said that he would tell Harry about the bet ending. When the boy came back to Hogwarts and made no mention of it, Snape had assumed that Black had kept his word.

Now, he wondered.

Is that why he said what he did? Accused me of trying to murder his godson?

Frowning, shaking his head, Snape hardly noticed when they arrived at Dumbledore's gargoyle, and didn't remember the password the Headmaster called to let them past it. Of course, he thought, that hardly mattered. He was not in the habit of visiting Dumbledore any more.

He wondered if the Headmaster had really noticed it, or what it meant. *You are a fool if you do not, Albus. The purebloods are spinning around a new star. They don't know what he means to do now, but that may not matter, not if they convince themselves that he could do something. You intended to use his brother as a figurehead, Albus. Instead, you have someone distinctly different on your hands, someone close to growing into a true leader.*

But he cleared his mind of that as they arrived in the Headmaster's office and Dumbledore turned around with that gentle smile Snape had grown to know and loathe. "Sirius, Severus," he said. "Please take a seat."

It was not a request, for all that he made it sound like one, and Snape felt the iron edge of the same compulsion that had attacked the Great Hall, pressing him towards one of the chairs. He shook it off and sat down on his own. Black shuffled towards his and half-collapsed into it, looking like an old man.

"Now, Sirius," said Dumbledore, sitting down behind his desk and turning an anxious, fond glance on Black, "tell me what

happened.”

“I don’t remember,” Black whispered.

Oh, I do not believe that, Snape thought, raising an eyebrow.

Neither did Dumbledore, apparently. “Sirius,” he said, as though scolding a child.

Black broke again, and began to weep. Snape curled his lip and looked away. He had seen grown pureblood wizards weep, but only under the influence of the Cruciatus and similar curses. Even if Black had realized the incredible worthlessness of his continued existence and was going to beg the Headmaster to end it all for him, he could have shown a little more dignity.

At last, Black drew himself together, and whispered, “I—I could see it all so clearly. I remembered Snivellus trying to kill Harry last year.”

Snape narrowed his eyes. *He said he would try to put aside that stupid nickname.* Anger stirred in him, against Black and against himself, for being so stupid as to believe that anything Black said was true. *I see the way things stand now. You are my enemy, Black, and I see no value in trying to keep peace with you, even for Harry’s sake. I would take pleasure in removing him from you now. If you died, I would dance on your grave.*

The depth of his hatred was sustaining, comforting. This was the same man who had tried to send him to his death when they were both sixteen, and not in the name of Dumbledore’s war with the Dark Lord. Snape wondered that Dumbledore would even try to protect someone so weak, so flawed by his grudges that he could not see past them. He certainly could not use him in his endless war, so what was the point?

He realized it again as he watched Dumbledore lean forward across his desk, gently coaxing Black to speak. *He is a pureblood wizard from a Dark line, who was placed in the House that Dumbledore thinks is the House of Light. Black is his little pet redemption project. Of course he would try to spare him anything he could, and not hold him to those standards of conduct that any other reasonable adult wizard would be expected to obey.*

“Tell me about Severus trying to kill Harry,” Dumbledore whispered. “Come now, Sirius, you can do it.”

Snape rolled his eyes, but sat still.

“He was standing over him with his wand,” Black whispered, in between the sobs. “He said that he really served the Dark Lord, and that he was going to send Harry’s soul to join the soul of his dead master. Then he fired a Killing Curse at him, but it rebounded, just the way that it rebounded from—from his brother.” Black huddled into himself and covered his face with his hands.

Dumbledore turned to look at him. Snape wanted to rage at the doubt on his face.

How dare you look at me that way, Albus, after everything I have done for you? A year of spying, a year of giving up people who believed in the same things I once had, a year of walking in constant fear of discovery, a year of committing murder and torture on your commands? Don’t you owe me more than that?

Probably last year, Dumbledore would have felt he did, Snape realized abruptly. But since Snape had confronted him over what he had done to Harry, their relationship had been strained to the breaking point. He no longer trusted Dumbledore not to hurt a child. Perhaps the Headmaster did not trust him in exactly the same way.

He kept his voice a lazy drawl, his eyes half-shuttered. “Do you really believe, Albus, that if I had been hit by a deflected Killing Curse, that I would be here now? Such a spell destroyed the Dark Lord, who was a much more powerful wizard than I am. And what was my motive for trying to kill Harry Potter? Do tell me that.”

“I told you,” said Black, jerking his head up. His face was caught in a snarl, his features twisted into something barely human. “You’re a Death Eater, Snivellus. You were trying to kill Harry so that you could bring your master back.”

“From the story you told, it sounds like this imaginary wizard you saw was trying to take vengeance for the Dark Lord instead.” Snape sneered.

Black passed a hand over his face. His eyes had such heavy dark circles under them that Snape wondered, in a detached way, when he had last slept. “I—that’s what I meant. That’s right.”

“It is *not* right,” said Snape, wondering that anyone could believe this idiocy. “Headmaster, with your permission, I would like to leave this room. I cannot believe these ridiculous accusations. I cannot believe that I should be subjected to them.”

“This was grave enough for Sirius to attack you in the Great Hall, in front of the students, Severus,” Dumbledore said, his eyes unsmiling. “You will stay.” He turned and looked at Sirius again. “If this happened last year, Sirius, why didn’t you attack him then? Or come and report the incident to me?”

Black’s face turned dead white.

Oh, yes, do tell him, Snape thought, folding his arms across his chest and staring back at him. *Do tell him that. I must admit, I am curious to learn how this imaginary version of me got away as well.*

“I—it was wiped out of my mind the next day,” Black whispered. “They made me forget. Someone wanted me to forget.”

Dumbledore sighed. “And now the Memory Charm has snapped? That would account for your behavior, Sirius, but you still should have come to me first, instead of attacking Severus.”

Black seized on the explanation fervently. “Yes, yes, the *Obliviate* broke,” he said, his head bobbing up and down on his neck like a puppet’s. “And now the memories are flooding me, and I’m sorry, Albus, but it was just too much to take. They flooded me all at once, and I had to try to kill him for what he’d done to Harry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I should have come to you first, but I didn’t think.” Tears were leaking down his face again.

What a plainly ridiculous story, Snape thought. *I would have noticed last year if Black was under a Memory Charm of any kind, or Dumbledore would have.* He had to admit, he hadn’t noticed that that incredible fool Lockhart had used any Memory Charms, but he had used few if any while inside the school itself.

“Since I did not try to kill Harry, Black,” he said, “I am curious as to what your Obliviator would have wanted you to forget.”

Black turned towards him and gave a very dog-like snap of his teeth. Snape curled his lip. He had always found it fitting that Black’s Animagus form was a dog, since he had learned of it. Snape himself had always believed that dogs were dirty creatures, shedding and barking and smelling like wet hair when they came in out of the rain.

“How do I know that you didn’t try to kill Harry?” the fool asked belligerently. “That’s what the memory says.”

“But you are lying,” said Snape, looking directly into Black’s glare and adding a touch of Legilimency to his gaze, trying to seek out the truth in his mind. It was such a feeble lie, thought it would succeed because Dumbledore would support him in it. Snape was curious to see what Black was hiding instead.

He found absolute, howling chaos. Most wizards organized their mind in some way, as a park or a forest or a vast underground cavern. This was a raging storm, flickering lightning revealing memories that Snape barely had time to glimpse before darkness took them again, and wind that tossed him from side to side and made the normal gentle swimming motion of a Legilimens impossible.

He tore himself away and looked down at the chair, his hands clenching on the fabric. He breathed out, carefully. He did not think Black was insane, but he was very close to it. *He is dangerous. I must keep him away from Harry at all costs.*

“I am *not* lying,” Black was saying. If he had felt Snape touching his mind, he didn’t seem inclined to comment on it, and neither did Dumbledore. “That’s what the memory says.”

Snape looked up to see Dumbledore watching them across the desk. His eyes were sober, but he wasn’t interfering.

He will let Black say such ridiculous things? Then I have free rein with the truth.

“I wonder what memories you’ve put aside, Black, to put this false one in its place?” he asked, turning his attention back to his old enemy. “Memories of your godson being abused, perhaps? Memories of him turned into nothing more than a tool for his brother, memories of his mind and his magic bound and nearly shattered because someone feared his power—“ He took care not to look at Dumbledore.

“That’s *not true!*” Black was yelling, near the top of his lungs. “It’s Connor who has the power, not Harry, and Harry was never abused!”

“Tell me, then,” said Snape, “what you call being made to study advanced magic when you are a child. Tell me what you call casting curses on yourself to train yourself into weathering physical pain. Tell me what you call knowing that you will die in war protecting your brother, or stand at his shoulder wrapped in shadows if you survive. I saw all this and more in Harry’s mind last year, Black. And I saw how none of the adults who should have been his guardians and his protectors were helping him. I saw—“

“That is enough, Severus.”

Another flowing wave of compulsion, as in the Great Hall, and Snape found his mouth clamped shut. He blinked and subsided. The spell wore off immediately, and then Dumbledore was leaning forward across his desk, his eyes on fire with anger.

“You will not repeat such lies outside this office,” he said.

“They are not lies, Albus,” Snape snarled back. “You *know* they are not. You know what you did. You know whom you sacrificed.”

“You should have thought of that,” said Dumbledore, his eyes stern, “before you made another such sacrifice necessary.”

Snape had nothing to say to that. He swallowed, and felt a cold black dread building in his stomach.

“I know that you have spent long hours alone with Harry,” Dumbledore went on. “Perhaps you are only teaching him advanced Potions and spells. Perhaps not. Perhaps you truly do mean to harm him for the sake of the man who was once your master.”

“You know the truth,” said Snape again. There was a cold hollowness in the middle of him, he realized in wonder. He had not thought that Dumbledore would go this far. He had not thought that the man really was capable of such enormities.

“I know many truths,” Dumbledore replied. “And one of them is that you will not supervise any more of Harry’s detentions, nor spend any more time alone with him after class hours.”

“Under penalty...?” Snape asked. Because there had to be a threat, of course. The Headmaster would not expect him to just give up and slink away into a corner without being bested in some form or fashion.

“Under penalty of Sirius’s memory being spread to the entire school,” said Dumbledore, and his voice was heavy. “Who do you think they will believe, Severus? A former Death Eater, only spared from Azkaban by the good grace of the Headmaster of Hogwarts? Or a hero of the First War with Voldemort, a former Auror, and the godfather of the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived?”

Snape had to close his eyes, so dizzy with rage and outrage was he. “You will lose yourself a Potions teacher if you do this,” he said.

“Only if you are stupid and stubborn, Severus.” Dumbledore sounded as though he were smiling. “And I know that you are not. That is more the province of Gryffindors.” Snape opened his eyes to see him giving Black a fond look.

Caught. Trapped.

How could he let himself be stripped away as support for Harry?

On the other hand, he could do nothing for Harry if he was in Azkaban. And he knew about the panic creeping slowly through the Ministry, filtering into Hogwarts and touching the students of his House. It awaited only a spark to light the tinder. Finding out that a pardoned Death Eater had tried to kill a student, and with that student being who he was, would ignite it.

Snape thought of the others that conflagration would reach out to touch—the pureblood families, the former Slytherins who would suddenly come under intense suspicions for nothing they had done, the wizards with unusual talents who made others nervous. Minerva herself could be under suspicion in such a climate, for all that she was a Gryffindor and a hero of the First War, for nothing more unusual than being an Animagus. The wizarding world was once more in the mood to fear and hate what it did not understand.

And Harry would certainly be on that list. His power and his Parseltongue talent would make him a likely target.

If he cared about protecting him, Snape could not do that to him.

“I yield,” he said, his voice sounding hollow even to himself. “I promise that I will not speak such truths outside this office.”

“Lies, Severus,” Dumbledore reprimanded him gently. “They are not true.”

It would have been a relief to be Black in that moment, Snape thought, or any other impulsive, dunderheaded Gryffindor. It would have been a relief to have shouted, to storm at the Headmaster and call him a bastard, to pull his wand and hex everyone in sight.

But he was a Slytherin. And Slytherins retreated when they had to, and waited for the best moment to strike, when the enormous heel of a more powerful enemy was not poised to crush them.

“Very well,” he said, with what he knew was bad grace. “Lies, then.”

Dumbledore nodded, his eyes twinkling again. “Now, Severus, please return to your Potions class. I have matters to speak of with Sirius.”

Black, Snape noted as he stood, was looking hopeful again. Of course, why should he not? He had always been Dumbledore’s Golden Boy. If trying to slaughter another student in school was not enough to get him in trouble, why should attacking another teacher in the Great Hall be?

There are times I wish I had died on Lupin’s fangs, Snape thought, as he took the moving staircase back down, *if only because an enraged werewolf would bring me to a cleaner end than Albus seems intent on doing.*

The idea hit him so hard that he nearly stumbled.

An enraged werewolf...

He used all the skills he had learned as a spy to keep himself from showing emotion on his face or in his body, just in case Dumbledore was watching him through the spells Snape knew he had positioned in this staircase. He reached the bottom and strode briskly in the direction of his Potions class. He would teach them, and he would go about the other ordinary efforts of his day, and at the end of it, he would go and speak to Remus Lupin.

“Lupin,” said Snape coolly, when his knock on the werewolf’s door that evening produced said werewolf.

“Severus,” said Lupin, blinking at him. He always *had* assumed he had permission to use Snape’s first name, Snape thought as he pushed past him, and scolding him for it had always been tiring. Besides, now it would probably work to his advantage. Lupin considered them on friendlier terms than Snape himself did.

“Remus,” he said, turning around as Lupin shut the door, and noticing the brief flicker of surprise in the amber eyes. “I need your help.”

“I assumed you were here to bring me the Wolfsbane Potion,” said Lupin, frowning at him. “For what other reason do you visit?”

Snape ground his teeth. *Gryffindors. Always interested in the most inane things.* “For a reason that concerns us both, this time,” he said sharply. “Harry.”

Lupin’s eyes widened, and he rubbed the back of his neck, moving to take a seat behind his desk. It was an old and comfortable-looking piece of furniture, Snape noticed. In fact, most everything in the room looked comfortable, from the books with battered spines on the shelves to the half-stuffed chairs that flowed around the desk in a half-circle. “What about him? I trust that he hasn’t been troubling you. I know that last year he still wanted rather badly to go to Gryffindor, but I have told him that Slytherin House isn’t all that bad.”

How gracious of you, Snape almost said. He let it go. There were more important things at stake. “Tell me,” he said, “was there ever a point this year at which you seemed to lose a few days’ time?”

Lupin froze. Then he glanced hastily aside. *Trying to keep me from reading his mind*, Snape thought, and his eyes narrowed. *So he does suspect. Why hasn't he done anything about it?*

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Lupin, his voice light and neutral. "Now, Severus, if you will excuse me, I really ought to get this marking done. I'm frightfully late handing these essays back to my students as it is." He picked up the stack of scrolls near the edge of his desk.

"You suspect," Snape whispered. "Why haven't you come to me? There are ways to break a Memory Charm, you know that, and I would not have thought you one to submit tamely to an *Obliviate*, however gentle your friends may claim you to be."

Lupin's hands tightened, and he looked up. "Albus told me the truth when I asked," he said.

Thrown, Snape only stared at him.

"He told me that the memories he took from me concerned Sirius," said Lupin, and closed his eyes as if in pain. "I—sometimes I get angry at him for things he can't help, things that are over and done and in the past now. Sometimes I get angry at him for just being who he *is*. And that is not something friends should do. I always come back and apologize to him later, but this time I went further. This time I did something that hurt him so badly that Albus had no choice but to take the memories from me, so that I wouldn't go on hurting him."

Snape wanted to swear. *Black, Black, always Black! Who else has Albus sacrificed to protect him?*

With an enormous effort, he held in his temper. "Albus lied to you," he said as coolly as he could. "The stolen memories concern Harry, not Sirius."

"Harry?" Lupin frowned. "But why would he want to take away memories concerning Harry? I've always been happy with Harry. He's never done anything that made me angry."

"Not what he has done," said Snape, watching closely, "but what he has had done to him."

Lupin just went on frowning at him.

Snape shook his head. "You would not believe evil of your friends if it paraded around in front of you naked, would you?" he asked.

Lupin said, slowly, enunciating each word, "We've all made choices that we're not proud of. But I don't think any of those choices has ever—" He broke off abruptly and swallowed. Then he said, in a voice that Snape didn't understand, the voice of someone pleading for forgiveness, "I know that Harry was in danger that Halloween night when You-Know-Who attacked Godric's Hollow, but not since then. His parents would not endanger him. Sirius loves him. Tell me they haven't done something else to him, please."

Snape closed his eyes with a long hiss. *As I suspected. Simply telling him the truth will not work. His loyalty to his friends runs too deep. And I would not care if he remained Charmed, ordinarily. If Harry had not told me what his memories contained, I would not even be trying this.*

"When you have your memories back," he replied, opening his eyes, "you will see what I mean. But it takes a long time, and it is a very delicate process. Will you let me begin the first steps into your mind so that I can eventually reverse the *Obliviate* and let you see what lies behind it?"

Lupin closed his eyes. He was wrestling with the desire to know the truth, Snape thought. But he wondered what the other side could be. *Why wouldn't Lupin want the Charm off, now that he knew what was hiding behind it?*

And then he knew, and the sudden shining contempt unleashed a torrent of words from him.

"You are afraid of losing your friends," he sneered. "You are afraid of losing these people who have tricked you, hurt you, betrayed you, *Obliviated* you, because they are the only friends you have." He thought back to Lupin as he had known him in school—painfully shy; horrified the few times he got angry, as though he could transform without the full moon calling to him; making no effort to find new friends even when he obviously disapproved of what his fellow Marauders were doing, because he just as obviously believed that no one else would befriend him. Something occurred to him that never had, given his rather personal involvement in the incident. "Tell me, *Remus*," he said, stressing the name and seeing Lupin flinch, "how

did you feel when Black nearly made me dead and you into a murderer?"

Lupin sank back into his chair. Snape watched him, barely breathing. He knew that he needed Lupin's help with Harry if at all possible, but he would be worse than useless if he simply flinched when Harry was in danger, or handed Harry over to Dumbledore the moment he was asked to.

"I—that's not what he did," Lupin whispered.

"Really." Snape smiled. He knew it wasn't a pleasant smile. His smiles never were. "I could almost understand Black's actions against me, after all," he continued, voice soft and caressing. "I was his enemy. But *you*. You were his *friend*. If he had succeeded in his little—prank—then you would have killed me. You would have become the thing you feared most, the thing you hated most, the thing you fought so hard to avoid becoming. And all because your friend had an unreasonable grudge against me." He shook his head, clucking his tongue. "Tell me, *Remus*, why have you remained friends with him after that? Why did you find some way to excuse it, even then, because, after all, Black is 'just being what he is?' No one has ever forced Black to grow up. Why not you?"

"*Shut up.*"

The voice was a snarl, and Lupin surged to his feet, his teeth bared and his amber eyes open and blazing. Snape felt a thrill of fear. This was the thing he had seen, or half-seen, or dreamed he had seen, on any number of occasions. It was close to the full moon, but Lupin was still dangerous, even without that. Snape had made a point of studying werewolves after one had so nearly killed him. He knew their strength, even in human form. Lupin carried the power to tear apart anyone he chose, at any moment, to transform someone not into an infected, cursed beast like himself, but into a corpse.

Lupin knew that, too, from the look in his eyes.

And he was sorry for it immediately afterwards, sitting down and putting his hands across his eyes. "Oh, Merlin," he whispered. "I am *so* sorry, Severus."

Snape took his leave without a word. He still intended to free the werewolf from his Memory Charm if he could. Harry wanted it. That was one good enough reason. But, more than that, he suspected that Lupin's horror against getting angry extended mostly to himself. If he was hurt? He would swallow it and nod. If he learned that a child he loved was hurt...?

Snape did hope that he managed to break the *Obliviate* on a full moon, and that Lupin 'forgot' to take his Wolfsbane Potion before he leaped on Black. Death was too good for Black.

But I dare not use him as a mentor for Harry, the way I wanted to. He is afraid of his own anger. So is Harry. The last thing he needs is reinforcement on that.

He swallowed his pride, and found Minerva's rooms, and knocked. She was in, luckily, and she invited him in the moment she saw his face. Snape suspected he did not look his best.

"What is it?" she asked, when she had him sitting in a chair across from her desk and drinking a cup of tea. The tea was strong enough to nearly make Snape choke, but he drank it all the same. This was a ritual when he came and visited her. More than once, the teacup had ended up broken on the floor, flung by Snape when Minerva worked him up into a rage, but it was still a ritual. And this time, Snape thought he was unlikely to get angry.

He told her the whole story, and saw her eyes chill as she listened, one hand closing around the corner of her desk. When he had finished, and made his request, she nodded, once.

"Of course I will mentor Harry, Severus," she said. "But I can't promise that it will last much longer than your own protection of him, since Albus knows that I don't run blind at his heels any longer."

"I know," said Snape. "But he *needs* support, Minerva, and he *needs* to know what is going on, and I am afraid that Albus will carry out his threat if the boy tries to spend much time with me outside of class. I can send you Potions materials and books by owl. He can have them during his times with you, if you are agreeable."

"Why would I teach him Potions when I could teach him Transfiguration?" Minerva murmured, but her voice was dry, and she smiled. The smile vanished in the next moment. "I had not realized you were quite *this* dedicated to making his life better, Severus."

Snape raised his chin. She would accuse him of having a heart in a moment. It was one of her favorite remarks to make, and his to rage at.

But he said only, “I saw what his mind was like at the end of last year, Minerva. There is no way I could fail to help him after that. And I believe that others are beginning to notice his power. You have felt it. I have felt it. Others are turning towards it.” He paused. “Some of the reading I have done has convinced me that he might easily be *vates*, if he chose to be.”

Shock wiped her face clean, and then awe, and then hope. She nodded, slowly. “I see,” she said. “Well. That is different. I will be happy to mentor him, Severus.”

“Thank you,” said Snape, and stood, and took his leave again.

He felt a slow pulse of anger and determination rise in him as he made his way back to the dungeons. *Check and mate, Albus. But only for now. I don't think you realize how far I will go on fighting. If you take Minerva from him, I will free the werewolf. If you take him, or if he proves not strong enough to bear the burden, I will turn to the Malfoys. If they fail, then I will reach out to the purebloods who have sensed his power and know what it might mean, to the members of the Ministry who are not part of your Order, to the political enemies who would be happy to see you fall. To anyone but the Dark Lord himself my reach will go, until you are brought down and he is free.*

You threatened me with a wildfire. I will unleash a firestorm, if need be.

If need be.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eleven: The Lure of Power

Draco sighed and closed the book he held in his lap, rubbing at his eyes. They had begun to blur, and not even adjusting the color of the *Lumos* Charm would hold off the inevitable watering that would follow.

He could hear his mother's voice if he concentrated. *Never read in the dark for more than an hour, dear. It will make you squint the next morning, and Malfoys are not supposed to squint.*

But she was the one who had sent him the books, the one who had told him—via notes placed in the books at strategic spots—what was going on, the one who had shown him why he had to draw away from Harry for a time. Draco wondered gloomily why she had sent such fascinating books if she didn't expect him to be up until all hours of the morning reading them.

He put the book on the table next to his bed, and took a moment to stare through the opened curtains at Harry's bed. The curtains there were tightly drawn, as always. He could hear the soft breathing that marked Harry's sleep. He never snored. He sat up with a scream more often than a snore, or he would suddenly cease breathing altogether, and Draco knew he was lying still, terrified or tense, probably waiting for the appearance of enemies.

There had been more than once in the past month that Draco was tempted to go to him and soothe his nightmares, even if it was with something as simple as a handclasp.

But then he would have to explain why he had stayed away so long.

And Draco didn't yet know a way to tell Harry the truth without destroying him.

He put his hands behind his head, let out a long breath, and lay staring at the ceiling.

The first book had simply been fascinating—mostly explanations of the compulsion power that ran in several pureblood family lines, including the Black one, and explanations of what it could and could not do. Draco had wondered why his mother wanted him to have it. Did she just want to insure that any compulsion power he used was trained? That made sense, but Draco really didn't think he had the gift. It usually manifested by the time a wizard was twelve, the book proclaimed, and Draco's thirteenth birthday had been the fifth of June.

He remembered it as a miserable day, mostly, given that Harry had been dozing in the hospital wing at the time, recovering

from the damage to his mind, and he'd only wanted to be at his side.

Then he found the first note, tucked in between two pages of a philosophical argument about whether using the compulsion gift was ever moral. He unfolded it and recognized his mother's handwriting at once.

Draco, my darling—

I am hopeful that by now you will have figured out why I sent you these books. The compulsion gift is not irresistible, but it is subtle, and often changes the course of a wizard's mind without his realizing it.

Draco frowned when he was done reading it. Not irresistible. Fine, then. But what did she expect him to *do* with this information?

He flipped through the rest of the book, and found no more notes. He put that one down and picked up another with a rearing silver serpent on the front. Draco spent a few minutes staring at that. He knew he'd seen the symbol before, probably on a few artifacts around the Manor, but he couldn't remember what it indicated.

He opened it, and a folded piece of parchment fell out from between the cover and the first page. Draco picked it gingerly up and unfolded it, shaking dust off it. This book must have been packed away for a long time, wherever Mother had managed to find it.

Draco, my dearest—

There are other forms of compulsion than the compulsion gift. Sometimes, a wizard may not even realize that he is compelling others to follow his will, but he may do so unconsciously.

Once again, it was unsigned, but once again, Draco knew her handwriting. Wondering what this was all about, he settled back with the silver serpent book to read.

He quickly figured out that it was a history of the Guile family, whom he had indeed heard of. They'd managed to survive for centuries, playing Dark Lords against one another, never quite coming into the service of the Light Lords but making themselves appear innocent, until the last of them had died in the Dark Lord Grindelwald's armies.

But this was not a usual history. There were no musty family trees, no lists of great things that family members had done that were now forgotten, no lectures on what magical gifts might have been linked to their blood. This was a treatise on how the Guile family had survived the powerful wizards, what signs they had noticed that they were being compelled or swayed against their wills and how they had dealt with them.

Draco read the first few pages, and came upon the sentence *Yet it was hard for Serpentina Guile to figure out what had happened to her at first, though she was a great witch. She finally noticed that whenever she was around the wizard Falcon and grew angry, he had only to grow angry in return to calm her. At once her feelings would be soothed, washed away in the tide of magic that rose with his rage, and she would obey whatever he asked of her.*

Change the names, and it was a perfect description of what always happened lately when Draco grew angry at Harry.

Draco read hastily through the rest of the Guile book, and the other books that his mother had given him—a history of the Black family in particular, a book of laws that the Ministry had at one time enacted against those with the compulsion gifts, and a biography of the lives and magic of the Light and Dark Lords. It only took him three days, and by the end of those three days he had not only the books but a large array of parchment notes from his mother, folded and placed into the books at various key points, to enable him to put the puzzle together.

Draco took a deep breath that Wednesday night in September, and picked up his mother's last and lengthiest note, found very near the end of the book on the Light and Dark Lords.

Draco, my beloved son—

I am sorry to have to hurt you like this. However, when Harry was at the Manor with you, I recognized the signs. You were gentler and sweeter than I had ever seen you be, even as a baby. You cared for him as if he were your world. Such attachment is not natural, is too fierce, in a child your age. And what had he done to cause you to grow such an attachment?

I know that he saved your life in first year, but even before that, you still spoke of him in your letters, chattered as if you were obsessed with him. He became more than a figure of fun. He became your best friend.

I do not think it is all his magic, to be perfectly honest. I think you genuinely do see something in him that would have caused you to become friends even without that. But you could sense his power earlier than most of the others could, even when it was chained and held down by his webs. Malfoys have always been more magically sensitive. I fear that this caused his power to have a hold on your mind that it would not if you were one of your duller peers.

My darling, my dearest, I will not say that you should break your friendship with him. I will not say that merely because some of this is the effect of his magic, all of it must be. I will say that I want to see you free to make your own choice, not dragged along by Harry's magic, however subtly or unconsciously that may have happened. If you need this, if you decide that you need this, you must make the decision independent of the effect he has on you. The only way to do that is to withdraw from him for a while, and see if you can raise barriers against his power. You have the inheritance of the Black compulsion gift, and compellers themselves, as you will know from your reading, are immune to the effects of another's compulsion, and take less damage even from other spells that affect the mind, such as the Fugitivus Animus that Harry performed. Perhaps you can use that to your advantage, to help you resurrect your free will.

I have already said I would move mountains to help you, my son. I will. Should you decide that Harry is, after all, a true friend and not merely an incipient Lord who managed to draw you into orbit with his power, then the world will shudder and fall before I see you parted, or see either of you harmed again. Only tell me.

I will see that you have your freedom. Without freedom, nothing matters.

*With all my love,
Narcissa Black Malfoy.*

Draco had closed his eyes. He was upset already, and he'd only been distant from Harry for three days.

But he could feel other effects as well. He felt more clear-headed, the cool distance that had always been his gift before he came to Hogwarts returning to him. He felt more like his father's son than he had in years. He felt as if he could make sarcastic comments to Connor Potter without looking guiltily at Harry first to see if he would approve of them.

But he had to keep taking out his bottle anyway and staring at it, to see that despite the faint red traces of irritation that crept into the colors from time to time, the overwhelming colors were still purple—Harry's protectiveness of him—and green—Harry's fondness for him.

Draco ground his hands into his eyes. He didn't want to do this. He *didn't*.

But he had to know how much of his friendship with Harry was just magic. He could see the way that that magic was beginning to attract other people too, now, see the way heads turned when Harry entered a room (Harry was utterly oblivious, of course). He could see the same thing with Dumbledore. What Draco had accepted as evidence of a presence or aura the Headmaster projected was actually his magic. Wizards—pureblood wizards, at least, he corrected himself with a sneer—turned to meet it like flowers to the sun, or planets spinning around a star. Draco was starting to think from the book about the Light and Dark Lords that *that* was the main reason so many people grumbled about Dumbledore but didn't actually do anything to oppose him. The sheer strength of his magic lured them and soothed them and told them it would be impossible before they tried to accomplish anything.

How much of me is really Draco, and how much is Draco-because-of-Harry?

Draco decided he would have to find out.

“What's your favorite color, Harry?”

Harry blinked and turned to look at him. Draco kept his face as emotionless as possible, even though he wanted to make a joke that would ease the bewilderment in Harry's expression. This was a test that one of the books had suggested, and he wanted to see if he could pass it.

Though I am not sure what would count as passing or as failing, in this instance, he thought, and didn't move.

“Green,” Harry said at last, still blinking.

Green, a voice whispered in Draco’s mind an instant after that.

Draco swallowed and glanced away from Harry, picking up his pumpkin pasty. That was a bad sign, that voice in his head. Harry’s magic was not only around him but within him, within the webs of his mind, or whatever he had in place of webs. It was a way that Lords could control their followers, making sure those servants knew them so well that they would do what they wanted before the Lords even commanded it.

Draco decided he would make a few more tests, and then he would have to withdraw from Harry almost completely.

It hurt not to be included in whatever had happened between Harry and the Headmaster, hurt that Millicent was the one who had escorted him to the hospital wing, hurt to see Harry talking to Millicent and Pansy as if they had always been his friends. Draco wondered sometimes whether it was worth the pain. Perhaps he should just tell Harry the truth now and let him make up his own mind about the strength of his magic.

But then he remembered that that was a sign that he was still very firmly under Harry’s control. He turned back to the book on the Guile family and read until he came to a passage marked in a very firm hand. Someone had owned this book before the Malfoy family, he thought, or at least before his parents. This was not either of his parents’ handwriting.

The passage said, And of course the emotional pain that Frederick Guile felt when he could not go at once to Grindelwald’s side was a sign of how deeply the Dark Lord’s magic had crept into his being. Why should he have felt such emotional pain, with him a pureblood and the Dark Lord no friend or child or sibling of his? But he did, and he could not stop shivering and longing to be a part of his life until he had Apparated to become a part of his battle. Distracted by what he was feeling, as no good pureblooded wizard should be, Frederick Guile lost his life in that battle.

The note in the margin said, *Merlin take my magic if I am ever such a bloody fool.*

This time, Draco noted the small letters near the end of that passage. A.M. Abraxas Malfoy, then, his grandfather, Lucius’s father.

He wouldn’t be proud, would he, to see a grandson of his going to a new Lord’s side the moment he felt a slight disconnection from him? No, he wouldn’t. Draco turned on his side and punched his pillow, and pretended it didn’t tear at him when Harry came up and got into his bed without a word. He *had* to fight his way free. It had half-destroyed Harry to be tangled, bound up in someone else’s magic. Draco would not do the same thing. If he had to leave Harry behind—

Panic clawed at his skin, made it break out in sweat and gooseflesh, and his heart raced. Draco drew the bottle from his pocket and stared at the green glow, threaded with red, until he was calm again. Then he deliberately finished the thought.

If he had to leave Harry behind, then he would. He knew it was for the best, the only way he could have a completely free will. And he knew it was what Harry would want, in that case. Harry would be horrified to think of someone else being a slave to his power.

Draco closed his eyes abruptly, feeling as if a hot brick had just dropped into the middle of his chest.

Even if I decide for him and renew our friendship, how am I ever going to tell him? It would kill him, to know that he had a part in altering someone else’s mind and personality. How am I ever going to get him to see that he didn’t mean to?

“Harry. We want to—“

“Talk to you.”

Draco looked up intently around the corner of the book he was only pretending to read; by now, he had memorized most of the passages about the history of the Guile family. He had wondered when the Weasley twins, who could unquestionably feel Harry’s power but preferred to just hover around him and follow him everywhere, would approach Harry. It seemed that that time was now, on an evening in the library very near the end of September.

Draco could have told them it wasn't a good time. Harry had been looking deeply stressed the last few days, ever since Professor McGonagall inexplicably started meeting with him and Professor Snape had taken to ignoring him. Harry seemed to know why. Draco had heard him come into their bedroom one night, radiating so much anger and so much power that the stones strained in the walls, and fall on his back on his own bed, muttering something about "Dumbledore." But he had not confessed it to Draco, or to anyone else that Draco knew of. Millicent tried to talk to him about it, and got a snarl that had her backing down very fast.

There was a small and selfish part of Draco that had cheered at that.

But the snarl had never quite gone anyway. Harry spent more time than ever studying these days, and kept his interactions with other people—except his brother—on the level of chill courtesy. His magic spent a lot of time expanding out from his body in rippling waves, and drawing more attention than ever. Draco had caught some of the Gryffindors staring hard at him the other day, including Granger, who seemed to have taken to sneezing whenever Harry was around. Harry, of course, didn't notice.

He was looking at the twins now with a distinctly unfriendly expression, but that didn't daunt them. Draco had long since come to the conclusion that a rampaging dragon would not daunt the Weasley twins. They would probably throw Dungbombs at it, just to make it even angrier, before taking it down with some brilliant and utterly unfair trick. Draco scowled. It was unfair for *Weasleys* to have that much sheer magical skill.

"We want to know what—" one of them began.

"You're planning to do with your power," the other one finished, and then they leaned forward and gave Harry identical piercing gazes.

Harry sighed and shook his head. "I don't know. Everyone keeps asking me that, and I *just don't know*." He rubbed a hand over the center of his forehead. Draco had seen him washing blood off his scar the other day, and had had to work very hard to keep himself from asking what was wrong. "But it probably wouldn't be to play jokes and pranks, so you can go away." He picked up the book he was looking at again. Draco frowned. What would *Harry* want with a book on the history of the First War with the Dark Lord? He had thought Harry knew all that already.

"There are other things to do with power like that than just play jokes and pranks, mate," said one of the twins, taking a chair across from Harry. Draco restrained the impulse to simply rush up and yank them away from him. *His magic's affected me even more strongly than I thought*, he decided fiercely, and flipped through his book looking for some evidence of what it meant when someone else wanted to rush up and drag identical twins away from a powerful wizard.

"Yeah," said the other twin, who also took a chair. "Play tricks, for example."

Harry eyed them with a faint smile. It made Draco start when he realized that that was the first time Harry had smiled in *days*. And he ignored the sheer boiling jealousy that immediately rushed up from his stomach, over the fact that it was the twins who had made Harry smile. He *didn't* care who made Harry smile. He was strong. He was independent. He was staying away from Harry so that he could rebuild his free will.

"I don't want to do that, either," said Harry. "But I appreciate your concern. Really, I'm not going to do anything with it. Not just yet. Ron suggested I put up signs, and I'm not going to do that. Just sit here with it for a while." He turned back to his book. Draco knew that was a way of suggesting he was done with the conversation. He scowled at himself and flipped through the Guile book again, wondering how they had resisted Lords whose slightest gesture they could read.

The twins exchanged glances for a moment, communicating with silent flickers of their eyes. Then they shrugged and stood. "Just let us know when you do decide to do something," said one of them.

"Yes," said the other, his eyes lighting up again. "We could help you chain the Headmaster up, maybe. It's obvious that you don't like him."

Harry looked up, the skin around his eyes tightening. Draco knew that meant he was anxious. *Damn it, why can I still read him so well?*

"I don't want to chain anyone," said Harry, his voice quiet but passionate. "Not at all."

The twins grinned and bowed. "Well, not gaolers, then," said the one on the left. "What about court jesters? Can we be Your Lordship's jesters?"

“*Never call me that.*”

Draco would not have been surprised if every pureblood in the school felt the force of that command. It stabbed through his head like an iron sword, driven by the force of Harry’s outrage. The twins staggered, and several books on the library shelves flew up and hovered in the air like silent sentries, as though they were eagles prepared to stoop on Harry’s enemies.

Draco let out a long, slow breath, trying to recover from rejoicing at the sheer level of magic in the air, and then opened his mouth. This was a perfect test. The Guile book gave several examples of this. Once someone who was a Lord because of the level of his magic, whether or not he claimed the title, gave a command like that, it should be impossible for him to disobey it. The words shouldn’t pass his lips.

“Harry, the Lord,” he said, clearly.

He stared at nothing in particular as Harry stormed out of the library, his magic still sweeping around him like wings, and the books fell to the floor, and the twins scattered as Madam Pince came charging around the corner like the rampaging dragon Draco had been imagining earlier. She paid no attention to Draco at all, assuming that whatever had caused noise in her library, the Weasley twins were behind it. Draco was glad. She could have yelled at him, and he still would have sat there, glassy-eyed and staring.

He shouldn’t have been able to disobey.

How could he?

Draco watched Harry more carefully than ever for the first two weeks of October. And he could only conclude that he must have been blind before, because whatever signs Harry was displaying of being a wizard who could command others with his sheer presence, he countered them with signs of being something else altogether.

He *did* influence people. He *could* make them back down and do what he said when his anger flared. He *was* so powerful that he drew attention wherever he went, by the mere fact of his magic. Draco practiced not letting his eyes turn towards Harry, and found it unexpectedly hard.

And he also never influenced people for long. Millicent avoided him one day when Harry had muttered something about not wanting her around, but there she was the next one, cajoling a reluctant smile out of him. When Draco concentrated through Harry’s anger, he had no problem resisting whatever it was that Harry might want in that moment of his rage. He *could* look away from Harry. It took some effort, but there it was. It didn’t take that much, really, not when he was practiced at it.

If Harry really was going to become a Dark Lord of the same kind as You-Know-Who or a Light Lord of the same kind as Dumbledore, none of those things should have been true.

Draco was confounded.

And then came a night at the second week of October, the night he had lain awake brooding about how he would tell Harry the truth even if he wanted to, and finally fell asleep staring at the ceiling of his bed.

“Draco?”

Draco blinked his eyes open, thinking this had to be a dream. There was no way that Harry would be standing there, framed in the curtains of his bed, his wand blazing with a *Lumos*, if it wasn’t a dream. He hadn’t reached out for Draco in the long weeks of their separation, not even when he had a nightmare or when he was obviously angry and hurting and barely talking to anyone else. Draco sat up, rubbing at his hair and his eyes and trying to think of what to say.

Harry took a deep breath and sat down on the edge of his bed. His scar and his eyes were both vivid in the shifting light. “Draco,” he said gently. “I—I was going to wait until you said something, because I don’t know what I did to anger you.” He bit his lip. “But I can’t *stand* this anymore,” he said, abrupt, low, and fierce. “I need to know why you’re upset with me. I need to know what I did wrong.”

Draco stared at him. None of the books had said anything about incipient Lords seeking people out to ask what had angered them, either.

And he had thought that Harry would not. He meant less to Harry than Harry did to him. That had always been obvious. Harry might miss him, but he would never try to repair an apparent breach in their friendship.

Except that, apparently, he did, said Draco, when Harry misinterpreted his silence and sighed.

“Look,” said Harry. “I know I shouldn’t have let it go on this long. But I really *did* notice that you were angry, Draco, and I’ve kept noticing, and I just—I miss having you for a friend, all right?” He turned his head away, and Draco could see the stinging blush on his cheeks.

“I am not good at this,” he said in the next moment, his voice gone flat. “The only person I’ve ever really cared about conflicting with before was Connor, and I yield to him. But I can’t just yield to you. But I want to know what’s wrong. Is it something I can help with? Is it something I can listen to? Or do we have to just stop being friends, because of whatever it was I did?” He swallowed harshly, a little click that Draco knew Harry didn’t mean for him to hear.

Draco closed his eyes. Shock was yielding to other emotions. He knew that Harry couldn’t have come to him and said this last year. His webs wouldn’t have let him. His focus on his brother to the exclusion of all else wouldn’t have let him. The fact that he seemed willing to let Draco’s friendship simply drop away from him when he came back from Easter holidays was a sign of that, too.

That wouldn’t happen now, Draco was fairly sure. Harry would fight to keep their friendship intact, even if it took him more than a month to admit he *wanted* it to be intact.

Draco swallowed himself, and sat up to hug Harry. He felt Harry stiffen in surprise, then relax and even hug him back, his wand pressing awkwardly against Draco’s spine.

“Are you going to tell me what got you so angry?” he whispered.

Draco closed his eyes. He still didn’t know how to tell Harry the truth. He still wondered if he should try to pull away again, to achieve some semblance of independence.

But he no longer thought that all the answers could be found in books. And he had *missed* Harry, damnit. Now that he was aware of what Harry’s power could do and prepared to make conscious decisions about it if Harry asked him to do something he didn’t want to do, Draco thought he could have their friendship back. He certainly appreciated it more than he ever had.

And so did Harry.

“It’s something that I think would hurt you to know about right now,” Draco whispered. “Please? Can it wait?”

Harry started a bit, but then relaxed when Draco’s arms didn’t move away. “Of course it can,” he said. “I just—you’re my best friend, Draco, and I need to know that you’re all right. I thought you weren’t, and it was driving me mad.” He chuckled painfully. “Millicent kept asking me about the sour expression on my face all last week.”

“That was about me?” Draco asked incredulously. Harry had never answered Millicent. Draco had assumed the sour expression came from any one of the numerous pressures Harry was dealing with: controlling his magic, studying with Professor McGonagall, playing at a badly-feigned coolness with Snape, coping with the fact that his godfather was trying to be affectionate with him and failing, and cheering on his brother, whose compulsion gift Harry was more and more obviously uneasy with.

“Of course it was,” said Harry, as if it should be obvious. “I was worried about you, Draco.”

“Prat,” Draco grumbled into his shoulder, hugging Harry tightly enough to make him squeak. “Stubborn, *idiotic* prat. You could have come and *asked* me.”

“Yes,” said Harry. “But it took me this long.”

“And you’re really willing to wait to hear about it?” Draco asked, once more, just because he had to be sure.

“Of course.” Harry pulled away from him and blinked at him. “I trust you, Draco.”

Draco made his decision in that moment. To Azkaban with Lords and whether he had to stay away from Harry to be completely independent of him. He would just go along, deciding day to day on his independence if he had to, and getting Harry ready for the news that his magic could compel people, or something like it, even if he didn't mean to. Someday, Draco thought, he would be ready for it.

He was free. He made this choice freely. Draco said so, and felt no chain or compulsion holding him back.

He hugged a startled Harry again. "Now tell me what's been going on with you," he said, and settled down to be startled and angry and amused and outraged all in turn, confident that he was where he wanted to be.

Dear Mother:

I know that I made this request of you once before, but I hadn't considered everything you sent me then. Now I have, and I've freely chosen, and my request is still the same.

Please, move the mountains.

*Your beloved son,
Draco.*

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twelve: How Like a Lion

"Harry! What are you doing in there?"

"Just a minute!" Harry yelled out through the door of the loo, and splashed some more water on his forehead, washing the scum of blood from his scar. He sighed when he realized the lightning bolt was once again filling with crimson. That troubled him more than the crippling headache he'd awakened with. He could hide the headache; Tom Riddle's possession last year had given him plenty of practice. A bleeding scar was something else.

Draco was knocking harder than ever on the door. "I'm coming in there in two minutes, Harry Potter!"

"I'm done!" Harry reassured him, while he checked his scar. Yes, it would probably take a few hours to fill and drip again. The blood rose slowly, as though it were forcing its way out past thick barriers of muscle and skin. He thought the few hours he had promised to spend in the library with Luna, helping her get caught up on the lessons she'd missed last year when she'd been Petrified, would push its limits, but with luck he should be able to clean it again before the blood spilled down his face.

Draco opened the door before Harry could get there. Harry gave him a sharp glance. "That wasn't two minutes," he pointed out.

"I lied," said Draco, and caught Harry's hand, pushing back his fringe before he could stop him. Harry turned his head away, but Draco had already seen his scar, and the livid color it had turned.

"I thought so," Draco whispered, and then raised his voice. "Somehow you forgot to mention your bleeding scar in your account of the last few weeks, Harry."

Harry glared at him and hurried towards the library, Draco keeping up with him easily. Draco had, most unfairly, started into a growth spurt, and he never seemed to trip over himself the way some of the other boys did, either. "Why didn't you mention it?" he asked insistently. "Why did you feel that you had to keep that one thing concealed from me?" Then he paused, and Harry knew the thoughts that were running through his head. *If you kept one thing from me, how many other things have you kept?*

There were a few others, but none of them were Draco's business. He didn't need to know the details of Harry's meetings with Peter; that was Peter's secret, and Harry's to keep. He didn't need to know that Harry sometimes felt like hexing his brother when Connor preached about the goodness of compulsion gifts to him, because then he would feel like he'd been right about Connor all along. He didn't need to know how intensely uncomfortable Sirius was making Harry. That was a private matter, especially given the conflict Harry was feeling between his emotions for Sirius and his emotions for Snape.

And he didn't need to know about the scar bleeding, because that would involve explaining the dreams, and Harry had no idea how to explain them. What *did* a dream of two dark figures and a dream of other dark figures tightening in a ring about him have to do with anything? Harry had figured out that he only woke with the headache and his scar bleeding on the nights he had them, but they told him nothing he didn't already know. Yes, he had enemies. That had been obvious since the first time he fought Bellatrix Lestrange—since the first time he learned about *Connor* having enemies, really.

Except that, from his stare, Draco thought he *did* have to know, and that a few details meant he deserved the whole thing.

"I'll tell you later," said Harry, trying to hurry ahead as he reached the doors of the library. Draco lengthened his stride and caught him easily. Harry whirled to face him. He got angry much more easily now, and the one good effect of that was that he was sure he wasn't letting his rage collect in a hidden place and build up any more. "Why do you insist on accompanying me everywhere, anyway?"

"The Headmaster might hurt you," said Draco, not looking away from him.

Harry snarled. "Yes, but he's not going to try where someone else can see. I'll be safe with Luna."

"Yes, and on the way there?"

Harry turned away again. He knew that he was Draco's friend, and he knew that Draco was his, but this intense care unnerved him. As he had told Snape, it was one thing for someone to value people in general, and another thing altogether for them to show that they valued him.

He strode into the library, his mind already buzzing through the million and one things it seemed he had to do. Private work with McGonagall, finishing the brewing of Hawthorn's Wolfsbane Potion, coming up with a response to Lucius's truce gift, tutoring Luna, tutoring Neville, Quidditch practice, his own homework, spending time with Draco so that he wouldn't feel lonely, reading *Bindings of Magic*, visiting Connor and Sirius...

Harry's life was already a whirling circus. He couldn't imagine what it would become should he actually do something with his power, the way that people kept begging him to.

He sighed with relief to see Luna sitting at the table they'd agreed on, with her books spread in front of her. Of course, he faltered a bit when he came closer and saw that she had Divination and Arithmancy textbooks, since she took neither class.

"Luna?" he said softly, and she looked up at him, protuberant eyes blinking from behind her glasses. "Are you—all right?" There were some days where she was more all right than others.

"Of course, Harry," said Luna, with the same gravity that she said everything. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You don't take those classes," said Harry, sitting down in the chair across from her. Draco took the one beside him, and made a comment under his breath that might or might not have included the word "Loony." Harry gave him a glare that promised a hex when they got back to the Slytherin common room, and then turned to smile again at Luna. "What would you want with them?"

"I want you to teach me about them," said Luna. "You're taking the classes, aren't you, Harry? I asked someone, and they told me that you were."

Harry winced a bit. He hoped that whoever Luna had asked hadn't hurt her. He would have to ask the other Slytherins what they'd seen tonight. Most of the students, especially other Ravenclaws, didn't seem to understand that hurting Luna always resulted in Harry finding out about it, no matter how quiet they tried to be or where they did it. The other Slytherins thought it was a fine game, watching out for Luna, reporting it to Harry, and then watching for what clever or embarrassing hex he inflicted on the ones who'd embarrassed her in return.

Harry hadn't yet got Neville to confide the same mistreatment to him. He insisted that he could handle himself, and that anyway no one in Gryffindor mocked him too badly. Harry didn't believe him. It was taking time to coax Neville out of his shell, though, especially since he hadn't spent half of last year with his peers.

"Yes, I am taking these classes," he said, to get himself back on track, and picked up the Divination textbook. "Where did you want to start? Tea leaves? Crystal balls?"

“Dreams,” said Luna.

Harry sent her a sharp glance. She looked back at him, serene and serious as ever, and if she had ulterior motives, she hid them better than anyone else Harry had ever seen.

“All right,” he said, and opened *Unfogging the Future* to the right page. His own textbook always fell open to that place automatically now. He had read the brief descriptions of dream interpretation over and over again, hoping against hope there was something that could help him with his nightmares. But Trelawney’s books were as useless as Trelawney herself. “What did you want to know?”

“About dark dreams,” said Luna. “Nightmares.”

Harry could have recited the paragraph from memory, but he pretended to be reading, for Luna’s and Draco’s sakes. Their eyes on him felt like skewers. He wished they would stop—stop looking so calm, stop looking as though there was a hidden purpose behind this, stop *looking at him*. “Um. *Reading dark dreams is different from the art of reading light dreams, also commonly called prophetic dreams. While light dreams are the will of the future reaching down to touch those so favored, nightmares, also called dark dreams, represent a different kind of favor. They are commonly accepted as either the dreamer’s fears made manifest, or, occasionally, as the reaching back of a future so awful that it wants to prevent itself from happening.*”

He leaned back in his chair. “Luna, what questions did you have?”

“What kind of dreams do you have, Harry?”

Harry stared at her. He didn’t dare look at Draco. Luna sat with her quill poised above her parchment and just regarded him calmly.

“Oh, normal dreams,” Harry managed to say. “You know, the kind that you always have when you go to sleep.” He forced a smile, and hoped it looked more natural than it felt. “The other night, I dreamed that a door was chasing me.”

Luna nodded. “And what about other kinds?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nightmares,” said Luna. “Do you ever have nightmares, Harry? I dream about the Wrackspurts possessing me, the way they possessed you last year.” Luna never had accepted the Tom Riddle explanation for the possession. “What are your nightmares?”

“I don’t have nightmares, Luna,” said Harry. He didn’t want to hurt her, didn’t want to scare her. Merlin knew he was already doing that to enough people; he’d had a huge argument with Connor about it just the other day. “Just regular dreams.”

“He has nightmares every night,” said Draco.

Harry whipped around. “*Draco!*” he squawked.

“You prat,” said Draco, seizing his arm and brushing back his fringe again. His finger rose and touched Harry’s scar, then came back down and forced Harry to acknowledge the glistening red liquid on it. Harry winced. He’d started bleeding sooner than he thought. “She’s trying to *help*. Can’t you see that? And I’m tired of you not talking about this. What happened to moving forward and being honest, Harry? You said that you would.”

Harry closed his eyes. His headache was returning, despite the potion he’d brewed himself last night and taken this morning. “I know. I just...I don’t know why I’m having the nightmares, all right? I just am.”

“Do they have to do with Voldemort?” Luna asked.

Harry stared at her. He’d never heard anyone else but Dumbledore and his family pronounce the Dark Lord’s true name without stumbling. Luna just gazed back at him, waiting for the answer, and didn’t seem to realize there was anything remarkable in what she’d done.

“They can’t,” said Harry. “How *could* they?” He remembered the dreams that he’d had about Quirrell in first year, and the dreams about Tom Riddle last year. Well, yes, the Tom Riddle dreams had had to do with Voldemort, but they were

Voldemort, the signs of Riddle working his way into Harry's mind. The others were—dreams. “If anyone is going to dream about Voldemort, it should be Connor. Riddle himself told me that Connor's scar is some kind of connection to him.”

“This looks like a pretty damn good connection to me,” said Draco, swiping his finger across the scar again and holding it up. There was enough blood to soak the palm of his hand and spill towards his wrist. “*Damn* it, Harry, what do you dream about?”

Harry took a deep breath. Backed into a corner like this, he had no choice but to talk about it, and he had promised himself that he would try to stop hiding things. He really had no choice, unless he wanted his confined magic and his confined rage back. He told them about the dreams, and emphasized their vagueness and the fact that he had no idea what they related to.

“I think I know.”

Harry turned around abruptly. *Merlin, how many people know now?* Hermione Granger apparently did, since she was behind him and looking at him, her face somewhere between serious and worried.

“Do you,” Draco said, his body language gone tense, his hand making the hovering motion that Harry recognized as Draco's version of being ready to reach for his wand. He didn't like Hermione, or any of the Gryffindors, really. He barely tolerated Neville. Harry couldn't figure out why, since all Draco ever said when asked was *They're Gryffindors, Harry!*

“Yes,” said Hermione. “I wondered why I was sneezing all the time around you, Harry,” she added. “And I think I figured it out. And, well, if I'm right, then you have some pretty Dark magic. I think the shadows you're seeing in your mind are your own fears of your magic. You know that you're doing something wrong, even if it's unconscious—”

“*Shut up, Granger.*”

Harry had never heard Draco sound so deadly. He was on his feet now, wand in hand, never wavering from the way it pointed at Hermione. His face was pale, his eyes gone dark, and a few flecks of actual *foam* shining near his lips. Alarmed, Harry stood and put himself in between Draco and Hermione.

He wondered, tiredly, how many people he would have to shield from overzealous Gryffindors in a month's time. Of course, this time it was probably the other way around, but he wasn't sure about that. Hermione was one of the most powerful witches in the school. She would give Draco more trouble than Draco probably suspected in a hexing contest.

“Stop it, Draco,” Harry said over his shoulder. “These dreams have troubled me for months.” Well, one of them had troubled him for months, but he didn't care to dwell on the distinction right now. “If Hermione thinks she's figured out one of them, or even both, then I want to hear what she thinks.”

Draco's hand clamped down on his shoulder, hard enough that Harry gasped and winced. “But this has to do with the thing I told you about already,” Draco whispered into his ear. “The thing I didn't want to tell you about because it would hurt you. Please, Harry. *Leave it be. You do not want to hear this.*” The last words sounded almost like one sentence, spoken in the same intense whisper.

Harry frowned. He couldn't imagine how Hermione's theory and Draco's secret could be the same thing, but it would certainly fit with Draco's sudden and overwhelming reaction. Nothing seemed to drive him mad quite like threats to Harry's safety. Harry had had to stop him from hexing Dumbledore three times this last week.

“I think I want to hear it,” he said, and turned back towards Hermione.

Draco's arms descended, clamping around his waist and squeezing the breath out of him. “No, no, no,” he whispered. “Harry, please, trust me. Do what I tell you. Turn around and walk out of the library *now*. I'll make your apologies to Luna. I'll listen to Granger and tell you if they really were the same thing when she's done, and I'll report it *honestly*. But don't listen to her.”

Harry attempted to pull himself free of Draco's grip. It held firm. Harry sighed and glanced at Hermione.

“I think he can choose whether or not to hear this for himself, Malfoy,” said Hermione, putting her nose up. “And he deserves to hear it, whatever you think. Harry, I think you have the ability to—”

“*Silencio.*”

Harry stared. The spell hadn't come from Draco, even though he'd torn one arm free of Harry's waist and was groping

frantically for his wand. It had come from Luna, who walked up and looked Hermione up and down as she mouthed silently. Then she turned and glanced up at Harry.

“It’s like the necklace I gave you last year,” she said. “The one to protect against Wrackspurts. Sometimes you need a necklace, and sometimes you need a spell.”

Harry blinked, once, twice, again. He had the feeling that there was something very profound in what Luna had just said, though he couldn’t reason out what it was. “Thank you, Luna,” he said slowly.

Luna nodded. “You should never let Wrackspurts get hold of you,” she said. “Or the Heliopaths, either.” She turned and wandered over to her books, gathered them up, and then wandered out of the library. Harry supposed that meant their study session was at an end.

Hermione was still mouthing in outrage. Harry glanced at her and sighed. He knew he should release the spell and listen to what she had to say. Hermione was a brilliant researcher. If she had found something among the books that related to the dreams, it might take Harry months to duplicate her. He was good at applying knowledge he’d already consumed, not so much at finding it.

If you were a Gryffindor, then you would take the spell off and listen to her, said a voice in his head. Harry suspected it was Connor’s voice. That was one of the things they’d fought about, lately. Connor said that Sirius had said Slytherin House was fundamentally untrustworthy, and had given him stories about all of Harry’s classmates’ parents to prove it. Connor was always full of stories about Sirius saying this or that. He was disappointed that Harry couldn’t seem to repair his relationship with him and become a dutiful godson again, and told Harry so at every opportunity.

If you were a Gryffindor, if you were brave, if you were like a lion, then you would listen to her.

But Harry wasn’t, and so in the end he sighed and walked out of the library. Draco was nearly prancing at his side, as though he suspected that he was responsible for Harry’s decision to leave without freeing Hermione.

Harry rubbed his scar again, and Draco dragged his hand away from it and pointedly showed Harry the blood. “You’re going to Madam Pomfrey,” he announced.

“She’ll put me in a bed and want me to sleep,” said Harry. “And that won’t work, Draco. If I sleep, I’ll dream, and my scar will bleed again. Let it go. I only have to clean it off every few hours.”

Draco stared at him. “And I never *noticed*?”

Harry was about to argue that yes, Draco had noticed the scar bleeding, when he realized that Draco meant the frequency of times he’d washed the scar. He sighed through his nose. “I guess you didn’t,” he admitted.

“You’re far too good at hiding things, Harry,” said Draco, with a sadness in his voice that Harry supposed he might understand if he concentrated. But he couldn’t concentrate for very long. He had to get to Quidditch practice early, since his study session with Luna had ended early.

He was about to hurry off when Draco’s hand touched his shoulder again. Harry looked up and met a pair of eyes so concerned that he abruptly hugged Draco, simply to reassure him.

Draco hugged back, muttered, “Be safe,” and then went off in the opposite direction. Harry ran faster than ever. Flint, who had failed his NEWTS last year and so been kept back an extra year, really, really didn’t like it when anyone on the team was spending free time dithering about elsewhere, but he would make an exception and be especially harsh with Harry, since he thought Harry was their team’s key to victory.

Harry had just left the Great Hall and turned towards McGonagall’s office when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, and backed off immediately when he saw the Headmaster. His magic rose to bind him in protective walls. Probably Dumbledore had found some way past the modified mirror spell Harry had cast on him.

Instead, Harry saw, Dumbledore was avoiding eye contact. That meant the spell still held. *Probably*, Harry emphasized to himself. After the way Dumbledore had tricked Snape from his side—McGonagall had told him the story on the night she’d taken over his tutoring—Harry would believe anything of the Headmaster, including that he would pretend the spell still held

when in fact he had overcome it.

“Please come to my office, my dear boy,” Dumbledore dared to say. “We have much to discuss.”

“I’m sorry, Headmaster, but I’m meeting with Professor McGonagall now,” Harry said, as calmly as he could. He would be polite. He *could* be polite. He would not scream the roof down and set Dumbledore on fire as he wanted to. Besides, trying to set him on fire would probably only result in more ice. No matter what spells Harry practiced with, his magic and his rage both remained cold. That was another thing that had bothered Connor when he confessed it.

“You are not, Harry,” Dumbledore said firmly.

Harry froze. “What did you say?”

“I said that you are not,” said Dumbledore. “I have relieved Minerva of the responsibilities of teaching you. She is not your Head of House, and as Transfiguration Professor, she has other students who need her attention. She agreed with me. I believe her exact words were that a Slytherin student should be able to find other ways to learn.” Dumbledore smiled at him.

Harry smiled back at him, which appeared to disconcert the Headmaster. He heard McGonagall’s words for what they were, a salute and a statement of faith. And she had not outright been forbidden from associating with him, as Snape had been. They might still be able to meet on the sly. McGonagall had thought it better to yield than contest to the bitter end.

Sometimes, she is almost Slytherin, he thought, and then looked up at the Headmaster. Dumbledore avoided his eyes. He was probably thinking of magic to use on Harry right now, then. *Probably*. “Will all due respect, Headmaster, I won’t want you teaching me in her place. There are reasons that I don’t want it. I hope you understand them.”

Dumbledore only waved a hand. “That can be arranged later, Harry. Either Remus or Sirius would be an excellent candidate for your next teacher.”

Harry concealed his snort. Remus he could see, but Sirius... *Only if I want a course in ranting about Slytherins or twitching*. He had only disliked Sirius more when he learned he was the cause of Dumbledore’s attack on Snape. Harry was sure that Sirius had lied about the false memory. *It sounds like the kind of thing he’d make up, secure in the knowledge that the Headmaster would back him, because the Headmaster likes Gryffindors so much. It doesn’t matter that it’s so ridiculous. Dumbledore supports him.*

“No, this is something else,” said Dumbledore, solemn now, and drew a large letter forth from his pocket. Harry recognized the seal of the Ministry on the front. He nodded slowly.

“Lead the way, Headmaster,” he said.

Once they were seated in Dumbledore’s office, and Harry had refused tea and sweets and another cup of tea, the Headmaster handed over the Ministry’s letter. Harry wasted no time in opening it.

Dear Mr. Potter:

We realize this must come as a shock to you, and indeed we are in a somewhat unusual position ourselves. Normally, we would write to the parents of a child your age. However, on contacting your parents, they claimed to have only one son, Connor Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, though birth records and your attendance at Hogwarts clearly prove your existence, and they did admit to remembering a Harry Potter who had moved away or died a long time ago. They seemed to think that you were a relative of your father.

This is a sign of Dark magic in operation, and as such, we are forced to resort to this rather unusual form of communication, and of request.

It has come to our attention that you exhibit powerful magic, both Light and Dark, that you did not exhibit last year. We understand that such magic is not your fault, but the result of your birth, and we hasten to assure you that we do not regard you as at fault. However, each magical child so powerful must have a guardian in order for the wizarding community at large to assure themselves that the magic is not going wild or untrained. Since we have contacted your parents and they are victims of Dark magic that causes them to deny your existence, we currently believe they are not suitable guardians for you.

We would ordinarily appoint a guardian ordered by the Wizengamot, but your case is special enough that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is concerned with it. We believe you should have a guardian who a) lives on the grounds of Hogwarts, so that you may continue to attend school and acquire training for your magic, and b) is someone you trust, which will make your training all the easier, and c) can learn some of the facts of the case, as powerful wizards do not usually emerge as you do and we fear there may be something unnatural in your magic, perhaps as a result of the Dark spell cast on your parents. As someone who fulfills all of these conditions except the last, we have chosen Albus Dumbledore. Please sign the letter enclosed with this one; it will confirm the Department's choice of guardian and grant us permission to release the facts of the case, as we understand them, to him. It also grants you the option to choose your own guardian, provided that he or she fulfills the criteria set forth in this letter.

Amelia Bones

Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Harry turned the letter over for a moment, wondering why they had contacted him instead of Dumbledore directly. Was it the unusual nature of the case, or the fact that his parents were still alive but victims of an unknown curse, or--?

And then he knew what it probably was, and wanted to laugh. The Ministry would have heard about his magic. And they would want to keep things quiet, since Harry was Connor's brother. All of this was being arranged to pass the case along as quietly and as quickly as possible, without the possibility of either making it public *or* vexing Harry.

Harry glanced up at the smiling face of Dumbledore. "The Ministry contacted my parents," he said. "They don't remember me, so they're appointing a guardian who has to live on Hogwarts grounds and oversee my training. They want to appoint you."

Dumbledore's smile grew wider. "That would be wonderful, Harry. I have long looked forward to an opportunity to work more closely with you."

Harry nodded at him, then turned back to the letter enclosed with Amelia Bones's letter. It had a simple line for his signature (magically binding, of course) if he accepted Dumbledore as his guardian, and another few lines for him to fill out, complete with signature, if he wanted another guardian. The letter warned him sternly that his chosen guardian would have to comply with all the standards set out by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement in the original document.

The necessary words were written, and a brilliant white flash traveled around the room. Harry chuckled to himself. He would have to study the Ministry letters and see what magic they used, if he got the chance. His hand was already empty, the letter having apparently communicated with the original document to confirm that the chosen guardian met the standards set forth in it, with him to confirm that this was what he really wanted, and with Hogwarts to confirm that the chosen guardian was in residence, and then taken itself off to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Harry wondered idly if the Aurors had come up with that particular spell, or if it was the product of some overworked and underpaid researcher.

"Excellent, Harry!" Dumbledore said, sitting back. "May I see the original letter?"

Harry handed it over to him, and waited in patient silence as he read it. Dumbledore glanced up at the end of it, blinking. "I am flattered that you have changed your mind about trusting me, Harry," he said.

"I haven't," said Harry, and enjoyed seeing Dumbledore's face change. *I can be like a lion, sometimes. I can face what I have done.* "There is that option they mention at the end, about choosing my own guardian. I did. And, as you saw, he met all the standards set forth in the letter." He shrugged.

"Who?" Dumbledore whispered.

"Professor Severus Snape, of course," said Harry pleasantly.

Dumbledore stood. Harry could sense the power rising around him. He met Dumbledore's eyes calmly. "Will you really do this, Headmaster?" he asked. "We could destroy Hogwarts if we were dueling. You know that."

"You have not asked Severus, Harry," said the Headmaster. "Are you quite sure that he would be willing to take on a burden?"

"Oh, I am quite sure that he would be," said Harry, and bared his teeth in what was not a smile.

Dumbledore stared at him for a long moment, then sat back down and shook his head. "I must admit I do not understand,

Harry,” he said softly. “Why would you do this? There are so many things that you must be trained in, so many things you do not understand, and I am the one who can best train you to know them.”

“You haven’t explained them so far,” said Harry. “You made me a slave. Merlin only knows why, but I trust Snape, and he’s proven how much he’s willing to risk for me.”

“I will make every effort to remove him from you again,” said Dumbledore calmly. “You must know that.”

“I know that,” said Harry.

“How long will we play this game?” Dumbledore’s face was long and sad, sad enough to break a heart. “How long until we are the allies we must be to defeat Voldemort, Harry?”

“As long as it takes,” said Harry, and turned his back. Dumbledore didn’t try to make him remain in the office.

Harry made for the dungeons. He walked up to Snape’s office and knocked on the door, knowing the professor was working late on Remus’s Wolfsbane Potion.

The look on Snape’s face when he opened the door made all Harry’s anger at Dumbledore dissolve. “Idiot child!” Snape hissed. “What are you doing here? If the Headmaster—“

“I just made you my guardian by filing a paper with the Ministry,” Harry interrupted him. “Can I come in?”

Snape stared at him intently for a long moment. There was a bare flicker of warmth in his eyes before he inclined his head and moved out of the way. “Idiot child,” he said again, more mildly this time. “I suppose that you have left all your brewing equipment with Minerva.”

“Yes,” said Harry agreeably.

“Well, we will ask her for it tomorrow. In the meantime, come here and make yourself useful for once.”

Harry moved over to brew one of the lesser potions that the Wolfsbane took. After working so hard on Hawthorn’s batch, he could tell easily where the brewing was at any stage.

“And Harry?”

Harry glanced up. Snape was watching him with his head on one side.

“Well done,” Snape said quietly.

This time, it destroyed the bitter memory of what he had said after the Veritaserum and replaced it with a good one. Harry grinned at him and turned back to his brewing.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: A Little Knowledge

October 17th, 1993

Dear Mr. Potter:

I hope you will forgive the formal means of salutation at the beginning of this letter, and the charm that I have placed on this parchment to make my handwriting unfamiliar. I do know you, I know a great deal about you, and it feels hypocritical to hide behind a mask that I have created. However, I feel I have no choice. If you knew who I was, you would question me, distrust my motives for communicating with you like this, and above all demand answers that you would not believe. Please, be patient with me, and read what I write here, and do your best to open your mind and grant that the possibility of truth is here, if not the reality of it.

I am under pressure as I write this. There are many who would like nothing better than to take away the choice I am intent on giving you—

No, those are the wrong words. The choice has always been yours, and I am not the one who will give it to you. I am the one who, if all goes well and you grant the possibility of truth to these words, will let you know it exists.

You will have read the history of the First War with the Dark Lord. You will have read other histories. I know that you are astonishingly well-versed in ancient pureblood customs, and that you have used that knowledge in the past to dance with purebloods and best them on their own territory. However, I am asking you to reconsider a very simple fact of that history:

Why has the title used always been “Lord?” (Or “Lady,” as in the case of the Light Lady Calypso McGonagall, but I must admit ruefully that witches often have better sense than to become involved in games of conquest and power, preferring instead to dwell on the inner mind and develop their own control of themselves).

The title is important, Mr. Potter. It stakes a claim as well as announces what the wizard is to the whole world. The purebloods, and the Muggleborns—it is not the name I was born using for them, but I know it is the one you prefer—once they became part of the wizarding world, grant a certain recognition by using it. They acknowledge that the wizard holding it possesses power—power over them. Magic, Mr. Potter. It sings more sweetly than you can know, since you grew up with so much of your own power confined, one Lord in our world held up as a figure for you to revere, and one identified as the target of your enmity.

Dark Lords tend to conquer. Light Lords tend to rule. Both sway followers to their sides with the sheer lure of being near so much magic. And if one has to grant them the title of Lord and sometimes obey their commands, what of it? At least that immense power is not turned against them. And for many servants of the Lords, it has been about more than fear of that power, or even shared ideals. We were born to be near magic, those of us who carry it in our blood. It strengthens us, revitalizes us, cleanses our souls, works a rebirth in our perceptions of ourselves, changes our relationship to the world around us. Imagine it flowing over you like waves of an ocean that you can breathe, and which at the same time is light and sweet music and the scent of roses (or whichever flower you prefer). It is intoxicating. Not impossible to resist, especially once one is aware of it, but very convincing, very ensnaring.

Now imagine, Mr. Potter, what would happen if a wizard with such power came into our world—and did not claim the title of Lord. Imagine that he instead looked upon such compulsions as the Lords have been wont to use, and disdained them. Imagine that he worked to wield his power with such finesse and such delicacy that it would not harm the minds around it. Imagine he offered possibilities to those around him, paths for the future and hopes they could never have achieved without his magic to back them. Imagine that he was conscious, every moment, of what his power could do and what it might be used for, and weighed the hopes of those who came to him, and rejected the ones he deemed wrong instead of mindlessly obeying every wizard’s wish. Imagine such power bent to defend, to protect and serve.

Many Lords have gone mad trying to be such a creature, and ended up wearing the simpler title. Others have howled in fear and denied that such a possibility existed, because that would mean they would lose followers, or have to look too long and hard at their own tendency to use compulsion unthinkingly. And in practice, Mr. Potter, there has often been little difference between the Light and the Dark Lords. Both could wield the magic of both sides, compulsion or free will. It is the allegiances they declared themselves for that made the difference, that and the strength of their magic.

I will tell you now, Mr. Potter, that I think you have a good possibility of becoming such a wizard, nameless right now, but committed both to his own freedom and that of others. I am trying to show others that that might also be your path. But I can only persuade, and that will take a long time. I will not force. I will not compel. I have used Dark magic unhesitatingly in the past, but not for this. The purpose is too high, the path too bright.

Two things you must know:

First, Dumbledore fears what you may become. He fears what it would mean if a mere boy of thirteen was able to do greater and more moral things than he can, because he fears looking too closely at the consequences of his own decisions. It is a fear all the Light Lords have had.

Second, do not trust Sirius Black.

Starborn.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirteen: Padfoot and Moony

“Harry?”

Harry hastily folded Starborn's letter and put it in the pocket of his robe as Connor ducked into the Owlery. Harry shook his head and turned back to his task, binding the bundle he'd made around Hedwig's leg as she balanced on her perch. When he was certain it wouldn't fall off, he stepped back and met Hedwig's golden eyes.

"Take this to Lucius Malfoy, girl, please," he said softly.

Hedwig hooted at him, leaned forward to run a piece of his hair through her beak, and then took off, her wings sending up a mist of dust and feathers. Harry sneezed through it, and heard Connor sneezing behind him. Harry smiled. It was a peaceful moment enjoyed with his brother.

It didn't last.

"Harry?" Connor asked, his voice thick with disbelief. "What are you doing sending gifts to Lucius *Malfoy*, of all people?"

Harry turned to face him. Godric, Connor's black eagle-owl, was trying to get his attention from his perch, but Connor ignored him. His gaze was fixed steadily on Harry, his hazel eyes wide with disbelief and something that looked like betrayal. Harry sighed. He had become accustomed to that look on his brother's face lately.

"Because I'm truce-dancing with him," said Harry simply.

The puzzled expression on Connor's face didn't ease.

Harry muttered under his breath. "Isn't Sirius teaching you anything?" he asked, irritated, as he pushed past Connor and turned towards the stairs. "He said that he would. You need to know about pureblood customs and history and honor in order to make a good leader."

"He's been teaching me in compulsion magic," said Connor, voice gone cold, as he trailed Harry. "I thought you'd be *proud* of me, Harry. This what I'm supposed to learn. I'm learning to fight, to survive in the war, to be the Boy-Who-Lived. What else do you want me to do?"

Harry turned around and leaned against the wall of the staircase. "Connor, what do you think will happen after the war?"

Connor's face went blank—not the practiced draining of expression that he had lately whenever Harry disagreed with him about Slytherins, but true confusion. "What do you mean? I know we'll win. Sirius told me that Light Lords have always defeated Dark Lords, and that's what he's training me to be, a Light Lord."

Harry stifled a shudder. He had suspected that, but he had a different idea of what the term might mean now, after reading Starborn's letter. "All right, so we win the war. And then what happens?"

Connor said, in the voice of someone still trying to understand what he was thinking about, "Well—I think that we'll put the Death Eaters in Azkaban." Harry held his tongue. His brother *really* wouldn't understand the contacts that Harry had among the former Death Eaters. "And then we'll heal people who were hurt in the war. And Dumbledore will probably make a speech." He shook his head. "I don't know. What do you think will happen after the war, Harry?"

Harry sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "I think that we'll have a lot of people to heal," he said. "And I think there will be people who resent us for winning. And there will be purebloods on our side, and purebloods who aren't. I think we'll have a lot of work to do, Connor, to put the wizarding world back together again. If you don't know pureblood history and customs, how are you going to do it? You'll have to send someone else to speak to them instead of coming yourself, and that's an insult."

"Harry, you think *too much* about this kind of thing!" Connor cried, and flung an arm around his shoulders. "Now, come on. Sirius said that you could sit in on my lesson today. Remember?"

Harry managed to hide his flinch. "Yes, right," he said.

He ought to be grateful, he told himself as they hurried down the stairs. He got to spend time with his brother today, and all the other people he could have spent it with—Draco, Flint, Luna, Neville, Zacharias, Justin—had understood, if reluctantly, that a day with his brother was a rare treat.

But Harry had hoped that Connor would want to spend at least part of the day flying or eating or playing a prank. He didn't

want to sit and watch as compulsion magic was flung around for a few hours, then have to excuse himself because he was shaking and sick to his stomach with fear and revulsion.

As if reading his mind, Connor asked wistfully, “Harry, isn’t there some way that you could become more comfortable with compulsion magic? For my sake? It’s not a Dark gift, we know that now—“

“Remus would say it is,” Harry interrupted. “You remember how he explained Light and Dark magic at the beginning of the year.”

Connor shrugged. “Well, Remus was wrong. Are you going to believe him, or all the books that explain compulsion magic can be a Light gift, as long as the person who has it learns to control it?”

I got in trouble last year for trusting a book, Harry almost said, but stopped himself. Connor knew that all too well. He’d been possessed by Tom Riddle too, after all. “Can I read the book that explains what you are? You know, the goblin one?”

Connor blinked, then smiled. “Of course!” No doubt he was enthralled to see Harry finally interested in more than the disgusting aspect of compulsion magic.

Harry touched the letter in his pocket, and listened to the crinkle of parchment. Now that Starborn had given him an idea of what to look for, Harry really did want to read that book for himself, in the hopes that it would let him understand a little more of Starborn’s cryptic natterings.

The goblins of the North have long proclaimed themselves different from the goblins of the South, who have been working and living among wizards since before the Norman Conquest. The goblins of the North, on the other hand, have said that they would respect only a wizard who met a certain set of criteria...

“Very good, Connor!”

Harry blinked and glanced up. Connor and Sirius were across the room in the Shrieking Shack, and Connor had apparently just compelled a rabbit to hop straight into his hand. His brother was laughing in delight, and the rabbit was wildly struggling, fighting no visible pressure on his body.

Harry’s breath sped up, and his sight began to spin and narrow to a distant blur. He turned hastily, determinedly, back to Griphook Fishbaggin’s book. He could see why it fascinated Connor. It talked a lot about compulsion magic in vague and abstract terms, and mentioned good uses to which it had been put.

But it also praised free will in higher terms, and Harry wondered how that could have escaped his brother. Maybe he just hadn’t wanted to see.

That set of criteria has been variously and problematically defined, by both wizards and the goblins themselves. Following is a list of the words and phrases in Gobbledegook, the goblin tongue, that may be taken to refer to such a wizard.

Harry turned the page, and his mouth fell open. Connor hadn’t been kidding about the list of terms. Even the simplest had its own explanation, peppered with frequent question marks.

Halark mazkatin. *This phrase nominally translates to ‘opener of doors,’ but it is a puzzle why the goblins would need a second phrase for it, as they have their own word for ‘porter.’ Also, the doors are supposedly not literal. What does this mean?*

Kevnaz. *This word simply means ‘seer.’ At least, so I believed for a long time. However, I have learned that the implication is of a non-goblin seer. (Much as we refer to ‘non-human’ magical creatures, so the goblins of the North refer to ‘non-goblins.’) Yet, at the same time, do goblins believe that other species can even have true seers? I had not thought so.*

And on and on it went, with Fishbaggin seeming almost as confused as Harry was beginning to be. He heard a throat clearing, and it took that to tear his attention away from the book. Connor stood in front of him, smiling slightly.

“Yes?” Harry asked, when his brother simply went on smiling at him, instead of doing something.

Connor shook his head, grinning. “Just wanted to see how long it would take you to say yes,” he said. “Sirius wants to talk to

you about something. I'll see you back at Hogwarts, all right?" He bounced towards the entrance to the tunnel that ran under the Whomping Willow and back towards school. Harry gave a bewildered nod to his brother's back, then turned and looked at Sirius.

Sirius sat down on the bed beside Harry and put his head in his hands.

Harry tensed up at once. This was going to be another of the very worst sessions, then, the ones where Sirius cried and shook. Harry had dreaded them ever since the first time they happened, when he first visited the pair. Connor had simply stood in the background, an expression of sympathy on his face, as Sirius sobbed and told Harry how much he meant to him, he was his *godson*, he *meant* something to him, didn't he *see* that? Harry had to respond with awkward apologies and attempts to explain his distance, none of which went over well with Sirius. Since that time, Connor had left them alone when they talked. He claimed, when Harry asked him, that godfather and godson needed time alone.

Harry somewhat doubted that. He, at least, didn't need any time alone with the person Sirius had become, or was becoming.

Somewhat shocked by the bitterness of that thought, he was unprepared for Sirius to lift his head, wipe his eyes, and say, "Your parents sent me a letter, Harry. They've had Aurors questioning them. *Aurors!* The letter said they had a son called Harry Potter attending Hogwarts, whom they didn't remember, and until an attempt to remove the spell on them worked, he was going to spend his time with a former Death Eater called Severus Snape. The letter said that their son had chosen Snape as his guardian, out of all the choices available."

Harry stared. Sirius had gone from shocky and shaky to furious. His eyes were glowing as they had when he attacked Snape in the Great Hall. His hands were clenched in front of him, and he was breathing fast. Harry felt his magic respond instinctively, pouring through the channels in his body, ready to raise barriers if Sirius attacked him.

"Why?" Sirius whispered. "*Why* Snape, Harry? Why do you want him? I'm at Hogwarts, and so is Moony. They sent along a copy of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement's letter. You could have chosen one of us. Why did you pick him?" The last word was a snarl.

Harry bared his teeth. *So it's come down to this, then? Fine. He avoided it all summer, even after he knew. There's no reason to avoid it now.* "Do you know why I put that spell on my parents, Sirius?"

"What spell, Harry?" Sirius demanded, leaning nearer. His teeth were bared in a dog's warning. "What did you *do* to them?"

"*Fugitivus Animus Amplector,*" said Harry, as calmly as he could with his godfather so close. He wanted to defend himself, he realized. He wanted to call *Protego* and keep the Shield Charm between them. He wanted Snape there.

Sirius stared at him, then shook his head. "That's not possible," he said. "The Aurors would have recognized and broken that spell."

Harry laughed. It didn't sound nice. It made Sirius's face crumple a little. "They would have had to use as much power to break the spell as I did in casting it," he said. "And I don't think any Auror is quite that strong, or even two or three of them working in combination."

There. He'd said it, admitted his own power aloud to Sirius for the first time. *Let's see how he takes it.*

"Harry," Sirius whispered, and the balance in the room tilted crazily, away from anger and back towards sorrow again. "What have you done? What have you become? What's happened to my little godson who used to watch Connor singing about Gryffindor and clap his hands?"

Harry drew in a deep breath. "That wasn't me," he said. "That was—that was your godson. That was who I was, who my parents *made* me into."

Sirius froze. Then he said, "What are you talking about, Harry? Lily and James never made you sing if you didn't want to."

Harry clenched his fists, rolled off the bed, and stood up. He could feel the air around him chilling, his rage and his power spreading. "You were a Gryffindor, Sirius. Do you have to be such a bloody coward?"

Shocked speechless, Sirius didn't manage to respond before Harry turned and started shouting at him. It felt damn *good* to shout, Harry realized. The rage around him wasn't exactly turning hot, but it did relax, and seemed less likely to reach out and turn something to ice.

“They *hurt* me, Sirius! And you knew that, after what my mother told you last year, and you let them do it anyway! They twisted and warped my mind and my magic, bound me and changed me into something I never would have been if not for them! I still don’t really know *why* they did it, except that they needed a protector for Connor, and somehow they decided I’d do! But they should have helped protect him, too! They were the adults. You were the adults. You didn’t *act* like adults, but you were! You should have known! Why the hell didn’t you try to get me away from them, Sirius? Why did you treat me as if I’d done something wrong, just because I was Sorted into Slytherin? And now you’re on me about choosing Snape for my guardian.” Harry tried to laugh. It got caught in his throat. “Did you ever think that maybe I feel *safe* with him, because he tried to do something to help me, when you didn’t do a bloody fucking thing to keep my parents away from me, Sirius? Not one bloody fucking thing!”

Sirius’s face was ghost-white by the time Harry finished. It turned as gray as the Dementor’s robes in the next instant. He shook his head.

“There are so many things you don’t understand,” he murmured. “So many things...” He abruptly broke off with a cry, as though someone had hit him, and fell over and huddled on the bed again.

Harry shut his eyes and turned away. There was no satisfaction to be had in yelling at someone so weak, and he could already feel guilt creeping in where the rage had been. Sirius hadn’t actually been the one who hurt Harry. That was his parents. But Harry shuddered at the thought of facing them, because whatever he told them would affect his bond with Connor. They were Connor’s parents, too.

Do you have to be so selfish?

Harry tilted his head to the side. That sounded like his mother’s voice, and it was definitely coming from inside his mind—

Does everything have to revolve around you? Can’t you learn that other people have suffered in their lives, too, and that your sufferings don’t negate theirs or make them any less?

A flash of light and fire behind his eyes told Harry what this was. The phoenix web was reviving, perhaps stirred by his immense explosion of rage, and reaching out to take what it could of his thoughts.

His mother’s voice continued, relentless. *So you were trained to play the role of Connor’s protector. Does that matter? There was a time when you would have fought everyone else off rather than give up that role. Does that mean that we should apologize for making you what you are, the person Snape and Draco admire? They would never have paid attention to you if you weren’t the way you were, if you were just the Boy-Who-Lived’s older brother.*

Harry shook his head weakly. This couldn’t—this wasn’t true—

Your magic is only so strong because it was confined. When the confinement wears off, then you’ll be back to the strength that you always had. And then you’ll want your parents, your godfather, but they’ll have turned their backs on you, because you couldn’t appreciate what you had while you had it. Do you want to be left all alone? It sounds like you’re begging for that.

It sounded more and more like Lily as it went on, complete with the tearful recriminations on the end. Harry had heard her crying like that the few times as a child he tried to refuse his training, saying he was tired. Did he want Connor to die? She’d asked him that. Did he want his brother to lose his life because Harry didn’t know how to perform an effective Shield Charm, because he would rather sleep than learn how to defend Connor against curses?

And every time, Harry had picked himself up and gone back to his books. He could be tired later. One of the books had expressed it best, giving part of a speech that a Light Lord defending against a Dark Lord six hundred years ago had spoken, and ending with *Rest is for the dead.*

Harry felt himself fall to his knees, but dimly. The phoenix web was spreading over his vision now, turning everything into a haze of fire and gold, tightening its hold on his mind. Thoughts that had seemed thinkable a moment ago were becoming less so. Why had he shouted at Sirius? What did it matter that Sirius hadn’t confronted his parents about the way they treated him? Harry wouldn’t have wanted him to. He would have been upset. And look what happened to Remus when he interfered. He had to become a sacrifice, too, or at least his memories did, for the good of the wizarding world.

You inflict such pain when you protest, pain on others and on your bonds with others. Do you want that? Do you want Connor to look at you with disgust someday? Do you want him to ask you whether you choose the Slytherins or him, and

have you hesitate, and have him turn his back on you and the choice be lost forever? He's your brother. Draco is just your friend. How could you do this to him?

Harry cried out in misery, and heard footsteps abruptly hastening up the tunnel that led from the Whomping Willow.

“Harry? Sirius?”

Remus was in the room in the next moment, grabbing Harry and holding him close. Harry leaned his head on Remus's chest and stopped shaking. The phoenix web was retreating, pushed away by the presence of a person who obviously still cherished him, despite his daring to shout and use magic against other people.

Harry closed his eyes and fought to still the racing of his heart. He could feel Sirius and Remus exchanging glances over his head, and then heard them arguing, low-voiced. He could only catch splinters of their conversation through the pain and chaos in his head.

“..didn't have to do that...”

“*Snape* as a guardian, Moony! *Snape*...”

“...has reasons...”

“...way of spending more time with us...”

“...what happened....”

“No way we can tell him what happened! No way...”

“Hush, Sirius, I know, I know. Let's ask him.” Remus gently reached down and tilted up Harry's chin, until Harry's eyes were level with his. The werewolf gave him an equally gentle smile. “Harry,” he said conversationally, “did you know that I can run on full moon nights since I've started taking the Wolfsbane Potion?”

Harry blinked, trying to wrench his thoughts away from the consuming mix of guilt for his own actions and anger against his mother and Dumbledore for placing the phoenix web in his mind in the first place. “Really?” he asked cautiously. “I thought you still stayed—well, here, or in your office.”

Remus laughed gently. “Hardly! I'm a man in a wolf's body now, able to roam and run without losing control of my instinct. Sirius transforms into Padfoot, and comes with me.” He hesitated for a moment, then nodded, as if he'd had to convince himself this was the right decision. “And we'd like you to come with us. We run through the Forbidden Forest, mostly. I think it might be a good distraction for your magic.”

Harry could imagine that it would be. The one thing he didn't want to think about was spending time with Sirius, after what Sirius had said to him.

But that wasn't really Sirius's fault, was it? You should have known better than to question him about that.

“All right,” he whispered. “This full moon?”

Remus nodded enthusiastically. “Just one night, Harry. I don't know if you'd be up to running around all three nights, anyway.” He smiled. “But you ought to see us. There's a—a wildness in the Forbidden Forest that I can sense when I'm not human. I think you'll enjoy it, too.”

Harry swallowed several times. “All right,” he whispered at last.

“Excellent!” Remus hugged him one more time and stood up. “Now, come on. I'm hungry, and want lunch.”

Harry smiled at him and accompanied him out of the Shack. He knew Sirius was following them, but he didn't dare to look back. He was not sure if he would rush to Sirius in that moment, hug him, and beg his forgiveness, or try to strip his flesh from his bones with only the knife's edge of his magic.

Snape took one look at him when Harry came to help finish brewing the Wolfsbane that night and strode across the room, catching his chin and staring hard into his eyes. Harry averted his gaze and brought up his Occlumency shields.

He wouldn't understand, whispered the phoenix web. He wouldn't want to spare Sirius, would he? He hates Sirius. And you have to try to understand Sirius. It's obvious that something's happened to him. You have to try and understand, Harry. Everyone deserves a second chance.

"What happened?" Snape demanded, without letting Harry go.

"Nothing," Harry whispered.

"If you will not tell me, I cannot help you." Snape still didn't let him go.

Harry wanted to tell him. The temptation was strong, the words hovering on the tip of his tongue. But then Snape would get angry on his behalf, and storm and rage, and there would be another fight between Snape and Sirius, and this time Dumbledore might really sack Snape. How could Harry bear being the cause of that? He was barely standing the rush of memories that the phoenix web had brought back to him all day, of times when he'd hurt other people with his magic or his selfishness.

He cleared his throat. Snape waited, his eyes intent.

"I don't want to talk about it," Harry whispered, and then wrenched himself free and walked over to one of the waiting cauldrons.

Snape's eyes cut holes in his back. Harry chopped and mixed and sliced, and went on doing so until he felt Snape move back to his own work. He let out a low breath.

"Do not imagine for one breath that I have forgotten this," Snape said then, voice soft and deadly. "And do not imagine for one moment that I do not know who is the cause of this."

Harry glanced up in panic, only to see Snape staring fixedly at a locked cupboard across the room. "Your parents," Snape whispered.

Harry sagged. No, it wasn't healthy to have Snape so angry at James and Lily, but at least they were in Godric's Hollow, not here at Hogwarts where Snape might harm them. "Yes," he said, as though agreeing.

Snape said nothing for the rest of the evening, except to direct Harry in the brewing of the potion. His gaze didn't often waver from the locked cabinet, no matter what he was doing. Harry wondered what was in there that was so interesting.

"Ready, Harry?" Sirius asked, now looking smiling and cheerful, much more his normal self.

Harry stood outside the castle, shivering slightly as a chill breeze cut through him. They were on the lawn in front of the Forbidden Forest, which loomed dark and black and oddly inviting. Overhead, the full moon blazed with rigid clarity, like bone that someone had set on fire.

Harry's gaze went briefly to the werewolf standing on the other side of Sirius. Remus didn't look exactly like a normal wolf when transformed, being longer in the jaw and leg. But his coat was gray, and he had his head lifted so that he could sniff the wind. And he hadn't attacked anyone yet. Harry found himself hoping that the same thing was happening to Hawthorn Parkinson, wherever she was. He had delivered the Wolfsbane Potion by owl a few days ago, since she had written him that it was too dangerous for her to come to Hogwarts. Harry wanted to imagine her taking it and then running through the woods, enjoying the strength and speed and power of her lupine body without the urge to kill anyone.

He turned to Sirius and nodded.

Sirius grinned, the devil-may-care grin that he used when he played a prank. "Don't worry if you can't keep up," he said softly. "That's not the point. Just run."

He transformed into the black dog, and barked once.

Moony tossed back his head and howled. Harry shivered. That sound was definitely *not* a normal wolf's voice. It had no trace of melancholy to it, only wild power.

Padfoot barked again, and then began to run forward. The werewolf's legs surged down, and then forward, and he sprinted into the woods a good distance ahead of Padfoot. The big black dog barked enthusiastically, still running.

Harry ran after them.

It was easy to keep up with them at first, even with the branches slapping and scraping at him. He leaped over the trail sometimes as it twisted and turned in front of him, and took advantage of the clear areas that Moony and Padfoot had left. But soon they were plunging through thick underbrush that snagged but didn't stop them, and Harry had to run behind them, trying to keep track of the plunging shapes. He could see Moony still speeding up, moving effortlessly, and knew from his own harsh panting that he couldn't go much longer.

Then his magic came out.

Harry felt it stir and take a deep breath, as though it liked the smells of the wild Forest night. Then it swept through his body, and sped his feet, and cooled his panting, and eased the stitch that had started to grow in his side. Harry felt it lift and beat like wings, the way he had only felt a few times. One of them had been in the battle with Voldemort at the end of first year, and he shuddered. That had not been far from where he was now running.

But this time, he was not in battle, and the magic was not angry or defensive, only silent and intent. He wanted to keep up with Moony and Padfoot. The magic knew that, and it was going to help him.

He felt himself skim through tangles that should have caught him, and wondered if he was actually flying through them, or if his magic had simply brushed them aside. He avoided roots and rocks that should have caught his feet, and sprang across small hollows that should have made him trip. He ran and he ran and he ran, and still his breath passed cleanly and easily out of his lungs. It made him feel like singing.

A trill of song passed above his head as if in answer. Harry lifted his head, and saw Fawkes flying there, his wings spread wide and his tail trailing like a comet's. Even through the darkness, Harry could feel the phoenix's eye on him. Fawkes sang again, and then rose and disappeared briefly behind the branches. Harry knew he was tracking him, though, could feel the bright presence moving along steadily at his right shoulder.

Then there came the sound of hooves, and centaurs were galloping as steadily opposite him. They did not say anything, but when Harry glanced at him, they nodded their heads once, in grave gestures of recognition. They reared in the next moment, and tore back into the Forest.

Other creatures replaced them, things that Harry recognized from his reading and others he didn't. He thought he saw a swift, two-legged thing that was not a bird, with grasping talons and claws on its feet big enough to tear a man in two. He knew at one point there were unicorns, running with their tails behind them like streams of starlight, their horns catching the full moon's every gleam in ways that brought tears to his eyes. He knew he saw the coiling shape of an immense snake, and the striding legs of what could have been giant spiders. None of them stayed long, except for Fawkes, whom Harry could still feel like a beacon above him. All of them moved alongside him for a short time, often making some brief gesture of invitation or recognition, and then plunged back into the darkness of the Forest.

Harry felt less and less fear as he ran. His magic spread around him, filing the Forest with familiarity if not with light. He ran contained within it, spinning along as if on a broom. But this was the exaltation he had always felt on a broom strengthened and deepened. He was not afraid even when he recognized the three-headed shape of a Runespoor slithering rapidly beside him, and he called out a greeting in its own tongue. The three heads turned towards him, gave three identical snaps in unison, and then guided the Runespoor back into the bushes.

Harry knew it would have to end at some point, and it did. He jerked to a stop in a clearing, his heart hammering and his head filled with gold that did not come from the phoenix web. He spun around in a circle, his hands above his head, laughing. He felt the light when Fawkes came spiraling down and landed on his shoulder with a rushing croon. He felt his magic spread out further, shaking its head like a wild horse, rearing and dancing, with no purpose to hurt or destroy, only play.

He felt it when Moony came to the edge of the clearing and jerked to a stop, his nose in the air and his attitude and posture stiff. Harry turned and looked towards him, still smiling.

The werewolf's brilliant amber eyes were staring at him. Harry was puzzled by them. He could see recognition in them, the

same that the other magical creatures had seemed to show him, but why? It was not as though Moony didn't know who he was. Remus had been around Harry since he was a baby.

“Good show, Harry!”

Sirius was behind Moony, panting, human again, his body covered with scratches and his face freer than it had been in a long time. Harry found himself thinking that he ought to run through the Forbidden Forest every night, if it did him this much good. Moony turned away, the odd recognition disappearing from his eyes, and nudged at Sirius's hand.

Sirius scratched his ears, his eyes on Harry now. “How did you keep up with us?” he asked, with a smile in his voice that said he knew the answer already.

“Magic,” said Harry at once. Fawkes shifted on his shoulder and rubbed his neck against Harry's, prompting Harry to raise a hand and scratch the golden feathers. They bristled with a pleasant heat, counteracting the chill of the late October air.

Sirius smiled and nodded. “Think you want to run on?”

Harry thought about it, but an immense yawn caught him, and he shook his head. Fawkes made a chirp of protest as that disturbed his perch on Harry's shoulder. “I think I'll go back in and go to bed,” he said. The air still thrummed with magic, but it had calmed down now. Harry decided he would sleep better with the memory of peace and wonder still untaxed, rather than exhausting himself. “See you tomorrow, Sirius, Remus.” He nodded to the werewolf.

Moony's ears came up, and he stared hard at Harry. Harry shrugged and eased past them, back through the Forest. The walk was still light and easy, though far slower than it had been earlier. Harry supposed he ought to worry about some creature of the Forest possibly confronting and hurting him on the way back.

None of them did, though Harry did sometimes see signs of movement off the path, indicating he had an escort again. Maybe that was due to Fawkes, who showed no sign of moving from his perch on Harry's shoulder. Harry reached the entrance of the castle, and still Fawkes didn't move. Harry reached the entrance to the Slytherin common room, and paused to look at the phoenix again. Fawkes put his head on one side and watched him calmly back, with one eye.

“Won't Dumbledore be wondering where you are?” Harry asked.

Fawkes gave a cheerful trill. Harry couldn't translate it the way Dobby would have, but he recognized the tone: *don't care*.

Harry thought back to his last visit to Dumbledore's office. The phoenix hadn't been there. Maybe Dumbledore wouldn't worry at that.

“All right,” he said, with a shrug that Fawkes reprimanded him for, and whispered, “*Dignatio verus*,” to the wall. It opened, and Harry made his way to the third-year boys' bedroom. He saw a slight shift that was Draco relaxing into sleep. Harry had told him where he would be tonight, but the other boy had waited up for him anyway.

Fawkes fluttered from Harry's shoulder to the top of his canopy while he put on his pyjamas and brushed his teeth, but then insisted on coming inside the hangings with him and perching on the edge of his bed, radiating warmth.

“Cuddly thing, aren't you?” Harry muttered, and closed his eyes.

Fawkes began to sing, softly enough that Harry didn't think he was disturbing anyone else. He fell asleep contentedly, and for once, when phoenix music twined with his dreams, he wasn't frightened of it.

Albus Dumbledore stood at his window, hands clenched hard on the sill. He could see the full moon from here, and he knew that underneath it somewhere, Sirius and Remus were running, as well as other werewolves, some tame, some not. It was not that which had disturbed him.

Magic had brought him out of bed. Magic had jerked him awake. Albus could have slept through any of the ordinary small flares that were the professors performing spells, or a first-year's accidental magic escaping his control. But this was something else, a deep and booming symphony that had raised a thousand thousand voices in response to it. The Forbidden Forest was still stirring, not like a hornet's nest but like some sleek and beautiful creature awakened after a long sleep.

And about to go hunting, Albus thought, and shivered. This was the first song of a deeper threat than Voldemort was. He knew that Voldemort would be defeated, thanks to the prophecy. Harry might easily raise his voice and rouse so many answers that something altogether different would happen, something that would rock the foundations of the very wizarding world. And when foundations rocked, people died.

He *must* bind the boy again. It was the only answer. He had thought that the subtle strengthening of the phoenix web he had been doing lately would work, but if Harry's magic was as free as this, it was a sign that the web had weakened once more.

He turned to go back to bed, giving Fawkes's empty perch a frown along the way. Granted, the phoenix had been gone for long periods of time before, but it wasn't like him to stay away when Albus could have used the company.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fourteen: Detention With Draco

Clink.

Albus sighed and straightened his back as the last link in his trap was placed. It wouldn't be possible to use it until tonight—the devices needed time to adapt to the spells he'd placed on them, and Harry would need to be in his rooms, sleeping, which would happen for sure after the Halloween Feast—but he doubted that anyone would discover it before then. He had commanded the house elves to place the devices in out-of-the-way spots, and of course, since he was Headmaster of Hogwarts, they had obeyed him gladly and swiftly.

He waved a hand to dismiss the hovering window through which he'd observed the trap placement, and then sat down heavily behind his desk, to once more mourn that such a trap had been necessary. If Harry had only listened to his mother's words in his mind yesterday, coming from one of the unmodified devices, Albus would not have had to do this.

If Voldemort had not done what he did the night he attacked Godric's Hollow, you would have no reason to worry about this at all.

Albus nodded his head, once, in determination, and then straightened. It was useless wishing for the present to turn back and change the past, and he had lived long enough to know exactly how powerless regrets were.

He swept from the room, then, to prepare for the Halloween Feast, giving Fawkes's perch only one irritated glance along the way.

“Draco, what is *wrong* with you?”

Draco turned around and relaxed a little. Harry was fine, though he looked windblown from Quidditch practice; the first game, against Gryffindor, was on Saturday, and Flint had been drilling all his team hard. Flint had also forbidden Draco from coming to watch the practice, claiming that he distracted Harry. Draco didn't think that was true, and even if he had, would have determined it fair payment for the way that he worried whenever Harry was out of sight.

Today, though, his jumpiness and twitchiness had increased, and he didn't know *why*. He just shook his head and reached down to touch a piece of Harry's hair that was sticking straight up from his head, grinning. Harry swatted his hand away with a practiced motion and shook his head.

“I'm going to go to the library and study with Neville,” he announced, ducking down to pick up his bag from the floor.

“Good,” said Draco, swinging down to collect the Transfiguration book he'd laid beside the bed. “I'll come with you.”

Harry gave him a long look. “Zacharias will probably be there too,” he said. “There's really no need for me to have an escort to the library, Draco.”

Draco's nervousness spilled out his mouth before he could stop it. “Yes there fucking well is, Harry, and you know it.” He strode up to Harry and pushed his hair back. The lightning bolt scar was inflamed, but not bleeding. Draco managed to hide his surprise and rally before that ruined the point he wanted to make. “Someone might try to attack you at any time.”

“Somehow I think the Headmaster has better things to do than lurk around corners and wait for me, Draco,” said Harry, and

his magic swirled and grumbled.

“I don’t.”

Harry shook his head. “*Fine*. Come if you want to. But I don’t enjoy the feeling that I’m keeping you from your homework. You know Potions as well as I do. Poor Neville doesn’t, though, and that’s what I’ll be tutoring him in.” He turned determinedly towards the door down to the common room.

“That’s why I’ll be studying something else,” said Draco, and stifled a laugh as he saw Harry’s flush. *The poor boy does hate being embarrassed.*

The further they walked away from the Slytherin common room, the better Draco felt—until they ascended the stairs into the entrance hall and he felt it again, a buzzing and nagging against his nerves, building to a pain like a beesting on his right temple. Draco turned to the right, and the beesting moved until it seemed to hit him in the face. Draco narrowed his eyes, staring hard at the tiny alcoves and doors scattered around the Great Hall. *Where is that coming from? What is it?*

“Draco?”

Draco could hear Harry tapping his foot, but he ignored him for the moment. If he had a way to get rid of his jumpiness, then yes, he would take it. He slunk forward, and finally traced the buzzing and the pain to a small door that was probably a broom closet. He found it hard to concentrate on. Notice-Me-Not spells seemed to be worked into the wood. After a moment, though, he grasped the door and swung it open.

The buzzing wrongness focused on the one odd object in the closet: a silver Pensieve, sitting on the floor and wound with glowing golden runes. Draco frowned. There was something wrong with the Pensieve’s magic, something twisted away from the usual purpose, but he couldn’t figure out what it was just from looking. He would have to touch it.

“Draco, don’t.”

Harry was holding his shoulder with one hand, and his other extended his wand when Draco looked. His expression had gone flinty. Draco stared in fascination. It was the first time he had seen open anger on Harry’s face without an explosion of magic following that made him drop into a fetal position from the headache. The ferocity suited Harry better than the whimpering weakness that had afflicted him this summer, he thought.

“Why not?” Draco asked. “I know that’s what’s bothering me, Harry.”

“I don’t feel anything,” said Harry stubbornly.

“You haven’t been trained like I have,” said Draco, as kindly as he could. “And even then, you’re so powerful that your magic shields you from tiny influences like these. This is subtle. But I know it’s been making me jumpy, or part of it.” He brushed Harry’s now-hesitant hand from his shoulder and walked forward, kneeling to stick his head into the Pensieve.

“*Draco!*” came Harry’s anguished cry, and he heard feet running.

Then the memory swallowed him.

Draco blinked and glanced around. He knew for a fact that he didn’t recognize this place. It was a small, neat room, with wizarding pictures on the walls that displayed an unfamiliar series of scenes, mostly grassy fields with the grass rippling in the wind. The chairs sat close around a cozy hearth, which in Malfoy Manor would have been twice as big, and a bookcase packed tight with books stood along one wall. A staircase off to his left led upwards, and Draco supposed there must be more rooms up there. He shivered. The house would be claustrophobically small if there weren’t.

“Now, Harry, recite the names of the seven defensive kinds of curse for me.”

Draco turned, and his breath caught in his throat and turned to glue. Behind him, near a couch, were two figures he recognized, despite not having studied them closely. One was Lily Potter, whom he’d briefly met in Dumbledore’s office last year. Her face was worn and lined, her mouth set as she stared down at the child balancing on a chair next to her.

The other was Harry, Harry at perhaps five or six years old, with his glasses already in place and his eyes on the book that he

held. At his mother's words, however, he shut the book and began to recite obediently.

"Shielding curses, mirror curses, dream curses..."

Draco recognized the names of only those first two types of defensive curse. The others he'd never heard of. Harry recited them flawlessly, and then sat with his eyes on his mother's face and waited.

Draco felt slightly sick when he realized Harry was looking at his mother the way a Crup looked at its master for approval. And Lily gave him what he wanted, with a nod and a smile and a motion of her hand that came damn near being a pat on the head. Harry beamed. Then Lily stood and backed to the far side of the room. Harry sat where he was at a subtle gesture from her.

She has him well-trained, doesn't she? Draco thought, anger burning like bile in the back of his throat.

"Now," said Lily, "pretend that I'm casting spells at you. This is a battle to save Connor's life. Connor is behind you and to the right." Harry's eyes half-shut, and Draco knew he was envisioning it. "Tell me what kind of defensive curse you would use to stop each kind of spell."

She drew her wand and moved it in a half-circle. "*Reducto!*"

The spell did not actually shoot towards Harry, but Harry tensed as if it had and said, "A mirror curse. Then you'd have to deal with your own *Reducto* reflected back twice or three times."

Lily nodded. "That will do. *Consopio!*"

"A dream curse," said Harry, "to arrest the sleep in mid-motion and throw it back to you."

Lily tilted her head briefly to the left. "Acceptable, if you think you could really catch my spell and throw it."

Harry lifted his head slightly, his eyes gleaming. Draco would have expected him to smile, but his face remained silent and intent. "Can I try?" he asked softly.

Lily nodded. "*Consopio!*"

The sleeping spell had barely left Lily's wand when Harry held up a hand and shouted, "*Speculum Consopio!*"

A milky substance formed in front of Harry, bouncing the spell so fast that Draco was still blinking when he realized Lily had sprawled out on the floor and gone to sleep. Harry hopped off his chair, ran to her, and lightly touched her cheek. Lily stirred and woke, staring at her son. "I thought you said you would use a dream curse, rather than a mirror curse," she murmured.

"I thought I would, too," said Harry. "But I think a mirror curse works better with that particular spell." He was smiling, and Draco stared. That certainly transformed his face.

Lily stood up, and the smile evaporated as Harry watched his mother. "Tell me why you changed your mind," Lily said, in a tone of quiet iron that Draco had never heard even his mother use. *Well, maybe the time I chased fairies all through the eastern rose garden and broke most of the flowers*, he thought.

"Because I—" Harry stopped, chewing his lip.

"The truth, Harry," said Lily, still in that iron voice.

"Partially because I thought it really was a good idea," said Harry, bowing his head. "And partially because—well, does it matter if a Death Eater is asleep or asleep and having nightmares? They still couldn't chase us."

"They do deserve to suffer for attacking your brother," Lily said, sinking to her knees in front of Harry. "That is the way you have to think, Harry."

"But I thought being nice was a good thing." Harry sounded timid, fragile, unsure. Draco wished he could do something to change this, but morbid fascination—and furious curiosity about why this Pensieve had been placed in the broom closet—made him keep watching.

“It is,” said Lily gently. “For your brother. Connor is the one who has to remain innocent to defeat Voldemort, Harry. Remember, I told you about that last week? Connor has to show mercy.”

Harry nodded, his eyes half-lidded, as though he were trying to recall a difficult lesson, or a dream that insisted on escaping his grasp. Draco had to swallow bile again.

“But you have to be strong,” said Lily, and then put her hand beneath her son’s chin and tilted his head up so that his green eyes met hers. They were almost the same shade of green, Draco thought, and wanted to believe that was the only similarity he could see between their faces. “That means that if an enemy comes up to you and tries to hurt you, you have to be willing to hurt them back. If someone tries to kill you, then you have to be willing to kill them. Or Connor will die before he’s eleven years old. Do you want your brother to die?”

“No,” Harry whispered.

Lily hugged him. “And I know that you don’t want to kill him through inaction, either. Just keep this in mind, Harry. Anyone could turn out to be an enemy. Almost everyone, except the Gryffindors and the known pureblood families who serve the Light, could be a traitor or a Death Eater. So you’ve got to be careful. I know that you’ll make friends when you go to school, but you have to be careful around them all the time. And if one of them says something bad about Connor, or tries to hurt him, then you’ll have to hurt them back.”

Draco wanted to step out of the Pensieve, but not strongly enough to resist watching the rest of the memory. *It’s a wonder that he didn’t hex me for the first remark I made about his brother. It’s a wonder that he’s in Slytherin and seems to like it. It’s a miracle that he has any sense of compassion left.*

“I know,” said Harry, and he looked and sounded solemn.

“Other than that,” Lily said softly, “you are doing very well, Harry. You have just that little bit left to learn. Connor comes first, always and forever. When you’ve learned that, then I’ll never worry about him again. I know that you’ll be there, protecting him against all his enemies, and making them hurt if they try to hurt him.” She touched a hand to his forehead, resting it over the lightning bolt scar. “Connor has mercy and compassion. You’ll have to be justice, Harry, and sometimes the executioner.”

Harry nodded at her, and then the memory trembled to a stop, and Draco knew that it was ended. He wrenched himself backwards with a gasp, and then kicked viciously at the Pensieve. The golden runes on the sides were hissing like Harry’s snake had done last year, but they quieted when the silvery liquid of the thoughts inside splashed out and ran across them, dousing their glow.

Draco turned towards Harry. He had one hand pressed to his temple and was breathing harshly. He opened his eyes, but they had gone half-glossy.

“What are you hearing?” Draco whispered.

“My mother’s voice,” Harry whispered back. “Telling me that I have to be justice, I have to be executioner, because Connor is the gentle and merciful one.” He gritted his teeth, and Draco wondered if it was against pain, real or remembered, or to make himself speak the next words. “I can hear them repeating over and over in my head. The phoenix web is coming back.”

Draco gave a sharp glance at the Pensieve, knowing now how that was possible. Then he grabbed Harry’s shoulders and lowered him gently to the floor. Harry was panting as though he fought an enemy, and Draco could feel his muscles jumping like a nervous unicorn’s.

“It’s all right,” Draco whispered. “It’s just a memory, Harry, and she can’t hurt you. And you’ve already protected other people than Connor. You protected me from Ron’s hexes last year. You protected Luna from being bullied. You’ve protected Neville from failing in Potions. You got between Granger’s wand and me in the library the other day. You protect and shield all kinds of people. You show mercy and compassion all the time.” His own heart was pounding, and he wished suddenly that his mother was there. He knew he could soothe Harry, since he’d done it this summer, but Narcissa could soothe *him*, and make him as strong as he needed to be for Harry.

“But that’s different,” Harry whispered. “Wrong. I shouldn’t have done that, not when Connor needed me.” To Draco’s horror, he looked up with that glint in his eyes that Draco had hoped was gone forever, the one that said he was sorry and valued Draco’s friendship, but expected it to be dropped any moment. “I need to go find him.”

Draco started to respond, and felt several sharp buzzing pains center on his face. *There must be other Pensieves*, he thought. *That's why I'm feeling them now. And we've triggered the trap, or maybe disrupting this one Pensieve did, and they're all focusing on Harry and trying to put him back under the phoenix web.*

Draco told Harry, "Stay here," rather unnecessarily—he didn't think Harry could have moved—and then rushed out of the room and turned his face in the direction of the pain. It was like facing into a stinging wind, but he found the source of the problem almost at once. There was a Pensieve in a closet on the other side of the hall. Draco kicked it over without bothering to glance into it and see what memory it held.

Then he tracked the pain into the dungeons, and kicked over two Pensieves in a corridor near the Slytherin common room. There was one near the Potions classroom, and another near Snape's office. They'd formed as much of a circle around Harry as possible, Draco thought as he soaked his shoe kicking over the sixth one. When he lay in his bed that night, probably, they would have sprung into motion, and he would have been overwhelmed and buried by the onslaught of memories.

The buzzing pain was quite faint by now. Draco breathed a sigh of relief and turned towards the stairs out of the dungeons. He thought the final one would be near the Great Hall. He could disrupt it, and then—

The Headmaster was standing down the corridor, watching him.

Draco took a deep breath and plastered a smile across his face. "Hello, Headmaster, sir," he said. "I didn't know you went walking in the dungeons. It's a good place for a chill morning walk."

"You have been disobedient, Mr. Malfoy," said Dumbledore. He raised his wand. "And I think that you have earned yourself —"

Draco let out another sigh of relief as he felt the magic that erupted from behind Dumbledore, bathing him in the scent of roses on flowing crystalline waves. The air brightened and turned sweet, and then Harry stalked around Dumbledore, who had frozen the moment the magic broke free, and faced the Headmaster. Draco couldn't see the expression Harry wore. He didn't think he needed to. The way that Dumbledore's face blanched was enough.

"How *dare* you do this?" Harry whispered. "How *dare* you try to hurt him?" His magic climbed, but still the sensations Draco felt were mostly light and sweetness. He shrugged, deciding not to question the change. It was more pleasant than the pain he usually felt when Harry was angry. "Would you have hexed him or tried to kill him, the way you did Peter?"

Peter? Draco thought, and decided that was one of the things that he would ask Harry about later. Right now, he didn't think it was a good idea to ask Harry anything.

The Headmaster, of course, was the kind of fool who would try, and who, moreover, would paste on a scolding look as he watched Harry. "Harry," he said mildly, "you know that what I was doing was only for your own good. The Pensieves would have tamed your magic and made you able to think of your brother kindly again. I know that you have been having arguments. This would soothe them."

"I want to be able to choose the arguments I have, thank you, Professor," said Harry. Draco watched ice glazing the stones under his feet. "And that still doesn't explain what you were going to do to Draco."

"Harry, my dear boy, I was only going to assign him detention." Dumbledore fixed Draco with that same mildly scolding glance. "Disrupting my measures to help you the way he has done deserves missing the Halloween Feast, I think."

Draco stuck his tongue out at the old man. He was sure that the punishment would have been much harsher if Harry hadn't interfered.

He saved me again, he realized then. *He might not like to think of it that way, but he does keep getting between people who aren't his brother and harm.*

"I want detention with him," said Harry.

"But, my dear boy, you have not done anything wrong," said Dumbledore. "At least, you have not broken school rules. You have been morally wrong, and that is a blow to your relationship with your brother that it might take a long time to recover from, but nonetheless—"

He shut up then. Draco edged a step to the right, and caught a glimpse of Harry's face. *Yes, I would have shut up, too.*

“Really?” Harry asked darkly. “I think attacking the Headmaster ought to do nicely.” He raised both hands.

His magic bulged and rippled around him, and then turned abruptly sideways. Draco felt a wind pulling and tugging on him, causing him to move a step closer to Harry. But it let him go almost at once, and lashed out, focusing on Dumbledore. Draco watched in confusion. Was Harry just trying to make the Headmaster trip and stumble over his robes?

No, he wasn't, Draco realized after a moment. The wind wasn't physical, and it was blowing towards Harry, not away.

It was pulling on Dumbledore's magic, tearing pieces of it away from him and merging them into Harry's power.

Draco felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. *That would be pretty terrifying, if it was focused on me*, he thought, with a haze of both fear and contentment in his mind, and then pressed closer to Harry's back so that he could watch. The sensation was what counted, the rippling waves of power and how they ceased to exist as separate entities the moment they hit the magic around Harry, but the look on Dumbledore's face was well worth watching.

It ended soon enough. Dumbledore set up a barrier of some kind, and the magic ceased to flow. Draco hugged Harry, and sniffed roses as his magic bounced back and rippled around him. Harry let out a harsh breath.

“That, Mr. Potter, was a serious magical crime, and not merely a breach of the school rules,” said Dumbledore. His voice was mild. His eyes were not. Draco supposed this was a glimpse of the White Wizard who had taken the field against Grindelwald. He found himself shivering.

“And what would you call attempting to bind the mind and magic of a child, Professor Dumbledore?” Harry's voice was absolutely level, but Draco could feel the fine tremors that ran through his body. “What would you call trying to reinforce the phoenix web in my mind long after I had said I did not want it back? What would you call trying to *kill* another man who was only trying to shield me?” His voice was building, and so was his magic. The stones between him and Dumbledore were ice-covered, and in the silence between Harry's shout and his next whisper, one of them shattered, shards falling to the ground from the immense stress the ice was putting it under. “I want you dead,” Harry whispered, and Draco felt his rage join the magic, filling the corridor with the unbearable pressure of an angry wizard. Draco grimaced. Now the sensations of his magic felt like pain again.

Dumbledore did not strike back. Draco didn't know why. Perhaps he thought even now that he could use Harry, or perhaps he would rather have Harry angry and half-free than opposing him in magical battle. Draco could understand that. Instead, he only inclined his head and said, “Both of you will miss the Halloween Feast tonight. Your detention is to pick up branches and leaves off the lawn. You may not use magic.” Then he turned and walked away.

There was a moment when Draco thought Harry would strike at his back. Harry's magic trembled, fighting the leash he had it on, and then collapsed abruptly into him. Harry shook his head and leaned back against Draco.

“Thank you,” he said.

“I think that you're mistaking who those words should go to,” said Draco, running his hands over Harry's shoulders. He couldn't seem to stop touching him. The magic was probably responsible for that, he thought, and then shook his head and set Harry gently back on his feet.

“I mean it,” said Harry, and glanced back at him. “For all of it. For finding the Pensieves and kicking them over.” His hands clenched in front of him briefly. “The phoenix web was coming back yesterday, and it was my mother's voice that spoke to me. That must have been why it was happening. And I want to thank you for being here and holding me back. I could have *killed* Dumbledore.” He turned fully to face Draco. “And I want to thank you for not being afraid,” he said softly, “when you found out that I could drink magic.”

“Did you know?” Draco asked.

Harry hesitated briefly, then admitted, “I think I swallowed part of Voldemort's power in the Chamber of Secrets last year. But it wasn't something I've ever tried consciously to do. So no, I didn't.” His eyes were back on Draco's face, studying it closely. “But you aren't frightened.”

“It wasn't *my* magic that you were trying to swallow,” said Draco, puzzled as to why this was such a large deal for Harry. “It would be like being afraid of you because you're a Parselmouth, Harry. So long as you aren't drinking my magic or setting a snake on me, there's no reason for me to fear it.”

Harry abruptly embraced him, his body trembling violently. “Thank you,” he whispered. “Thank you.”

Draco gave up on arguing that he owed Harry thanks, and just hugged him back. The pain was retreating from his head, the ice was retreating from the corridor, and Harry’s magic now merely draped his back like a warm blanket. Draco couldn’t feel any commands from it. If it wanted him to keep holding Harry, then he was more than happy to oblige.

Harry sighed and stooped down to pick up another branch. The wind really had been brisk this weekend, and individual leaves from the Forbidden Forest had colonized the Quidditch Pitch until it looked as if it were growing a second kind of grass. The branches were almost worse, because of how quickly they usually broke when he picked them up.

Harry half-grimaced to himself. *You just aren’t used to doing chores without magic*, he thought, as he carried his latest armful to the edge of the Pitch. Dumbledore hadn’t told them to put the leaves and branches in any one particular place, so they’d chosen this one and hoped the wind didn’t start blowing again before they finished their detention.

Harry added his armful to the pile and turned to study Draco. Currently, he was chasing a leaf and trying to pick it up without dropping the rest of what he held in his arms. Harry thought it was a doomed effort, considering how many twigs he clutched. A small rain of them already followed his feet.

He’d thought as carefully as he could about the detention and the process of the detention to avoid thinking about what had got them the detention in the first place. He’d attacked Dumbledore, and somehow, both he and Draco were still alive and free. His head hurt like mad, but the phoenix web was a glittering mass that shifted under the surface of his mind, not the whole of it. Harry knew Dumbledore would likely try again, but at least this plan had failed.

And Draco had saved him. And then Draco had not been afraid of him when Harry had struck out and sucked part of Dumbledore’s power away.

Those were facts so wonderful that Harry felt he couldn’t let his mind fully touch them. His thoughts kept skittering around them and then returning, peering as warily at them as he had looked into the final Pensieve before kicking it over. He kept expecting to awake and find it a dream, that Draco had defended him so fiercely and accepted his fierce defense in return.

That is not something that would have happened with Connor, his thoughts told him abruptly. *Connor couldn’t protect you like that, not against Dumbledore, and you know that he would be afraid of you.*

Harry shook his head. He didn’t want to compare his relationship with Draco to his relationship with his brother right now. He just wanted to think about Draco by himself—

And perhaps laugh when he dropped the next handful of twigs, which happened in the next moment. The integrity of the bundle in Draco’s arms was completely disrupted, and Harry laughed as it slid through Draco’s frantically grasping hands and left him with a few leaves and one twig.

Draco flung down the leaves and the twig and stamped his foot at him. “I don’t see you helping,” he declared.

Harry started to walk towards him, and then paused when he saw a flash of movement near the pile of branches. He recognized the lifted, twitching nose and hairless tail in a few moments. Peter was there, in rat form, and wanted to speak with him. Harry let out a slow breath. He hadn’t seen Peter in the school, not even on the Marauder’s Map, since the attack by Dumbledore. Dumbledore had probably strengthened the wards so Peter couldn’t enter again.

But would Draco understand this?

Harry swallowed and turned towards his friend. “Draco,” he whispered, catching his attention in a moment. “Please, will you cover for me? There’s someone I have to talk to.”

Draco didn’t laugh. His eyes were deep as they stared into Harry’s. “Who is it?” he asked.

Harry let out his breath. “Peter Pettigrew.”

“You have the *strangest* friends, Harry,” said Draco, a little too calmly. “Not including me, of course. But yes, I’ll cover for you. If you’ll just leave an illusion of yourself here, it shouldn’t be hard.”

The edge to his voice said he would demand an explanation later, but Harry didn't mind. His heart was singing with relief. He waved a hand, and an illusion of him formed and stooped to gather up a stick. His hand passed through it, but Harry thought it would take a lot to notice.

"Of course, it doesn't actually *help*," Draco bemoaned it.

Harry looked hesitantly at him. Draco waved him on. "Go talk to him. The sooner you go, the sooner you can get back and tell me all about it."

Harry nodded to him and slipped around the leaf-pile, following the rat's tail further and further into the grass. Peter didn't transform until they were almost to the Forbidden Forest, and when he did, he sat with his back against a tree and stared intently at Harry.

"I think you can know now why Dumbledore made me be your parents' Secret-Keeper," he said softly.

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Interlude: To Narcissa, To Lucius

November 1st, 1993

Dear Mother:

I'm very, very afraid that Dumbledore is going to hurt Harry if this keeps happening. And I've managed to protect him so far, but I don't know what to do now. I can't fight the Headmaster spell to spell, and now he's tried to use magic on Harry.

So far, I know that he and Harry had some kind of fight in late September, though I don't know what it was about, and Harry wound up in the hospital wing. I was still considering the information you sent me then, so I couldn't go and see his wounds without exposing myself to his magic and risking (as I thought) compulsion. And just yesterday Dumbledore tried to set some kind of trap with Pensieves for Harry, and would have hurt me when I found out about it and managed to disrupt it by kicking the Pensieves over. Harry protected me, and drained part of the Headmaster's magic.

I saw one of the memories in the Pensieves. It was horrible. His mother was testing him on types of defensive curses and telling him he had to hurt anyone who hurt his brother. What kind of witch does that? What kind of mother does that? A Mudblood, that's who! It goes against all the pureblood tests that you taught me about this summer. You don't test children until they're ready!

What can I do, Mother? Is there anything you can do? I know that you can't really reach out and protect Harry from so far away, but you said you wouldn't let anything happen to him if I chose him. So, please, give me advice. I'm so worried for him. His scar bleeds and he has nightmares and he doesn't tell me half the things I need to know, even though he's my friend. And his brother scares me. Please help.

*Your beloved son,
Draco.*

November 1st, 1993

Well, really, Lucius. I expected better of you than this. So far you've traded a few truce gifts with a child who will perish the moment the Dark Lord takes the field, pretending to believe that this child is a wizard of serious power, and played at finding out a way around the Potter wards. Did I not know your true dedication to our cause, I would say you are playing both sides, trying to find a way to keep your wife and son happy while still serving our Lord. How like a Slytherin.

Very well, then. It would seem that I must get your attention in another way. Slytherins also like dramatics, if I recall my own days at school correctly.

Your son Draco drinks pumpkin juice for breakfast every morning, no matter what else there is to drink. He laughs with Harry Potter as if the world were never going to change. He reads too much late at night and thinks no one notices when he yawns in his classes. He watched the Slytherin Quidditch practices until the Captain, Flint, told him to leave. He cares more for the safety of this child you are truce-dancing with than he does for his own.

I can reach him at any moment, Lucius. I can snuff the life from him. Unless you make clear your dedication to our cause and send me, in the vial this owl has also brought you, three drops of your blood to help with our Lord's awakening, the boy's life will be forfeit no later than Yule.

I see him every day, Lucius, and I am not someone whom other people pay attention to. It would not be hard to kill him.

You have a day to send the drops of blood to me, and a week to find out a way to enter Godric's Hollow, despite the wards. Then you will involve yourself more deeply in our cause, and go on involving yourself. There will a test of your dedication at Yule.

I trust you will have a pleasant day, Lucius, warmed by the thought of your son continuing to breathe.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifteen: Soldier In a Silent War

"The phoenix web is returning," Harry warned Peter as he sat down on the grass in front of him. "I'm not sure how much I'll be able to hear before it burns my thoughts up again."

Peter's eyes narrowed, but he didn't waste time speaking against Dumbledore. He simply nodded. Then he said, "Harry, I mentioned Regulus Black the last time we had a proper conversation."

Harry blinked. "I remember."

Peter leaned forward. "Regulus Black was Sirius's younger brother," he said. "Not much younger. A year between them. They were close friends before Hogwarts."

Harry tightened his hands in front of him. "I'll repeat what I said then," he said, as calmly as he could. "*Why* would they keep something like that concealed from me? Sirius could have forged a closer bond with me by telling me he was an elder brother like I was, or that he had been. And—and from the way I understand them now, they wouldn't have let an opportunity like that pass. They wanted to control me, bind me close to them, and that would have been a great chance."

"They are your parents and godfather, Harry," said Peter. "Does it make it easier to talk about them, and the wrong they've done you, when you don't acknowledge that?"

Harry clenched his hands again, and felt his hands begin to bleed like his scar. "It makes it possible for me not to wish death on them," he said.

Peter's eyes sharpened, and he nodded again. "Then we'll talk about them as 'they,' Harry," he said. "And I'll tell you why they wouldn't admit that Regulus existed."

"As I said, he and Sirius were close friends before Hogwarts. But then Sirius came to Hogwarts and was Sorted into Gryffindor. Suddenly he'd broken all the traditions that his family was supposed to keep. The Blacks had been Slytherins for as long as the family existed. All Sirius's cousins had gone into that House. And Sirius was the elder son of the major branch of the family. I know that doesn't matter to a line like the Potters, but to a pureblood family like the Blacks, it *did* matter. A great deal."

Harry nodded. "But Sirius told me that he was an only child, and that was why his parents were so angry with him," he whispered. "They had no heirs after he rejected their ideals."

"They had Regulus," said Peter quietly. His eyes were staring past Harry, seeing into a time that Harry now suspected he didn't know the tiniest shard of truth about. "But he was the *younger* son. He couldn't quite ever make up for the loss of Sirius, no matter what he did, even though he was Sorted into Slytherin and believed in the same ideals that they did."

Harry felt himself give a shudder of revulsion. *Imagine if our parents had favored me just because I'm the elder and ignored or devalued Connor because he was born fifteen minutes after me. What an idiocy!*

Then he remembered that they had, seemingly, ignored and devalued him for not being the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry swallowed and caged the grief and pain. *There has to be a reason for that. I don't know everything yet.*

“All right,” he said, harshly, because he needed to get his mind off those disturbing thoughts somehow. “Say I believe you. Say that Regulus did exist, and that Sirius lost him to his parents just like his parents lost Sirius to the wizarding world. Then what happened?”

“Regulus became a Death Eater,” said Peter quietly, and met Harry’s eyes again. “But—and I’m only reporting this secondhand, understand, because Sirius never told all the details to anyone—something went wrong. Something...changed his mind, I guess. Or he just decided that he was tired of being ordered around. He stole something very important to the Dark Lord and ran. I never knew what it was. I was never that close to the Dark Lord. My importance was all borrowed from Sirius.” He glanced away, but not before Harry saw many complicated emotions twisting in his face, hatred and love and bitterness and weariness.

“And he got away?” Harry asked. “Or he died?”

“Voldemort,” said Peter, visibly forcing himself to say the name, “caught him. And then he bound Sirius’s mind to his brother’s. He could do that, because of the blood connection. He forced Sirius to witness the way Regulus suffered while he tortured him.”

Harry buried his head in his hands, breathing hard. The mere thought of watching Connor suffer in his mind made him want to kill something.

“Sirius was going crazy,” said Peter, his voice as distant as the moon. “None of the Blacks...well, none of them were ever very stable, except Andromeda and Narcissa. Sirius was struggling between his impulse to stay loyal to his friends and his impulse to go and rescue his brother. He knew that the moment he went to Regulus’s rescue, V—Voldemort would take him, and then Sirius would be tortured until he gave up your parents’ location.”

“Because of the prophecy,” Harry guessed.

Peter glanced at him sharply, then relaxed. “I had thought you didn’t know much about that,” he murmured. “Yes. Because of that. And Dumbledore wanted to spare Sirius that.”

“I don’t understand why,” said Harry. “The first time we met, you said that you had betrayed my parents on Dumbledore’s orders. If he was going to betray us anyway, why did it matter if you or Sirius did it?”

Peter’s mouth curved into a cruel grin, but Harry knew from the tone in his voice that the cruelty was all directed against himself. “Dumbledore didn’t want Sirius to have to make that choice, to decide between his friends and his brother. He explained everything to me and asked me to take Sirius’s place as Secret-Keeper. He performed a spell that—“

Harry cried out as the phoenix web flared across his vision. Peter reached out and caught his shoulder, holding him steady until the spasm passed.

“Never mind about the spell, then,” said Peter softly. “Some other time. He asked me to take Sirius’s place as Secret-Keeper, and told your parents the reason for the switch. They were horrified, of course.” The emotion in Peter’s voice now wasn’t like anything that Harry had ever heard. “No one should ever have to make a decision like that, they told me. Poor dear Sirius should never be subjected to such a loss of innocence as choosing between his friends and his brother.”

Harry heard the echo of other words behind the ones Peter spoke. After a moment, he drew them out.

Connor should remain innocent until the time he can face Voldemort...

With a gasp, Harry flushed the words from his mind. *No. They aren’t the same, not really. They did offer me a choice.*

But he’d seen that choice in Dumbledore’s Pensieve. A shudder of remembered anger racked Harry again, and he suffered a brief moment of despair. How did ordinary people cope with these emotions? How was he going to be normal when he hadn’t dealt with them for the first twelve years of his life?

“I was already a spy among the Death Eaters,” said Peter. “The Dark Lord would accept my betrayal of my friends for the same reason he accepted me as a credible Death Eater, Dumbledore assured me. He thought I was jealous of my friends for being more powerful and talented than I was. Aren’t wizards of lesser power always afraid of those with greater, and jealous of them?”

“He was right. Once your parents made me the Secret-Keeper, the Dark Lord ceased torturing Regulus and killed him. He concentrated all his efforts on me. I held out for a week, then cracked when Dumbledore said to, and betrayed the house at Godric’s Hollow. I told your parents that V—Voldemort had kidnapped the two of you and taken you to one of the last battlefields, to sacrifice you there in a dark blood rite. Off they rushed. Voldemort came into the house that night, and I was right behind him when he struck.” Peter closed his eyes tightly.

Harry’s heart had sped up. The sound of it filled his whole world. He fought wildly to calm it down, because it was just as wildly important that he be able to hear Peter’s answer to his next question.

“They knew we would be betrayed? They risked our lives on purpose?”

Peter turned his head and fixed Harry with a careful eye. “Of course. You said you knew the prophecy. They *knew* what would happen when I led Voldemort into the house of a child born at the precise moment the prophecy said he should be born. And of course there are other clues in the prophecy that let them suspect your house was the right one.” Peter closed his eyes again.

“After that, it was rather simple,” he said, his voice gone strained and thin. “I ran, of course, when the Dark Lord fell. Your parents came back and found you wounded but alive, and the Dark Lord a pile of ash on the floor. They knew who must have betrayed them. The Aurors arrested me, and questioned me under Veritaserum, but the phoenix web was in my mind by then, already sinking deep. It filled me with a different kind of soul that gave me the appearance of truth. I was able to stare at them, and laugh, and proclaim my hatred and jealousy of James and Lily Potter. That was the same web that was going to give me the appearance of insanity in Azkaban, just in case anyone ever questioned me about that night. Dumbledore could say truthfully that he visited me several times, and I only appeared to grow more mad over the years. But Sirius was with me during the trial anyway, just to make sure that I didn’t place one foot wrong. He was determined that no one should ever discover that I’d been a sacrifice for him, because he didn’t want to be thought a coward or too weak to choose between his friends and his brother.”

Unbidden—like all his thoughts lately—Harry recalled what James had said to him when he’d told the story of cracking and using *Crucio* on Bellatrix Lestrange. *And Peter’s betrayal hit Sirius hardest of all. He was in the Ministry when they interrogated Peter. I don’t think he slept for three more days after that. He had to hear every last detail, every last confession.*

Sirius hadn’t been trying desperately to learn why one of his beloved friends would commit a crime. He had been trying desperately to make sure that said beloved friend, a shield, a sacrifice, didn’t reveal that he was either shield or sacrifice.

Harry swallowed several more times. Now was not the moment to get sick.

“And so you went to Azkaban for twelve years,” he said.

“Almost twelve years,” said Peter, his eyes distant. “Yes. That is what I did. If I had revealed what I had done under Veritaserum, I might have stayed out of Azkaban, but I would have revealed that Dumbledore had knowingly placed two small children in danger, and that was not permissible. Nor was it permissible to reveal that Sirius had suffered for so long.”

“Not only Dumbledore,” Harry whispered. “Our *parents*. Why? Why is that, Peter? Why would they do that?”

“The prophecy,” said Peter.

Harry was starting to hate that word. He picked up a blade of grass and rubbed it between his fingers until the urge to tear the explanation out of Peter was gone. “But surely there must have been a greater justification than that,” he said.

Peter blinked. “Of course there was. There was concealing Sirius’s weakness, and bringing Voldemort down.” He hugged his arms around himself and stared into the Forest. “You cannot understand what the First War was like, Harry. Everyone was tired, and certain they were going to lose, after eleven years of fighting. We’d grown up in Hogwarts in the knowledge that we’d be soldiers going to war. Everyone wanted an end. That was the cause of the hysterical celebration after Voldemort fell. No one really thought to question that, to ask how and why a baby could have defeated him without something like the prophecy, which was never made public. They didn’t want to. They had their hero, they had their villain, and that was it. That was all.”

“They put Connor in danger,” said Harry again. He could not get past that. He had always trusted his parents to know what was best, to save and protect his brother—if not as well as he could—and they had put Connor in danger when he was only a year old.

“And you, Harry,” said Peter, looking strangely at him.

Harry swallowed. “Yes,” he said, and then dodged the uncomfortable truth staring him in the face. “But why aren’t you still in Azkaban? You stayed there twelve years. Why not the lifetime you were meant to stay?” His voice wavered into hesitancy on the last words.

“You are right,” said Peter. “Dumbledore meant me to stay a lifetime. But I was left alone in Azkaban, without the constant reinforcement that I think you’ve had, if they’ve really tied your web—“

Harry shouted as his sight darkened with pain. Peter held his arm this time until it subsided, and then spoke carefully, watching Harry for the least sign of agony.

“Without reinforcement. And my web was tied to two things. One of them was my sense of friendship. That withered when none of my friends came to see me, when I realized they’d all been pitifully eager to sacrifice me just so that Sirius could sleep with an untroubled conscience.”

“What about Remus?” Harry asked.

Peter looked hard at him. “Remus knew about it, too, Harry. He was too afraid of losing his friends ever to go against them.” He laughed, harshly. “Remus is very good at ignoring things that he doesn’t want to see.”

The revelation hit Harry with the force of a hammer blow. He’d thought Remus was just another one of Dumbledore’s victims. Instead, he, too, had conspired to hurt and maybe even kill Connor.

And you.

Harry gave the thought a vicious kick and focused back on Peter.

“And what was the second thing?” he asked, his own voice unexpectedly hoarse.

“A sense of duty,” said Peter simply. “Dumbledore impressed it on me that this was my duty to the future, my duty as a Gryffindor, my duty to a world without the Dark Lord. And—well, he was right, I thought. So I gave up my personality and my freedom and the good will of the wizarding community for it.

“But the more I thought about it, the more resentful I became. As I said, the loss of my friends did that. I became convinced that it wasn’t fair that I was sitting in that cell when Sirius was free to walk around, and the phoenix web might have controlled that.” A feral smile spread over Peter’s face. “But then I found another duty instead.”

“What?” Harry whispered.

Peter locked eyes with him. “Protecting you. I promise you that I am not going to let the same thing happen to you that happened to me, Harry. I promised myself that, too, and I even got through the wards on the school that permitted the passage of Animagi until Dumbledore adjusted them to bar me specifically. I’m confined to the outside of Hogwarts now, but that doesn’t mean I won’t protect you. I was a sacrifice, and I lost so much because of it. I’ve been a sacrifice exactly as long as you have. Both of our trials began the same night. I broke free of my prison. I’m going to help you break free of yours by shattering that damn web. If you find another duty to substitute for the one the web originally attached to, then you’re free. The web can’t cope with that great a shift in priorities. The moment that I chose you over Sirius and James and Remus, then I was free.”

“But that would mean I have to do something other than protect Connor,” said Harry.

“Yes.” Peter was immovable.

Harry shook his head at him, frantic. “I *can’t*. Then he’ll be left undefended when he goes forth to face Voldemort.”

“Sirius is training him, I thought,” said Peter. “He’ll have that training. And he’ll have the protection of other people, the adults and his friends and anyone else who fights the Second War. And I assure you that this is everyone’s war, Harry. Not even most of the Death Eaters stood by Voldemort when they thought he’d fallen. I’ve been prying and sniffing around my old haunts. They *like* their lives now, free and prosperous. They’re not eager to go back into slavery to a madman. They might be called by Voldemort’s magic, but they’ll seize any other option that seems at all viable.”

“Dumbledore—“

“He’s not viable,” Peter said sharply. “Not for them. Do you think someone who did what he did to me would hesitate to sacrifice Dark wizards whom he already despises?”

“Connor—“

“Maybe,” said Peter. “But he’ll have to grow in strength and training first. And that could be your duty, you know, Harry.”

“Training him?” Harry sat up straight. It was only a minor variation of the duties he had now, he thought. “I could do that.”

“Protecting the wizarding world,” said Peter. “Uniting it. Leading it. Providing an option for the Death Eaters and the purebloods and the others who would ordinarily rally to Voldemort’s side. You know their rituals. You have the magic that could shelter and protect them. Think about it, Harry.”

Harry closed his eyes and began to shake. The mere thought of taking his brother’s role as the Boy-Who-Lived was enough to activate the phoenix web. He felt burning pain begin to concentrate behind his eyes.

“I’ve said too much,” Peter whispered. “I’m sorry. But think about it, please, Harry. And now I must go. I can feel the Dementors coming.” His voice was threaded with old fear. “Be safe.”

Harry heard the inrush of air as Peter transformed, and then the soft rustle of grass as he scurried away. A moment later, the phoenix web let him go enough that he could feel the cold approach of the Dementors on his back. They curved into the Forbidden Forest after Peter. Harry shivered.

His mind was in chaos, screaming and shouting at him.

They knew. They left us in danger.

Remus knew.

You don’t have to live for Connor.

Dumbledore sacrificed Peter to spare Sirius.

He stood up, heavily, and made his way towards the school. He needed, badly, to speak with Dumbledore.

Harry had just slipped past the doors into the entrance hall when a piece of darkness unfolded from the wall and swept towards him. Harry winced. It was Snape, and unlike the conversation they’d had the day Harry first confronted Dumbledore, Harry wasn’t in the mood to talk with him.

Snape, of course, gave him no choice. “What was that explosion of magic earlier, Mr. Potter?” he asked. His face was mostly in shadow, but Harry could see his eyes glittering with some intense emotion.

Harry sighed. “Dumbledore tried to trick me. There was a set of Pensieves he’d charmed to reinforce the phoenix web in my mind.” He heard Snape’s sucked-in breath, but forced himself to keep his eyes on the floor. He knew that Snape would probably have something to say about this, but he didn’t think that he had the ability to deal with it right now, what with his thoughts stirred into chaos. “Draco helped me get rid of them, but then Dumbledore tried to hurt Draco. So I called my magic to fight his, and sucked some of his power away.”

“And you did not come to me?” Snape’s voice sounded nearly dead. Harry winced again. That didn’t mean hurt. That meant anger so intense that not even his normal cold whisper was sufficient to express it. “You did not think that perhaps your guardian should know that the Headmaster is threatening his ward?”

Harry raised his head and stared at Snape. *Well, I didn’t expect that.* “But we already knew that,” he pointed out. “Dumbledore was threatening me before this. Why would you want me to come and report it to you again?”

Snape moved a step forward. Harry took a step back, watching him warily. He was not afraid, not exactly. He trusted Snape not to hurt him. But it was hard not to feel—well, cautious, especially with the way that he could feel Snape’s magic boiling

under his shields. Snape was not as strong as Harry or Dumbledore, but his power had a sharp, cruel edge to it that made it a finely balanced blade on the occasions when he chose to wield it outside the confines of wand and spell.

“Guardian does not mean only guardian in a legal sense,” Snape said. His voice was strangled. Harry wondered if he was choking on rage or something else. “It means guardian in a protective sense as well. I could have helped you fend off Dumbledore, Harry. I could have spoken to him in place of the parents who will never stand up to him again.” Harry clenched his fists again; he feared that after what Peter had said, that was no more than the truth. “And I could have provided you with the protection and shelter that you need so badly,” and Snape’s voice twisted, with kindness more cruel than cruelty, “and which you will never convince yourself to seek.”

Harry held his breath, then forced it out his nose and mouth in regular, calm patterns. He couldn’t afford to get upset over this. He had a Headmaster to speak to about his sacrifice of Peter and his endangering of Connor. He couldn’t yell at Snape and shatter his mask.

“I’ll remember that the next time, sir,” he said. “May I please pass now? I’m going to speak to the Headmaster on another matter.”

Snape looked startled for perhaps a tenth of a second. Even as Harry tried to slip around him, however, his hand darted out and seized his shoulder. Harry kept his stance relaxed and his gaze on the ground, so that Snape couldn’t try wandless Legilimency on him.

“I do not want you alone with him,” said Snape. “I’ll go with you.”

“No!” Harry tried to back away without looking up or really dislodging Snape’s hand. He didn’t want Snape to think he was really rejecting his guardianship. It was complicated. *It started being complicated the moment you started having allegiances other than to Connor*, whispered a part of his mind that might or might not be the phoenix web. “Please. I have to handle this on my own. Can I handle this on my own?”

“Why?” Snape was merciless, even as he knelt in front of Harry and spoke gently. “Why do you want to?”

“I—I don’t want you hurt,” said Harry, twisting his head away again. He couldn’t tell Snape what Peter had said. Snape would only see it as more evidence that Sirius was dangerous or weak, and would seek to keep Harry away from him. Perhaps talking about that in the abstract would work. “And I’m going to say things to the Headmaster that concern Sirius. I don’t know if you can control yourself around him if you know what those things are.”

There was a tense, breathing silence. Then Snape said, “I have always told myself I was more concerned about the future than the past. That was what I told myself when I spied among the Death Eaters for Dumbledore. And it was perhaps the only time in my life when that has been true.” He reached out and gripped Harry’s chin, tilting it so that Harry’s eyes met his. He did not try Legilimency, though. “These other years, I have brooded more on schoolboy grudges than the possibility of saving someone or healing someone or the future. That is true. And now it need not be. This is my chance to prove that, as much to myself as to you, Harry. I will come with you, and whatever I learn about Black, I will hold silent, because you matter more to me than he does.”

Harry closed his eyes to cover the emotions he was feeling, and nodded once. “Thank you, sir.”

“Come.” Snape swept to his feet like a great bird hovering over Harry. His hand never moved from its grip on Harry’s shoulder, warm and intensely comforting. “Let us go see the Headmaster.”

Albus told himself that he had expected the visit. Of course, that did not mean it did his old heart any good to see Harry walk in, laden with power and with eyes in which he could see the broken remnants of the phoenix web, and with Severus following closely behind him, his eyes wild. Albus winced. *Severus has given himself entirely over to protection of this child. What happened to his knowledge of the greater cause? What happened to the man who was prepared to torture, to kill, to act the Death Eater for the sake of the wizarding world?*

Harry Potter had happened, Albus answered himself, and sighed. Matters would have been a great deal simpler if Lily Potter had only ever borne one child, and if that child was Connor Potter.

“Professor Dumbledore,” said Harry, his eyes pierced with half a dozen emotions. “I met Peter Pettigrew this evening. He told me why you sacrificed him.”

Albus clamped down on his emotions. He would not show terror in front of either of them. Harry might miss it at this moment, but Severus's piercing eyes were fixed on his face and hadn't moved.

"He said that he went to Azkaban so that Sirius could live free," Harry whispered. "Why him, Professor?"

Albus felt his heart begin to beat again, slowly. So Harry knew part of the truth. He did not know the whole of it, the most vital part of it. Perhaps he never would. It all depended on how well Albus answered him. "I felt sorry for Sirius," he answered freely. "He had come from a Dark family, and been abused as a child. The moment he went into Gryffindor, his family began to turn their backs on him. Not even his relationship with his brother could save him in their eyes, not once his brother went to Slytherin. But Sirius still remembered his brother fondly. That childhood experience of friendship with him was the seed that had formed the noble man we knew, that made it possible for Sirius to escape the shadow of Slytherin in the first place." He heard Severus snort, but he made no move to meet the other man's eyes, keeping his earnest gaze on Harry. "When that same brother was in danger, how could I ask Sirius to choose between betraying him and betraying his friends? True, he would have died when he went to Voldemort, but more than that, his soul would have been destroyed. I wanted to spare him that."

"Why didn't you want to spare Peter?" Harry's voice was flat and unforgiving.

Albus spread his hands. *Yes, I knew I could count on Peter's selfishness. He must have escaped and shattered his web because he was so concerned that someone else know the truth. He could not stand to be a true sacrifice. Now that he has convinced Harry he was some abused innocent, he should leave him alone, because his vanity is satisfied.* "Peter had already had a different life than Sirius," he said simply. "One full of life and love and laughter as a child, and a friendship with the Marauders. The first sacrifice I ever asked him to make was as a spy among the Death Eaters, before Severus came to our side—"

"What?"

But Severus clamped his mouth shut in the next instant, even though his eyes glittered angrily. Albus watched him with an intense sadness etching his heart. *I have already lost you, Severus. I know it. But I may not have lost Harry. Not yet.*

"And then to become your parents' Secret-Keeper in Sirius's place," Albus finished. "That spared Regulus, whom Voldemort killed at once when he had no more use for him, and it spared Sirius from making a decision that would have torn his soul apart."

"But it didn't spare Peter," Harry whispered.

"Peter chose this," said Albus. "I told you once, Harry, that the phoenix web only works when someone accepts it willingly. That is what Peter did. He agreed to spend the rest of his life in Azkaban with the rest of the world thinking him a traitor. I honored him for his sacrifice. I do not honor him for what he has done since he escaped."

"You ordered him to betray us," said Harry. "You ordered him to put Connor's life in danger." There was a long silence, and then he breathed out, "Why?"

Albus could have fallen to his knees and prayed in thanks, did he think anyone or anything would have accepted this prayer. Despite the shattering of the phoenix web, despite Peter's words, he had not lost Harry, not yet. Harry believed that Connor's life was still more important than his own.

And, because of that, the wizarding world may be spared the intense revolution that Harry would otherwise bring upon it, the tearing and the ripping and the bloodshed.

Albus replied with all his heart. Harry could have this part of the truth, and welcome to it. "Because of the prophecy," he said. "It spoke of someone born to defy the Dark Lord at the end of July—a younger twin. You were the only pair who qualified. If the Dark Lord did not attack you, then the prophecy would never have come true. The dying would have continued. The First War would have ended with Voldemort's victory."

Harry wavered for a long moment. Then he said, "But you put a child in danger. There are those who would argue that if you had to sacrifice children, then you didn't deserve to win the War."

"Those people were not the ones who fought Voldemort," said Albus, his mind full of Plague-devastated battlefields, of the thunderstorm that Voldemort had turned to acid and set upon Hogsmeade, of the Children's Massacre with its crucifixions

and the Eagleton house with its Muggleborn family made to rape and murder each other. “They are the ones who still have the luxury of ethics even in wartime.”

“But what if you put him in danger again?” Harry whispered. “What if you put him in danger now?”

“That is why he is getting training from Sirius,” said Albus, and then leaned forward. He had to impress this on the boy, now that Harry was turning aside from the role the prophecy had destined him for. “And why you must support him, Harry, not rip him in two. I understand that I have hurt you. I understand that your parents have hurt you. But what do you gain by drawing away from us, by choosing Severus as a guardian or listening to Peter? You will tear your twin apart, put him in danger of his concentration wavering even as he learns to fight Voldemort.”

Harry swallowed.

“Harry,” said Severus sharply, “that is not true. He also put your life in danger that night.” He raised his head, and Albus flinched at the hatred in his eyes. *I must watch him. I forgot how dangerous he was when angered.* “He has asked unacceptable sacrifices of you. Is Connor’s peace of mind worth so much more than your freedom?”

Harry only shook his head and said, “Truce, from now on. I won’t hurt you if you don’t hurt me.” Then he turned away from the room, barely waiting for Albus’s nod. Severus stayed a moment, his eyes locked on Albus’s. Albus knew better than to try Legilimency. He remained silent.

“You are a bloody fool, Albus,” said Severus. “You know what he could become.” He shook his head twice, and then hurried after Harry. Albus could hear him speaking to the boy, trying to soothe him, trying to turn him from his loyalty to his brother.

Albus did not think it would work, not now. They had avoided disaster by the skin of their teeth, but they had avoided it. He had a truce with the boy, and he had seen for himself that Harry still cared more about Connor than about simply turning his magic loose to do what it would. He still had some hope for the future.

Perhaps it would have been better to leave him free, in danger of becoming a Dark Lord, than to bind him. He has a hatred of bindings now. He will not understand that the wizarding world is built on them, that I cannot let him loosen them.

But he could be far more devastating than he is now. If he were free of all the bindings, if he knew all the truth, then he would wield a power that is stronger than he now has. Imagine the world then.

Albus could imagine the world then. He would not be able to prevent the bindings from being loosened if Harry knew everything, and then there would be civil war and bloody revolution and the death of everything he had worked so hard to build and protect and love.

And Sirius...

What the boy did not know about his godfather would not hurt him.

The situation now was not ideal, Albus knew, but he could maintain it. He could stay in a truce with the boy, defending what he still had rather than mourning what was lost. He was sure Harry would do the same, rather than risk losing his brother. He did not think himself that important. He would not challenge or confront his parents unless someone pushed him. And Severus cared too much for the boy to push him.

It had been, Albus decided as he stood and made for bed, a good day after all, and the only thing that would have made it better was the presence of Fawkes on his perch. Phoenixes, however, never seemed to know when they were wanted.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixteen: Comes a Dementor

Harry felt the thoughts ganging up on him again, that night when he lay in his bed in Slytherin and had no distractions but the soft breathing of the other four boys around him—which was too familiar to be a true distraction.

Harry closed his eyes, but sleep was the furthest thing from his mind. He felt Starborn’s letter, which he’d hidden under the sheets, burning like a hot coal. He felt the questions that Peter had made him ask stirring in his head and looking at him with sharp eyes.

They've risked so much, in reaching out to me. Well, at least Peter has. I have no idea how much danger Starborn's in. But Peter is here, and keeps being here in spite of everything. Harry let out a long, slow breath. *He lost his friends, his freedom, control of his own mind for twelve years. And he still would have been safer if he remained in Azkaban. At least then things wouldn't have changed. He could have had the comforts of routine, and Dumbledore's good will.*

Instead, he left, and came for me, first to Godric's Hollow and then to Hogwarts. He didn't even know if I would listen to him. But he came anyway. He risked his newfound freedom.

And all he wants me to do is try to think without the phoenix web, to think about things a little differently than I've done so far.

Harry wrestled with the thought a while longer, but the conclusion he came to was always the same.

He risked too much for me. He made another sacrifice. The least I can do is try to honor that sacrifice, and ask his questions.

Harry opened his eyes and stared at the canopy of his bed. He missed Sylarana now as he had not in days. She could have helped him straighten out his thoughts and decide which one he should tackle first.

Well, when in doubt, work backwards. Sylarana had said that to him once, though she had been referring to the way that one ate a Chocolate Frog. She did not seem concerned about the wisdom that said snakes always swallowed prey headfirst, and preferred to start with the legs.

Harry started with the Headmaster, therefore. When he settled the truce with Dumbledore, he had regretted, for a moment, the gift he'd sent to Lucius Malfoy, a mirror tuned to the silvery instruments in Dumbledore's office, and enabling Lucius to see what happened there. Harry had explained in his note that he felt compelled to answer the gift of great trust Lucius had given him—allowing him to spy on possible enemies—with a gift as great, to allow Lucius to spy on his greatest possible enemy. Such a mirror would be worth more than one linked to Godric's Hollow, the home of a pair of frightened wizards on the edge of a *Muggle* village.

Now, he did not regret it, because he was thinking about things the way that Peter would have wanted him to. He was thinking that the truce with Dumbledore could not hold. How could it? Dumbledore didn't just want Harry not actively opposing him. He wanted Snape away from Harry, and Harry was not about to let that happen. He wanted Harry's magic bound, and Harry was not about to let that happen, either.

He paused, startled at himself.

You aren't?

If someone else had asked him, he would have said that of course he would allow his magic to be bound, if Connor wished it. Connor had made the point that Harry's magic could hurt and frighten other people. Harry didn't want that to happen. Surely it would be better to cage his power.

But how would that work? It was only a temporary solution. And given what had happened the last time his magic had been fully under the control of the phoenix web, that "temporary solution" was as likely to get people killed as having the magic free. Harry wondered whether other wizards would rather be dead, or alive and afraid.

No, his magic would have to stay free.

Harry shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. His head throbbed in an odd, pleasant way that had nothing to do with the pain he got in his scar along with his dreams. He had the feeling that he should have seen this revelation long since, but better late than never.

So. Fight your way back. Now Snape.

Snape's refusal to indulge his hatred towards Sirius was another sacrifice, another change. How could Harry refuse to honor it? He had demanded peace from Snape on the matter of his godfather, and got it. Snape was *trying*. The least Harry could do was trust Snape in the matter of his legal guardianship, and that meant thinking about things the way Peter had asked him to, so that he could tell Snape when something went wrong or was bothering him.

This is simpler than I thought it would be, Harry realized in confusion, and moved his thoughts to Peter.

The phoenix web flared when he tried to consider betraying Connor, so Harry concentrated on the story about Regulus, and the fact that their parents, Dumbledore, Sirius, and Remus had left them alone to face Voldemort's attack. Harry wondered what would have happened if things had gone wrong, if the prophecy hadn't meant his brother to be victor over Voldemort. Would Dumbledore have shrugged at Lily and James and said that he was sorry? Would he have *Obliviated* them the way he did Remus?

Anger hissed through Harry, honest anger. It was still hard to feel angry on his own behalf, but he could and would feel enraged over Connor. The phoenix web even liked that, and retreated from paining him.

There have been too many sacrifices, Harry thought, as he remembered Peter's distant eyes when he spoke of the First War. *That was the way they fought then. We can fight the Second War a different way. I don't need anything to be different, because I was raised and trained to be a soldier, but someone like Peter shouldn't be asked to do the same in the middle of his life. I want to fight in some way that won't involve anyone but me having to sacrifice anything.*

He waited for pain from the phoenix web, or pain from his own conscience. And there was nothing. There was only darkness in his mind, bright darkness lit with the shine of possibilities like stars. Harry shivered, and now there was gooseflesh running up and down his arms, and his breath was coming short, and he remembered the sentences in Starborn's letter that had most caught his attention.

Imagine that he was conscious, every moment, of what his power could do and what it might be used for, and weighed the hopes of those who came to him, and rejected the ones he deemed wrong instead of mindlessly obeying every wizard's wish. Imagine such power bent to defend, to protect and serve.

And Harry thought, for the first time, *I really could do that. I really could be that. But to do that, I have to be conscious of my power, not caging it, not ignoring it, not hoping that everyone else will ignore it.*

The possibility, tasting of morning, lasted for all of a moment. Then the ordinary, regular thoughts crowded in again.

Doing that would frighten other people. There's no doubt of it. And do I want to call attention to myself just now, when I've just got Snape as a guardian, and have Aurors investigating my parents? And Peter could still be lying. And Starborn could be lying. It's even likelier with Starborn. He admitted to being a pureblood who uses the word Mudblood. I can't trust them. This is all just an aberration. There's a reasonable explanation for all of it. Come summer, I'll be back with my parents and Connor, and all of this will seem like a nightmare.

This time, it was the ordinary, regular thoughts that felt false and strained, and it was his own voice and not the voice of his magic or rage that answered his last statement, quiet and confident. *It will only seem like that if you let it.*

Harry lay awake, trembling, for some time after that.

"Nervous, Harry?"

Harry snorted at Millicent and bit into his sausage. "Hardly," he said around the food, ignoring Pansy's grimace of disgust at the way bits of sausage flew out of his mouth. "It's just a Quidditch game."

"It's against your brother," said Millicent, leaning forward, her eyes shining with the Slytherin instinct for scenting a weak point, or blood in the water. "I'd think that would throw you. After all, you've gone to great lengths before not to win that game, and you seemed quite distressed last year when you did win."

"That was last year," said Harry, and bit into another sausage without quite finishing the first one. Pansy pointedly edged away from him.

Millicent lifted her head. "You've changed your mind, then?" she whispered.

"Did I say that?" Harry turned back to his breakfast, ignoring her growl of frustration. Let her see how it felt, to be tormented and teased and played with.

Draco, of course, leaned over and whispered, "Do you really mean to win this game, Harry, or not?" Draco always considered that he had a right to know truths like that, and he probably had more of a right than most people, Harry conceded. As it happened, though, he knew why Draco was asking this now. He'd been listening the night before when Draco bet Blaise

ten Galleons that Harry would win. Blaise was betting that Harry would deliberately throw the game again. It irritated Harry slightly that neither of them was betting on Connor to win, but he was fairly sure he would get blank looks if he asked them why, so he didn't bother.

"I don't know," he answered Draco honestly, and went back to his sausages.

"You should," Draco whispered, stealing one of the sausages. Harry didn't know why, since his own plate had been loaded with them, but he couldn't do much more than growl a protest; he'd bitten into too much food for even him to talk through without spilling crumbs to the table. *It's too bad that the game today isn't a contest in that skill*, he thought. *I could best Connor at that and not feel awkward about doing it. He'd probably be disgusted.* He snorted at the mental picture of what his brother's expression would be as Harry crammed food into his mouth, and so almost missed Draco's next words. "Real talent deserves some recognition."

"You're not being subtle, you know, Draco," Harry pointed out as he finally got his mouth free. "I might have wondered what you meant first year, but now I know."

Draco frowned at him. "Don't you *want* to win?"

"Yes," said Harry, and ate one more bite before Flint's bellow rang out across the Great Hall, summoning the members of the Slytherin Quidditch team for one final lecture and yelling session. He sighed and stood. "And no."

"You're bloody confusing," Draco whined at him.

"I'm being honest with you," said Harry, as he eased around the table and towards the entrance to the Great Hall. "The inside of my mind is bloody confusing."

He had just started to hurry, not daring to look towards the Gryffindor table, when the shadow of wings swept across his head. He paused and looked up, blinking. An owl circled around him, then dropped a letter into his hand and hurtled back towards the window out of the Great Hall, as if it were too busy to wait for a reply or even a Knut or treat.

Harry turned the letter over. He had suspected from the creamy paper what it was, and the Ministry seal confirmed it. He swallowed once and eased a finger beneath the seal, breaking it open.

"Hurry it up, Potter!" Flint shouted.

"Just a minute, Flint!" Harry yelled back, and then drew out and unfolded the letter.

Dear Mr. Potter:

It has come to our attention that your appointment of Severus Snape as your guardian is irregular in at least one respect. There is evidence that Professor Snape was once a Death Eater, and though he was spared Azkaban by the good word of Headmaster Dumbledore and indeed was not reported reliably at the scene of any Death Eater activity, his reputation is hardly pristine. He would hardly seem the first choice of guardian for the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived, who might himself be a target of Death Eaters seeking to use him against Connor Potter.

We must therefore be sure that you are not under any outside coercion. Enclosed with this letter is a charmed parchment that will check you for the Imperius and other forms of compulsive magic. When it is touched and has completed its listing of any relevant spells you may be under, it will return to us. We also plan at least one visit from the following Aurors, so that they may interview you personally:

Auror: Kingsley Shacklebolt

Auror-in-training: Aidan Feverfew

If our Aurors see any irregularity, they will not hesitate to recommend removing Professor Snape as your guardian. In that case, we are minded to appoint either Professor Dumbledore, as was our original intention, or your godfather, Sirius Black, whom Auror Shacklebolt has done us the convenience of pointing out lives at Hogwarts. Please prepare for the visit on the second Saturday of this month.

Sincerely,

Amelia Bones

Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Harry let out a little sigh. Well, he had known something like this would probably happen. He had not expected the visit from the Aurors specifically, and he wondered what it would take to fool them. A good deal, he suspected. Shackbolt was Dumbledore's, part of the Order of the Phoenix, and if he trusted this Auror-in-training, he would either also be part of the Order or a neutral who could do no harm—certainly not an enemy of Dumbledore's.

Harry never doubted that he would need to fool them. Going back, falling into Dumbledore's pocket, was simply not an option.

He swallowed. *You are thinking the way Peter wanted you to think again*, he accused himself.

And is that a bad thing?

Harry shook his head and straightened his spine. Flint was glaring at him from across the Hall now.

“Any day that you see fit to join us, Potter,” he sniped.

Harry strode out of the Great Hall. He could feel thoughtful gazes fixed on his back, but he had no inclination to turn and meet them. He had a lecture to attend, a match to play, and a decision to make, probably in mid-air.

Harry kicked into the air. He could feel eyes on him. The rest of the Slytherin Quidditch team would be watching, because Flint had managed to convince the rest of them that Harry was the reason their practices went so well. Harry wished he wouldn't. Taking credit for his own Captaincy would be a good start, even if said Captaincy did consist mostly of yelling.

He could feel the Slytherins who'd bet on him to win or throw the game watching. They'd probably debate every move he made, Harry thought as he swerved around the first Bludger batted at him by one of the Weasley twins, because they would want to be absolutely sure if he'd flown in such a way as to hand the game over to Connor, or just had a piece of bad luck.

The Gryffindors were watching him, and especially Connor, whose eyes had gone wary. He no longer expected to win, automatically, when he played Harry. Harry told himself he was glad. His brother needed to experience real competition in order to grow. It was as simple as that. Harry should have seen it last year and done something about it then, though he'd been a bit too busy fending off an enchanted Bludger to think about it.

He knew his parents, who had come for the game, wouldn't be watching him. He wondered idly if the *Fugitivus Animus* would blur his shape in their eyes, or just convince them that he was someone else.

“And Gryffindor secures the Quaffle!” Lee Jordan roared triumphantly. “Chaser Angelina Johnson carries it—“

Abruptly he squeaked, and the Gryffindor stands roared in outrage. Harry briefly turned from his search for the Snitch to see Flint cutting Angelina off, turning his broom in such a way that she nearly fell from the sky. She had to clutch at her own broom, and the Quaffle bounced from her arms. Flint grabbed it and sped towards the hovering Gryffindor Keeper, Oliver Wood.

Harry shuddered at the look on Flint's face. He obviously wanted to win this game, badly enough to risk fouling an opposing player, and the expression on Wood's face wasn't much better. *Mad for Quidditch, the both of them.*

“And the Snitch has been sighted!” Jordan shouted, recovering from how massively unfair life was. “There goes Connor Potter, surely the most magnificent Seeker on the field, after it!”

Harry glanced once at his diving brother, then shook his head. That would be a feint; he'd played Quidditch with his brother too long not to recognize the way he bent over his broom, prepared to spin off in one direction or another. The Slytherin Beaters were falling for it, chasing him, but Harry preferred to rise and hover above the chaos, still looking for that flash of gold.

“Fall off your broom.”

Harry clutched at his broom handle in shock. He darted a quick glance around, but he could not see who might have spoken. It certainly wasn't another Quidditch player; they were all below him. And the stands were full of staring eyes and screaming mouths. It had sounded like none of them, actually. It had sounded like a voice half in his head, the way that Sylarana used to

speak to him.

“Fall off your broom. Leave this match to your brother.”

Harry, now that he was watching for it, felt the slithering of a cold wind around his thoughts. This was the compulsion gift, he realized. Someone was trying to make him fall by compelling him to do it.

He thought of Connor and discarded him in the same instant. Connor would want to win the game fairly, and he was a bit busy at the moment, skimming along just above the grass to escape the Beaters and their Bludgers. But it was still compulsion.

That left Dumbledore, but Harry didn't think Dumbledore wanted him harmed in the way that a fall from his broom would leave him harmed.

Sirius.

Harry caught his breath as a shock of betrayal tore through him. Of course, it would be that way, he thought a moment later. Sirius had made no secret of his allegiances this year, even as he helped all four Quidditch teams prepare for the matches. He wanted Gryffindor to win. He expected to see the Quidditch Cup adorning Gryffindor House at the end of the year. Harry had prevented that from happening the last two years, and Sirius might well have decided to remove him as a threat.

But does he really want me dead? Harry looked down at the boil of green and red robes beneath him. *That's what could happen if I fell from this height.*

Now that he knew what was happening, he became filled with a reckless desire to test if Sirius really meant it. He aimed his broom at the sky and soared upward, ignoring Jordan's amused commentary about how the Slytherin Seeker seemed to have decided to chase birds instead of Snitches. Harry was two hundred feet above the Pitch, then three hundred. He waited.

“Fall off your broom.”

Yes, he means it, Harry thought in a daze as he bounced the compulsion off his Occlumency shields. *Oh, Sirius. Are House rivalries really that important to you, still? Or are you just not thinking?*

He lowered his gaze, sweeping the stands until he saw Sirius's untidy black hair. Sirius was sitting beneath a colorfully decorated Gryffindor banner with their parents and Remus, of course. He would be concentrating intensely to summon the compulsion gift from that far below. Harry had no doubt he could do it, though. Connor had had to meet his eyes when he demonstrated it, but Connor's gift had been new then. Sirius had been well-trained in it for a long time.

“Fall off your broom.”

“No,” Harry snapped back aloud, irritated, and then looked down to see Sirius's head tilt back. Harry couldn't read his expression, being too high up, but he could make out the pale smear of his face, and that was enough to confirm that, yes, Sirius had been talking him into a fall, and Sirius could hear him back.

Harry resisted the urge to stick out his tongue, and looked around for the Snitch. He still didn't know for sure what he would do when he saw it, but his desire to catch it was a bit stronger than before. *If Sirius wants to see Slytherin lose so very badly, I am disinclined to oblige him.*

Then he saw it, a golden flutter dancing and looping ahead of him, as though it were taking a small stroll alone in this empty expanse of sky. Harry tensed, but didn't move, listening instead to Jordan's commentary for a moment.

“Slytherin scores,” he said, sounding displeased, “40-20.”

Harry nodded slightly to himself, and felt his mind open up in front of him again, the way it had Sunday night. He was making another decision that would change things, and he wasn't sure he would like all the consequences.

But it wasn't his fault that the Snitch was up here, and Connor was down there. Nor was it his fault that Gryffindor was trailing Slytherin right now, and Harry's snatch of the Snitch would let them win conclusively.

It was much easier not to think, Harry found as he pushed himself forward. He'd win the match, and then see what happened.

Of course, the moment he began flying after it, the Snitch began exhibiting evasive behavior, darting back down towards the players and cutting from side to side. Harry gave himself over to a Seeker's instincts, and none of the evasive maneuvers mattered. He was not behind the Snitch, but slightly in front of it, his hand poised to the right by the time it fluttered there, his body leaning forward when the Snitch stopped flying backwards.

"Fall off your broom."

Sirius's command simply rolled over him and vanished when he was in this mental state, and then Harry's hand closed around the Snitch. He'd planned to let out a howl of triumph, to mark the moment, but when he felt the frantic beat of the tiny wings against his palm, he could do nothing but swallow. He held up the Snitch in his closed hand and flew back closer to the players, hoping someone would notice soon.

Lee Jordan did. "Potter's caught the Snitch," he said, in a dazed voice. "Slytherin wins, 190-20."

Harry heard the cheer erupt from the throats below him, at least the throats clad in green or sitting in the Slytherin green-draped stands. He smiled as he saw the gleams of pale and dark hair that would be Draco and Blaise, the one taunting the other into paying up. Harry thought he might be in shock. His breath rushed through his lungs, and he was shuddering slightly, and the air around him was very clear and bright.

"Fall off your broom."

Harry shook his head and turned to glare down at Sirius. *The match is over. Slytherin won. Why does he have to keep doing this?*

He was just in time to see Sirius rise to his feet, his eyes apparently intent on where Harry hovered, and Peter hit him like a whirlwind. Harry felt his jaw gape, and did not care. Peter appeared to leap up from between the slats of the stands—maybe he'd come as close as he could in rat form, or actually transformed as he was making his way through the gaps in the boards—and bear Sirius down onto the stands as he tackled him. The compulsion ceased at once, but now people in the Gryffindor stands were screaming for a different reason.

Harry narrowed his eyes and hurtled towards them, letting his Nimbus 2001 fly as fast as it could. The rest of the Pitch flashed by in confused blurs of green and scarlet, and then he was above the fight. "Peter!" he yelled. "Sirius! Stop it!"

Sirius had already transformed, and Peter was trying to hold down, or fight back, or do something else with an enormous black dog. Harry knew at once that he was going to lose. Peter was still thin and shaky from Azkaban, and Sirius was enraged and snarling on top of being healthy.

And if Sirius wins and retakes Peter...

A cold wind blew in from the side. Harry reared back and saw the Dementors pouring onto the Pitch, aiming for Peter. Their black shapes appeared to ripple in the strengthening wind. Their eyeless faces—Harry had learned now that they were eyeless—were turned in one direction. People screamed and fainted all around them, and they didn't appear to notice.

Harry bared his teeth and sharpened his grip on the Snitch. His hand hurt from the tightness of his clutch. *Good. The pain will give me something to focus on.*

He flew straight at the Dementors.

They didn't stop coming, but they did ripple and part, and then Harry could see the gray one he'd met in King's Cross Station in the middle of them, walking down the suddenly empty space like a king down an aisle in his throne room. That sensation of cold eyes from the eyeless face assaulted Harry again, and that voice like an icy spike hammered in through one ear. Harry pulled up, hovering. He didn't dare fly when he was in such pain.

What are you doing? This one has escaped from Azkaban prison. He is ours to retake.

"I don't want you to retake him," said Harry, and bore down with his right hand to make his fingers cramp and tremble, and his mind come back from the threatening glimpses of the Chamber that danced on the edges of his vision. "You—you called me something, the last time we met. What does that mean?"

Vates. The gray Dementor's voice had turned colder. *But though we might listen to you, vates, that does not mean we obey.*

Harry had no idea what the Dementor was talking about, but he knew what it meant: the Dementors were still spreading out around him and focusing on Peter. He didn't want that to happen.

"You touched my mind last time," he said. "Why, if you don't care?"

The vates is important to us, said the gray Dementor, and reached out a shadow of a hand on which ghostly fingers flickered. But our own responsibilities are to guard the prisoners of Azkaban. We have no choice about obeying that binding, any more than you have a choice about obeying your own.

Harry took a deep breath. What he thought he had to do now was far more than just listening, or thinking. But too many people had made too many sacrifices, or might have to make them. Peter, and Snape, and Draco, and Connor.

It ends here.

"If I could free you from that binding?" he whispered.

The Dementors all froze as one. Harry could feel them trembling, and wondered if that was what they did in place of breathing.

Then the gray Dementor said, in a voice that felt as though it were leaving ice crystals frozen on his face, *Only the true vates could do that. And you are very far from being a true vates yet.*

"Free my magic, then." Harry lifted his head and narrowed his eyes at the gray Dementor. "You want to be free? You want to have possibilities other than guarding Azkaban?" He remembered the phrases in Starborn's letter. "I think I have power that I might bend to protect and serve, and I would refuse compulsion if I could. I've had it used against me too often to like it. But *I can't get rid of this binding on my own.*"

The phoenix web flared behind his eyes, but Harry thought hard about doing this for Connor, getting the Dementors off the field so that he wouldn't be terrified, and the pain in his head calmed.

That is the first step, said the gray Dementor, and then it glided forward and reached out a hand towards him.

Harry calmed his fear and grasped its fingers with its left hand.

Cold sank into him and overwhelmed him, freezing his arm from the hand down, but Harry had felt the intense cold of his own magic and did not flinch. The swirl of ice bore up to his shoulder and then across to his neck and towards his head. Harry closed his eyes.

The warm flare of the phoenix web was there to greet him, and then the Dementor's power reached his mind. This time, it did not simply rip and tear at his thoughts as it had in King's Cross. Harry had invited it in, and that made the difference. Harry could feel the way the Dementor trod carefully through his thoughts, stirring up happy memories that it delicately fed on, to keep itself locked in his head while it completed its work.

And it did complete its work. Harry saw the phoenix web turn blue from gold, and then he felt it begin to crack and fray. Behind it rose a swell of power, and he panted, afraid of what it might mean.

We will not force you to free us, the gray Dementor whispered to him, the voice still painful. The vates cannot be forced, or he is the not the vates. And we can do nothing about the part of the web that is tied to your brotherly duty. But freeing your magic? Yes, we may do that. At the least, we shall enjoy it.

Harry didn't have time to question what that meant before the web dropped in shards of ice, and his magic broke completely free for the first time in his life.

The gray Dementor was borne backwards out of his mind on swelling waves of power. Harry sobbed, and then bowed his head as he felt magic spiral down his arms, warming the path of ice that breaking the phoenix web had made. Then it reached his fingertips and rose all around him, an incandescent wave of light that filled the Quidditch Pitch and struck wildly for the sky beyond.

Harry managed to slit his eyes so as to see through the radiance, and became aware that his magic was singing, in a voice far deeper and gladder than the voice of the phoenix web. The song echoed through his body, his mouth, his ears, and its cheerful booming shook the earth, reminding Harry of Hagrid's voice. That ceased after a moment, but the light continued rising from

him, forming an enormous pair of white-gold wings that beat lazily from his shoulders and covered the shocked faces staring at him in brilliance.

Heated wind stroked his skin, and Harry saw the Forbidden Forest stirring, the trees bowing as if in answer to that wind. Creatures were moving at the edge of the trees, too. Harry heard the thin sound of many cries, many greetings. He lifted his head as the wings dropped from his shoulders, dissolving into sharp motes of light, and smiled in their direction.

He looked back down at the stands. Peter was gone, and, Harry had to hope, safe. The Dementors were nowhere in sight. Remus was on his feet, staring hard at him. The rest of the school was staring at him, too, but screaming in shock, and the expressions on their faces were different from the one on Remus's, which was unexpectedly yearning.

Harry didn't know what the *vates* was, not exactly, but he knew it had something to do with freedom and magical creatures, and he wondered if Remus had recognized him in the way a werewolf might.

He turned slowly on his broomstick, looking along the stands. Ron was furiously scratching his shoulders. Neville was staring with an open mouth and shining eyes. Percy Weasley had his hand over his face. Hermione was mouthing questions at him that Harry didn't think he could have answered even if he could hear her. McGonagall was on her feet, her hands clasped together as if to hold something precious between them, her face wildly proud.

Dumbledore was staring at him in horror.

Harry glanced at the Slytherin stands, and surprised a look of pleasure and wonder on Millicent's face. Pansy had her mouth open. Draco was standing up and applauding, while Blaise looked as though someone had smacked him in the face with a hammer. And Snape...

Snape's triumph hung around him like a roaring black fire to someone who knew him as well as Harry did, even though he'd done no more than rise to his feet and look up at Harry.

Harry read the next step in his guardian's face, and nodded. He was terrified, and he did not dare look at his brother, but he knew what had to happen next.

No hiding. No going back. We face what comes from this. We must.

He started to fly towards Snape, and then paused as another voice rang out over the field. This one was very familiar, but it didn't come from inside his head. Instead, singing, Fawkes soared over the field and came to settle on Harry's shoulder. Harry adjusted himself to carry the weight and raised a trembling hand to stroke the phoenix's feathers. He only realized he still held the Snitch when he realized that he couldn't unclench his fingers from around it.

Fawkes fit his head into the curve of Harry's neck, and gave a low, glad croon.

Harry took a deep breath, accepted the heat seeping into him like courage, and flew towards Snape.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventeen: Shut Up, Sirius

Harry was trembling by the time he landed beside Snape, despite Fawkes's warm presence on his shoulder, despite the fact that he knew there could be no going back, despite the comforting hand that Snape immediately clapped onto his other shoulder. Only his iron determination kept him from running.

Well, that and the sense of what he owed to so many people. The sacrifices had gone far enough.

It ends here.

Harry turned and lifted his chin, meeting Dumbledore's eyes. It was his move now. Harry was not about to clap his magic under bindings again. Nor would he run. He had every right to come over to his guardian and accept congratulations for winning the match for Slytherin. He had no reason to whimper and cower as if he had done something wrong, or hide.

He finally managed to unclench his fingers from the Snitch, and smiled faintly at Snape as he let the little golden ball go. Its wings were broken. "It looks like Madam Hooch will have to use a different set of balls for the practice matches," he said, and Snape's gaze grew, if possible, fiercer. It seemed as though he had forgotten the Quidditch triumph in the wake of what

happened next.

“She will indeed,” he said. “That was incredible flying, Harry. Both during the match, and what came...after.”

Harry swallowed, and felt a tingle of weariness run through him. He didn't show it. They could not show any weariness, any weakness, not right now. The easiest course for the Ministry and anyone else who wanted to enslave him would be to pretend that a mere child couldn't handle that much magic, and herd him, clucking, into the “care” of someone who would make sure his power was bound again. But he had to be honest with Snape. He had promised he would be. “Better than you know,” he said. “Sirius was trying to compel me to fall off my broom at the same time.”

Snape did not move for a moment. Then his gaze rose past Harry, and Harry saw Sirius's death in his face. He apparently shouldn't have trusted Snape's newfound control around his godfather *that* much.

“He will not leave the Pitch alive,” said Snape. If he had made it a loud, dramatic announcement, then Harry would not have worried. But he said the words casually, and drew the wand from his sleeve, and Harry knew he was seeing the man who had run as a Death Eater at Voldemort's side. Even more telling, the shields were rising off Snape's magic. If he wanted to, in this kind of rage, he could simply will Sirius's heart to stop beating. Harry was grateful beyond words that he had thought of his wand first.

He reached up and gripped Snape's arm, causing Fawkes to give a disapproving chirp as he shifted positions. “No,” he said, when his guardian looked at him. “I don't want him harmed. I want him alive.”

Snape did not look as though that would change his mind. Harry firmed his grip and leaned in close to say, “He is my godfather. He's still that.”

“Not by the time I finish with him,” said Snape.

Harry sighed. “I know that you probably think he doesn't deserve to be my godfather any more—“

“He does not,” said Snape, his voice smooth, “deserve to live.”

“Please let him speak to us,” said Harry. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Dumbledore already coming towards them, his robes billowing around him. “Please let him explain why he would do such a thing. I have the power to demand explanations like that and get them, now. Dumbledore has to treat with me on a much more equal footing. Please?”

Snape took a deep breath. Then, abruptly, he smiled, and the shields came down over his magic again. “I suppose,” he murmured, “that I would have little to gain from killing Black in public and in such a manner that the Headmaster, at least, would immediately guess my hand in the death.”

Harry squinted hard at Snape. He knew him well enough by now to guess that the important parts of that statement had to do with killing Sirius in public and in a traceable way. But what about private, untraceable ways?

He is a Potions Master, Harry thought uneasily, and felt his heart begin to pound hard.

“Sir—“

He got interrupted by Dumbledore's arrival, and by Draco's. Draco stepped up to stand at his side, every bit of him radiating wonder and happiness and protectiveness, and Dumbledore halted in front of Harry and inclined his head in a little bow. It was by far the most equal gesture he'd ever got from Dumbledore. Harry bowed back, reassured now, despite Dumbledore's narrow-eyed glance at Fawkes. The phoenix preened his tail feathers and ignored Dumbledore.

“Harry,” said Dumbledore, “surely you will want to come and speak with me about—your new magic, and other things, in the privacy of my office? Surely you would like some answers?” His eyes had a careful look to them, and Harry recognized it. Dumbledore was making as gracious a surrender of this as possible. He did not want Harry for one moment to think he was defeated. Harry could almost admire the old bastard. At least he knew his politics.

“I do,” said Harry. “But I want Professor Snape to come with us, as my legal guardian, and Draco, as my best friend and as a witness from the pureblood community, and Professor McGonagall, as a witch of untouched reputation, and Hermione Granger, as a witness from the Muggleborn community, and Sirius Black, to answer for his crimes, and Remus Lupin, to be answered for the crimes done to him.”

Dumbledore stared at him. He understood the reasoning behind Harry's gestures, of course, but he seemed stunned that Harry would actually go through with them. Harry raised his eyebrows mockingly, his fear retreating as he started to enjoy himself again. *Of course I am going to go through with them. I'll use any weapon against you I can, Dumbledore, and not only the supposed Slytherin ones. The more witnesses, and the more varied, the better.*

Dumbledore nodded once, and then said, "It shall be as you suggest. You will give me a minute to speak with Professor McGonagall, Miss Granger, Professor Black, and Professor Lupin?"

Harry inclined his head again. "Of course, sir."

He felt Draco take his arm as Dumbledore moved away. "Is that wise?" he whispered. "After all, Professor McGonagall is such a busybody. And Black just tried to kill you. And Granger's twice the busybody that McGonagall is, and—"

"Yes?" Harry encouraged mildly, his gaze locked on Dumbledore's retreating back. Sirius was human again, but still snarling and looking around for Peter, whom Harry thought must have got away. He sagged when Dumbledore spoke to him, though. Professor McGonagall was already making her way calmly towards the Headmaster.

"She's a Mudblood."

Harry glanced at Draco. "I can't force you to stop using that word, Draco," he said. "I *won't* force you to stop using that word. I will ask you to please stop using it around me. I don't like it, and it's ridiculous, anyway. Going by terms of sheer magical power, you know that Hermione's one of the strongest witches in the school." Fawkes added a croon after his words, as though to confirm that.

"I know that!" Draco sounded peevish. "But Mudbloods just don't belong, Harry. And I thought you were going to ally with the purebloods."

"I'm allying with everybody," said Harry. "If I can ally with the Dementors, I can surely fit in some witches and wizards who grew up in the Muggle world."

"You must tell me what happened with the Dementors," said Draco.

"*Must?*" Harry asked, watching Remus's expression as he glanced over Dumbledore's head at Harry. The Headmaster was casting *Sonorus* now, making some speech, probably reinforced with an edge of compulsion, to calm the crowd down and make them sure that things were being handled. Harry knew some people would calm down and leave, but he doubted that the Headmaster would be able to make them stop thinking about this. The headlines would appear in the *Daily Prophet* tomorrow. The Ministry would be notified. The news was probably already sweeping like a storm throughout the community of people Starborn was trying to maneuver.

Harry had to accept that. He had made his decision. There was no going back.

I suspect I will need regular reminders of that, he thought, and tightened his shoulders, causing Fawkes to flutter in place. The Headmaster had summoned Hermione. She was giving Harry a curious look, her hand tightening on something around her neck. Harry tilted his head. He could feel an intense aura of magic radiating from the thing, whatever it was.

"Well, I'd like you to tell me what happened with the Dementors," said Draco.

Harry broke his gaze on his enemies, or tentative allies, and smiled at Draco. "I will."

The other Slytherins surrounded him then. They ranged from Blaise, who was pretending everything was normal and accusing Harry of winning the game purely to lose him ten Galleons, to Millicent, who smiled more than she talked. But they walled Harry round in green and made him feel at home.

He did not look across the field for his parents and his brother. There seemed to be no point, not right now. His path was still too new.

"Would anyone fancy a cup of tea?"

Harry listened as Hermione and Sirius accepted, while everyone else refused, Snape with no more than a dark expression.

Dumbledore had conjured chairs for the seven other people now crammed into his office. Harry sat between Snape and Draco, with Hermione and McGonagall across from him and Sirius and Remus in chairs on the sides of the rough circle. Harry could still meet Dumbledore's eyes, since Hermione's and McGonagall's chairs flanked the Headmaster's desk. Fawkes was not with him. He had fluttered away towards the dungeons, singing, rather than enter the Headmaster's office. When a phoenix chose his allegiance, Harry reflected, he did it rather thoroughly, and did not turn back, either.

He could feel the weight of tense expectation in the room. Merlin, he was radiating some of it himself. This was the moment when some shells were going to have to crack. He wondered idly for a moment what question Dumbledore expected him to ask first. Something concerning his parents, concerning Connor, concerning the phoenix web?

In the end, he decided it wouldn't matter. Rather than reacting to what Dumbledore wanted him to do, he would lead the dance and force Dumbledore to react to him instead.

"Professor Dumbledore," he said. He would stick to titles until they were open enemies. They weren't, not yet. This was the steel fist in the velvet glove, the same role he had danced opposite Lucius during his Christmas in Malfoy Manor. "Will you please enlighten me as to why Sirius Black might have been trying to convince me to fall off my broom during the Quidditch match?"

Hermione choked on her tea. McGonagall paled. Sirius slumped back in his seat, bowed his head, and wouldn't look at anybody.

Remus stood up and shouted at Sirius.

"*You* were doing that? I thought Harry might be having some trouble with his flying, but I never—Sirius—you really did—" He broke off, but his eyes were glowing, and his voice had become a rumbling snarl on the last words. Harry had only seen him angry like that once before, and then he'd been too deeply under the influence of the phoenix web to appreciate it.

"I did," Sirius said softly. "I can't—there is no apology that will be enough, Harry. But I'm sorry." He recited the whole thing in a dull voice, his hair still falling across his face.

"Tell me why, Padfoot," said Remus, stepping forward until he stood directly in front of Sirius's chair. "I'm owed that, at least, I think."

Sirius looked up, and Harry stared. He hadn't really paid attention to Sirius in the last few days, occupied as he was with the thoughts that Peter had asked him to think. Sirius barely looked human. His face was gray, his eyes bloodshot, and shadows that indicated lack of sleep and pain both were cut into his cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Moony," he said, his voice steady now, but still dull. "I can't tell the whole thing over again. I'll leave that up to Albus." He nodded to the Headmaster, and then slumped back down in his seat.

Harry looked in the Headmaster's direction, and surprised a gentle expression on his face. "Sirius?" he whispered. "You really grant me permission to tell them everything?"

"Yes," said Sirius, his voice flat and gray.

"You have suffered so much, my dear boy," Dumbledore murmured, and sighed. His eyes were more open than Harry had ever seen them. They were showing the love that Harry suspected Peter had gone to Azkaban for.

Dumbledore faced the witnesses and began to speak. His voice did not quaver, and his words did not falter or fade; they sounded almost detached. But the way his eyes went constantly to Sirius made up for all that he did not show in his voice, Harry thought.

"Harry Potter has asked why his godfather would betray him. I have denied him answers before, but now that Sirius Black has granted me formal permission to narrate the reasons, I will.

"Sirius Black was born with the compulsion gift—" Dumbledore waited patiently for the shock wave to finish traveling around the room, and continued in the perfect moment, which was the moment before Hermione could begin asking questions—"and had it trained ruthlessly by his parents. He had a younger brother, Regulus, whom some of you will remember." He looked to Remus, to McGonagall, to Snape. Remus's face had gone absolutely pale, Harry thought. He narrowed his eyes. He would ask Remus, later, why it was that he had agreed to go along with Dumbledore and the rest of them, and betray Peter and Connor.

“Regulus had no compulsion gift,” Dumbledore said softly, “and did everything his parents wanted of him. He did not suffer as Sirius did. Sirius had the power, if he had not been trained, to make his parents do whatever he wanted them to do, to believe whatever he wanted them to believe. They had much smaller compulsion gifts, and they were terrified, scared sick, as purebloods often are, at the thought of being made to believe that perhaps Muggleborns were equal to them. My apologies, Miss Granger,” he added. Hermione nodded stiffly. Harry looked hard at her, and realized she was the only Muggleborn in the room. She would probably be thinking hard, and twice as hard as any other Muggleborn student in the same situation would, because she was Hermione. Harry decided to speak with her later, if he could.

It kept him from thinking too deeply about what he had just heard, for a moment. Then the thoughts came rushing and pounced him. *Sirius...they feared Sirius, just as my parents feared me.*

“They tried as hard as they could to sway Sirius to their way of thinking, so that he would never wish to make them believe otherwise, because he would believe the same things,” Dumbledore’s soft voice continued. “They—well. I am afraid beatings would have been the least of it. But they were pureblood wizards, and, moreover, of a pureblood line to whom Dark magic came as naturally as breathing.” He looked at Sirius again, and there was desperate fondness in his eyes. “Do you feel up to showing them the scar, Sirius?” he whispered.

Sirius took a deep breath, put his teacup down beside his chair, and rolled up his left sleeve. Harry stared. The scar there was one he knew he had never seen before, and should have; Sirius had probably been using charms to mask it. It rolled from Sirius’s shoulder to just past his elbow, and resembled a branching vein. Harry was not sure what could have made it. It certainly didn’t look like the cuts from a blade that he had studied how to heal, nor the aftereffects of any Dark spell he knew.

“That is the remnant of an *Amotio Maga* spell,” said McGonagall, and when Harry looked at her, she seemed to be on the verge of fainting.

“Yes,” Dumbledore acknowledged softly. “When his parents were displeased with him, they took Sirius’s magic and locked it into a festering, flesh-eating wound on his left arm.” His voice was emotionless. Harry wondered how long it had taken him to sound like that when he spoke of this. “It pained him horribly, and he could not use magic to ease the pain—nor to do anything else, for that matter, as long as the *Amotio Maga* curse was in operation. His parents would only give his magic back when he pleased them, which was not often. They were trying to teach him the horrors of living like a Muggle.”

Dumbledore’s voice warmed and grew sterner, both at once. “It did not work. When Sirius came to Hogwarts, he had a sympathy for Muggles and Muggleborns, both, since he had been deprived of both his own magic and control over it for so long. He was Sorted into Gryffindor, and I undertook to protect him, as I could not do before.” He paused one more time, then sighed. “*All of it, Sirius?*”

Harry looked at his godfather. Sirius nodded, or the curtain of black hair hanging over his face nodded. It abruptly occurred to Harry that Sirius hadn’t cut his hair in months. That had always been a sign that he was depressed in the past. Harry felt an uncomfortable twinge of guilt for having failed to notice it.

Dumbledore sighed once again, and took a battered piece of parchment from his desk. He gave it to McGonagall, who stared at it and paled. She handed it past Sirius to Draco, who only stared at it without interest before handing it on to Harry. He took it with trembling hands. He recognized his godfather’s script, though it was far shakier than what he was accustomed to seeing. Sirius must have written this letter when he was younger, Harry thought, and the date at the top of the letter confirmed it.

November 2nd, 1967

Dear Professor Dumbledore:

I know that you don’t know me, but my name’s Sirius Black. I need your help. My parents hurt me. But I know you’re the wisest and the best wizard in the world, because you defeated the Dark Lord, and you’ll help me, because you always help children in trouble. Even my mother says so, and I think she’s afraid of you. Please, please help me.

Sirius Black.

Harry gave the letter to Snape, and stared at Dumbledore. “And you didn’t help him,” he whispered.

Dumbledore dipped his head slowly. “I did not.”

“Why not?” Harry could not imagine not responding to such a letter. Sirius had just been a child.

“Because,” said Dumbledore, with a sigh, “at the time, I had no power to help a child in desperate need. I was not yet Headmaster of Hogwarts. And I had no legal means to challenge a powerful, pureblooded, Dark family for control of their elder son and heir. The Wizengamot would have laughed at any legal challenge, no matter how Sirius was being treated. A child’s letter was proof only of a child’s temper tantrum, they would have said.”

Dumbledore spread his hands slowly. “I have spent most of my life since trying to make up for that great wrong, and I fear that I have only exacerbated it. I could not save Regulus Black. I could not save Sirius from nightmares of his brother’s torture and death at the hands of Voldemort. I could not save him from the aftereffects of that Dark curse used to forge the mental link between the brothers. Only Voldemort could have broken it, and it ended only when Connor Potter survived his Killing Curse.”

“What aftereffects?” Snape asked the question with no emotion in his voice at all. Harry was glad. He could think of many emotions that would have made the room explode. Everyone was far too quiet. Remus had not stopped staring at Sirius, for one thing, and Hermione’s tears were spilling silently down her cheeks as she read the letter.

“Sirius’s mind has been—unstable since then.” Dumbledore did not look at Sirius as he spoke. “He has had nightmares. And I asked him to take on a duty that I feared he did not have the strength to do, because we had a desperate need, and Sirius wished to be useful. First to guard Connor, by coming here to Hogwarts as extra protection for him, and then to tutor him in compulsion magic. Connor Potter also has the ability.” Dumbledore closed his eyes. “I asked him, but I fear I made it sound an order. The Dark curse is prone to—twisting Sirius’s good intentions, it must be said. Sirius seemed to take part of protecting Connor to be sabotaging Harry. And that came to a head today. I am sorry, terribly sorry, to you, Harry, and to Sirius. What mistakes I made, I made out of love, but that does not change the fact that they were still mistakes.”

Harry became aware that his hands were clenched tight again. He tried to breathe, and could only utter a sound suspiciously like a sob, though he still knew he was not going to cry. He stared at Sirius, and thought how little he’d known of him at all, how the drinking and the womanizing were probably an attempt to live as normal a life as possible, how the dark circles under his eyes came from nightmares and not loss of sleep over his latest girlfriend.

“None of that excuses what you have done to Harry,” said Snape then, and his voice was cold and utterly bereft of emotion or resonance. “Bound his magic and encouraged him to be trained into a weapon.”

“I know,” said Dumbledore, calm, accepting. “But that does not mean that the suffering of one can be made the reason for the suffering of others, as would happen if Harry were to unleash his magic.” Harry looked up to find himself facing a stare full of passionate Gryffindor resolve. Dumbledore was not going to back down from this one, he knew.

Well, neither am I. Harry bared his teeth and hardened his heart. This was for other people, not him. “But you made Sirius’s suffering the excuse for others’,” he said.

Dumbledore’s face went white. Snape’s chuckle followed after that, low and smooth and dark.

“He has you there, Albus,” he said. “And I feel free to say that, as Harry’s legal guardian, I will not agree to your binding his magic again. Nor will I consent to Harry being near Black again, nor alone with him. He is insane, and he tried to cause my ward’s death.”

“*FUCK YOU, SNIVELLUS!*”

Sirius was out of his chair in an instant, bowling towards Snape. Harry had time to react, and he snapped up a barrier in front of Snape, a wall of white-golden light. He hoped Sirius would have time to react in turn, but he hit the wall and fell backwards. A steady stream of whimpers slid from his mouth, and he held a hand to his face, blood running between his fingers. Harry suspected he’d broken his nose.

Snape hadn’t reacted except to breathe a little faster, but the glare he sent Dumbledore was deadly. “And I will definitely recommend that Black be removed from the school altogether,” he whispered. “That he would attack another professor, not once but twice, is unacceptable. And as for attacking students, the way he did today—it would not matter if it was Miss Granger here, or Connor Potter. I would still ask for, no, *demand*, his removal.”

Harry watched Sirius climb slowly back to his feet. Yes, his nose was broken. And Harry had caused that by no more than willing it to happen.

His magic reared around him, then settled on his shoulders in visible golden coils of power. Harry saw Sirius's eyes trace them, and blank hatred and rage turned to blank fear. Harry wound his fingers through each other.

He's unstable, he reminded himself, and looked at Dumbledore. "You must have had a reason to keep him here so long and let him train Connor," he said. "What was it?"

"I told you," said Dumbledore softly. "I asked him to train Connor in compulsion magic because he had the time to do so, the ability, and wanted to feel useful. I believed the duty would be light enough not to affect him adversely. I did not—"

"I can still do it."

Sirius sounded calm again. Harry looked back at his godfather, and saw that he'd lowered his hand. He'd probably cast a healing spell on his nose. His eyes were fastened on Dumbledore's face, and there was a deep, quiet desperation in them.

"I love both of these boys as if they were my own children," he said. "I know that Snivellus won't let me have any more contact with Harry now, for as long as he's Harry's guardian." The stare he sent over his shoulder said that he personally wouldn't let it be very long. "But I *need* the contact with Connor. Please, Albus. I'm sure that Lily and James wouldn't want you to stop letting me teach their son just because Snivellus is being unreasonable."

Dumbledore closed his eyes. He looked inexpressibly weary, but Harry knew he would assent before he did.

"Very well, Sirius," he whispered. "If you think you can control yourself around Connor, then you may continue training him." He sighed. "It would be the best solution, in any case. I simply do not have enough time to give Connor all the training and attention that he needs, while you do."

Sirius nodded fervently. "Thank you, Albus. I promise that you won't regret this."

"I will," said Harry, standing. He drew Dumbledore's gaze to him, and part of him reveled in the sick terror behind the older wizard's serenity. "Why should I consent to leave my *twin* alone with a man who's hurt me so badly, and could hurt him?"

"Because," said Dumbledore quietly, "Connor is doing well. He no longer unconsciously compels people. But he has much yet to learn. And it helps heal Sirius as well, to know that he's doing something."

"That's true, Harry," Sirius chimed in eagerly. "I promise that I won't hurt him. I could never hurt him. I could never raise my mind or my hand against him."

Harry turned and studied his godfather. It hurt to say what he felt he had to say next. "But you could do it to me."

Sirius flinched and turned his head away. "You don't understand," he whispered. "This Dark curse makes me react strongly to Dark magic. And you stank of it, and you chose a guardian who stank of it, and you're in *Slytherin* House, and it's just so *hard*, Harry—"

He began to cry then. He sank into his chair unattended. Remus was still frozen in the middle of the circle. Now he took his own seat, and drew Harry's eyes and attention back to him.

"I think," he told Dumbledore, "that Remus should know what you've kept from him, now."

Dumbledore tried to stare him down. Harry stared back, and let his magic unfold lazily. Even the barest touch of that power made Dumbledore narrow his eyes. Harry wondered how he felt the magic, if it was some horrific physical sensation.

"I know," said Remus then, quietly.

Harry stared at him. "You do?"

Remus nodded to Snape. "Severus mentioned it to me at one point. He said—he said I had learned you were being abused. That's what the stolen memories concerned." He closed his eyes. "And he also said that the *Obliviate* had to be removed delicately. My sanity is at stake if it's just stripped from my mind. I know that."

"Yes." Harry felt the claws of his power flex around him. He was reasonably certain that he could remove the *Obliviate*, now, when he'd studied Remus's mind for a little while. "But do you know why Dumbledore *Obliviated* you rather than try to persuade you?"

“Harry,” said Dumbledore sharply.

“He was afraid he couldn’t convince you,” Harry told Remus, ignoring Dumbledore. “He was afraid that you would endanger a web in my mind, one that had been there for eight years, since I was four. That web fucked up my mind and bound my magic.” He ignored the very slight flare of golden pain from behind his eyes. He had expected it, since the gray Dementor had told him the part of the web that concerned Connor was still there. “They needed me bound, to be Connor’s guardian. Dumbledore here is terrified of what I’ll become when my magic is free, don’t ask me why—“

“You could become a Dark Lord,” said Dumbledore, and the room appeared to flicker into darkness as if a cloud had crossed the sun when his own magic surged forward. Harry wondered if he was even aware of the edge of compulsion that rode his voice. He did see McGonagall bow her head and twist as though trying to escape a yoke, and Draco made a spitting, hissing noise. Harry hoped they had managed to fight it off. “You could become as vast and dangerous as Voldemort, Harry. We are already fighting one of him. I do not wish to fight two.”

“I swear that I will not,” whispered Harry. “I wish to defend, to protect and serve.”

“Then why not remain as you have been?” asked Dumbledore, his voice ringing with wistfulness. “You would be defending, protecting, and serving under the phoenix web, and doing it with an easy mind and clear conscience.”

Harry found himself laughing. The sound tore at his throat, but he went on making it. The look of shock on Dumbledore’s face, the shine of mingled triumph and compassion in McGonagall’s eyes, and the intent expression on Hermione’s features were worth it.

“I want to defend, protect, and serve other people than just my brother,” said Harry plainly. “And that is *going* to happen.” He turned and met Remus’s eyes. “Tell me when you want the *Obliviate* removed.”

“I don’t know,” Remus whispered. “I—I have to think. I have to think about what I’m ready to know.” He avoided Harry’s eyes.

Harry suffered a brief surge of contempt. Remus probably didn’t want to know, or wanted to think of some way to know about the abuse Harry had suffered and yet avoid losing his friends. Harry would not be at all surprised if he chose his friends, the way he had when he knew about that Halloween night.

Then he restrained his contempt. He could not simply step into Remus’s mind and kick the barriers aside. That would make him no better than Dumbledore, no better than Voldemort. He *had* to respect Remus’s free will, even if that led him to actions Harry despised, and only act against him when Remus actually did something to hurt him.

Harry faced Dumbledore again. “And now I want to know why you tried to put me back under the phoenix web,” he said softly, “when I had said clearly that I did not want it. I want to know why you attacked Draco.” Draco shifted closer to him. Harry put one arm around his shoulders, ignoring McGonagall’s shock. She hadn’t known about the Headmaster’s attack on a student, then. *Well, there is a first time for learning everything.* “I want to know why you thought it was so important to have my magic and my mind bound.”

“I have told you,” said Dumbledore. “I feared that you would become the next Dark Lord.”

Harry snorted. “When I was *four*?”

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, his voice unexpectedly grave. “No other child has ever had power of that magnitude at such an age, Harry. Their power matures slowly, along with them. Tom Riddle was already a powerful wizard at eleven years old, but he did not suddenly leap full-blown into spells that would have taxed adults. He had been powerful since birth, and he went on refining his gifts. His magic gained ground because he learned new spells, new techniques, and new training. But yours... yours was simply and suddenly *there*, Harry, long after your birth, when to all appearances you were born a magically normal child. It had more than a touch of the unnatural about it. And given the prophecy, we could not let the future savior of the wizarding world grow up with a brother who would become a Dark Lord. We thought at first that your training would encourage the magic to lie still and accept refinement, but it wasn’t enough. Your magic not only refined, it kept growing in raw strength, as if its sudden appearance in your life were not the end, as if it were drawing power from elsewhere. So, the phoenix web.” Dumbledore let out a long sigh and passed his hand over his eyes. “Because the greatest opponent of power, and of the careless arrogance with which Tom used his power, is love.”

Harry lowered his eyes. There were a great many things he wanted to say. He wanted to ask about the *vates* title that the

Dementors had given him. He wanted to ask about what Starborn had said in his letter, about Harry having the potential to become a kind of wizard who was not a Lord. He wanted to ask about why they had to force him to love his brother, and not just rely on the natural love. He wanted to demand that Sirius be kept away from his brother.

But he looked at Dumbledore's face, and decided the first three would be unwise questions to ask, at least if he wanted to surprise Dumbledore in the future. And he looked at Sirius, and the words stuck in his throat.

They were so similar. They'd both endured, and managed to survive, suffering. They'd both been feared for their gifts. They'd both been asked to make sacrifices beyond what they could bear—though Harry knew, at least intellectually, that his sacrifices had been heavier than Sirius's.

It was true that Sirius hadn't hurt Connor. *Not yet*, pointed out a dark voice in the back of his thoughts. But his offenses had been against Harry himself, and if Harry chose to forgive them, he could.

Harry let out a long breath. "This is the way it's going to be," he said, and saw Sirius's head twitch towards him. "I don't mind if Sirius trains Connor—for now. If he ever hurts my brother, then he'll have me to contend with. The same if he hurts Snape, or Draco, or anyone else I care about."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, his eyes not moving from Harry's face. Harry stared back at him, and went on.

"I mean to have Professor Snape as my guardian, still." He ignored the firm grip on his shoulder. He'd expected it. "We'll deal with the Ministry. And I'm going to stay in Slytherin House and use my magic openly, the way I want to, free of its constraints."

"There are many things you do not know," Dumbledore warned him gravely.

"I know that," Harry snapped. "But I'm going to try to learn them, rather than avoid or ignore them." He couldn't help glancing at Remus as he said that. Remus flinched. The look in his eyes was odd now, a mixture of fear, pleading, and the yearning with which he'd watched Harry on the Quidditch Pitch. Harry stared back at Dumbledore. "I want you to stay out of my way."

"You're talking to the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Harry," said Sirius, who seemed to have recovered from his crying fit.

Harry gave him a glance he knew was withering. "Shut *up*, Sirius," he told him in exasperation. "I forgive you for what you've done to me, but I know what you are now, and I'm going to be watching you closely."

"Those are the kinds of things a Dark Lord might say," Dumbledore observed quietly.

Harry snarled at him, and felt the walls shake slightly. He snatched back control of his rage before he could do something unfortunate. "No," he countered. "They're the kinds of things that a very angry, very tired, very magically powerful teenager might say when he's been forced to grow up and become a soldier too quickly and a sacrifice all his life."

Dumbledore was silent, regarding him. Harry turned, meeting the other eyes in the room.

"I won't demand anything from you," he told them—McGonagall, Hermione, Remus, and Draco. "I will *ask* that you use your discretion when talking about what you heard in this room. And if you do something to oppose me, please think about what I'll have to do in return."

Draco was grinning, now, and not bothering to hide it. McGonagall nodded, her eyes shining with pride. Remus glanced away from him. Hermione was chewing on a piece of her hair and scowling fiercely.

"And now," said Harry, rising to his feet, "I think I'm tired, and I have a party to attend in the Slytherin common room, and I'd like to walk back down to the dungeons under the protection of my legal guardian and my best friend." He held out a hand to Draco, who clasped it, hard. Harry glanced once at Hermione, regretting the loss of an opportunity to talk to her alone. But... "Hermione, I'm meeting Neville in the library tomorrow after lunch. Can you be there?"

Hermione blinked and nodded. She would probably go to the library the moment she left the office, Harry thought, and try to look up most of the terms she'd heard here. He wished her good luck with finding them. He could use the help, assuming she decided to help him.

"So our state is one of—" Dumbledore began.

“Armed neutrality,” Harry cut in. “I won’t attack you or your allies, Headmaster, and I expect the same courtesy of you. I *will* defend my brother and anyone else I care about if you threaten them. I *will* defend myself against future attacks by Sirius.”

“That wasn’t my fault,” Sirius muttered.

“Shut *up*, Sirius,” said Harry, without looking at him. It would take him a while to sort out his feelings for his godfather. He would prefer to do it away from him. “I will try to learn as much as I can about my magic, and the best ways to use it.”

“There is so much damage you could do,” murmured Dumbledore in a resigned tone.

“I prefer to think of it as how much good I could do,” Harry corrected him, and then turned towards the dungeons, Snape and Draco immovable barriers on either side of him. He didn’t wait to see how the others sorted himself out. He was almost tired enough to skip the Slytherin victory party.

Albus slumped against his desk as Harry and the others filed out of the room. Things were bad, but not as bad as they could have been. There was still a spark of hope. Sirius could remain in Hogwarts to train Connor. The wizarding world would find out about Harry’s power, but they wouldn’t fall in behind him as they might have had he declared an open allegiance to the Light. Harry was still, technically, in a truce with him.

Harry did not know the full story behind why Albus had called his power unnatural. He did not know that Albus felt his magic as a narrowing of every possibility in the world, a darkening and a stripping away of the future.

Albus gave Fawkes’s perch one last sorrowful glance, then stood up, shaking his head. Things had gone as they would. There was no turning back. He had lost some ground, but he would win it again. Harry had met his eyes a few times, too directly, during their conversation. Albus had used Legilimency, and knew he still bore part of the phoenix web, the part linked directly to his brotherly duty.

It was enough. It would have to be enough. Albus would make it be enough. Things were not as dark as they had been before, in the final days of the First War with Voldemort, or those days of the war with Grindelwald before Albus had felt comfortable enough to challenge him to single combat.

He had survived then, by loving the wizarding world. He would protect it now. Not all hope was lost.

He made himself believe that.

Snape saw Harry and Draco safe to the door of the Slytherin common room, where the boys stepped from the silence of the corridor into wild cheers, wilder catcalls, and the crooning and chirping of an overexcited phoenix. Snape shook his head and made his way to his own office. *I hope the boy does not ask if he can bring the bird to classes. My answer will always be no.*

He opened his office door, stepped inside, shut the door, and leaned against it for a moment. He let the emotions wash through him, burning triumph and bone-deep disgust and heart-high pride.

Harry had done it. He had *done* it. His strength was incredible, not only his strength of magic but his strength of soul. Snape did not think he could have emerged from that sort of binding and not immediately taken revenge on everyone who had ever done him wrong.

In fact, he knew himself not to be a very pleasant man, even with smaller wrongs than Harry had suffered. And he was about to prove it again.

Snape walked over to the locked cabinet at the back of the room, unlocked it, and took out the potion sitting on the back shelf.

Harry might have forgiven Black for what he has done, Snape thought, as he held up the bottle and admired the dark green shine of the potion. *But I have not.*

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighteen: Pureblood Rituals

Harry wasn't sure who held the *Daily Prophet* towards him first the next morning when he walked into the Great Hall with Draco; it seemed to come from half a hundred hands at once. Harry shook his head and took his place at the Slytherin table, accepted a copy of the paper from Millicent, and then glanced around the Hall, letting his eyes travel slowly from face to face. He had avoided the reactions of the other Houses to his magic yesterday, except for a few select members of Gryffindor. It was time for him to look and see what they thought now.

Half of Hufflepuff House waved cheerfully to him. That would be Justin's work, Harry knew, and Zacharias Smith's. They tended to argue with anyone who said that Harry was the next Dark Lord, and given Justin's sterling good sense and Zacharias's bloody-minded stubborn logic, they usually got their way.

The Ravenclaws were more subdued, and the students in his own year avoided Harry's eyes. A few of the older students who tended to torment Luna were cowering in their seats. Luna looked up from reading the *Prophet* upside-down to nod gravely at him, and then returned to her reading. Harry kept his gaze cool as he looked, finally, at the Gryffindor table.

Neville was picking at his food. Hermione wasn't there. Percy Weasley looked as if he'd been up half the night vomiting. Ron avoided Harry's eyes. The twins just grinned at him.

Connor was glaring at him, and so were the other Gryffindors.

Harry took a deep breath and forced himself to turn his back on his brother. He looked down at the article that adorned the front page of the paper.

It was typically melodramatic, of course, because the *Prophet* was like that.

HARRY POTTER: NEXT DARK LORD OR TRUE SAVIOR?

Harry's breath caught in his throat, and he groaned. They wouldn't—he couldn't believe that someone at the *Prophet* had really been overtaken by the same nonsense that Snape had spouted last year, about Harry being the true Boy-Who-Lived.

With dread, and yet a certain morbid fascination, he read on.

By: Rita Skeeter

Harry Potter, a student in Slytherin House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and brother of our very own Connor Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, has revealed himself to be a source of immense magical power.

It happened during a Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch game, with Dementors on the field and a dramatic attack occurring in the Gryffindor stands. Sirius Black, a Professor at the school and a descendant of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, was reliably seen to be wrestling with Peter Pettigrew. Our devoted readers will remember him as the Azkaban escapee who excited and concerned many of us when, as reported in the *Prophet*, he appeared on the Hogwarts grounds, apparently intending to murder Connor Potter.

Soon after the attack began, the Dementors appeared, and Harry Potter flew to confront them on his Nimbus 2001 broomstick.

What happened then, no one seems quite sure, but we do know that young Harry's magic expanded around him, in an explosion felt as far away as the *Prophet* offices.

"I think he's really powerful," said Seamus Finnigan, a Gryffindor student in Harry's year. "Did you *feel* that?"

"I suppose he's powerful," said Ron Weasley, also a Gryffindor student in Harry's year, and the best friend of the Boy-Who-Lived. "I don't really know, though. I didn't think he was *that* strong."

"Please leave me alone," said Percy Weasley, elder brother of Ron Weasley, a seventh-year in Gryffindor House, and Head Boy. "I have a headache."

No Slytherin students were available for comment, and Connor Potter refused to do so. It is the understanding of this

reporter that Lily and James Potter, parents of both the Boy-Who-Lived and our new magical prodigy, were at the game, but left before comment or a lack of it could be obtained.

However, there is no shortage of fascinating things to learn about the elder Mr. Potter. It seems that Harry caused rather a stir at Hogwarts last year, when he turned out to be a Parselmouth, and was rumored to be either possessed by the Dark Lord, or the new Dark Lord himself, during the unfortunate rash of Petrification incidents during the autumn months. While this reporter was unable to obtain information as to how that incident fell out, it is certain that Mr. Potter has acquired a certain aura of Dark magic. He also argued with his brother, the Boy-Who-Lived, and may actually have been present during the historic moment when Connor Potter killed the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets with the Sword of Gryffindor.

We have also found out that the elder Potters are under investigation by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement for unspecified incidents, and that Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts and Head of Slytherin House, has become Harry Potter's legal guardian for at least the duration of the investigation.

Amelia Bones, head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, was unavailable for comment...

That was as far as Harry got before a hand slammed down on top of the paper, knocking it to the tabletop and flattening it. Harry took a deep breath and looked up to meet his brother's eyes.

"How could you do that?" Connor whispered. "How could you hurt Sirius like that? He came back from Dumbledore's office yesterday a shadow of the man he looked before the Quidditch game. He told me that you didn't want him to be your godfather any more, that you'd rather have sodding *Snape* as your guardian." His face was flushed, and his eyes shone in a way that reminded Harry of James's. "*Why*, Harry? What sin could he possibly have committed to make you reject him like that?"

Harry took a deep breath and stood. He could feel Draco surge up beside him, but he put out a hand, and Draco held his tongue. Harry had to be extremely careful of what was said here. He knew that Draco wouldn't be, tempted as he might be to blurt out the secrets of Sirius's dark past.

"That's what worries you?" he asked Connor. "Not my power, not my beating you in the Quidditch match, but this?"

"I care more about Sirius than some silly magical power, or some silly game," said Connor, trying to sound adult. It would have worked better if he weren't so angry. "I thought you did, too. I guess that was my mistake, huh?" Bitterness cut deep lines into his face.

Harry clenched his hands. *Damn it, I can't tell him the truth without revealing Sirius's past, and I don't know if I have his permission to reveal it.* He flicked a glance at the head table where the professors sat. Sirius was there, watching without expression. Snape leaned back from taking a platter of food in front of Sirius's plate and gave Harry an inscrutable glance.

It was his choice as to how to handle this, and Harry decided to be safe rather than sorry, especially given their audience.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "But you don't know everything, Connor, and until you do, you can't understand. Ask Sirius to tell you everything, or to give me permission to tell you everything."

"Now you sound like Mum," said Connor, his nose wrinkled.

Harry flinched, remembering Lily's often-cried phrase, the one he had hidden behind himself last year. *You just don't understand...*

"I don't need to ask anything," said Connor. "I know that Sirius was telling me the truth, and that you're being as bull-headed as ever." He shook his head, his eyes hard. "I don't want you to come to my training sessions any more. You can't keep from hurting Sirius, so I don't think you should be welcome during my private time with him. He should know that *someone* loves him and appreciates him for what he is."

Harry inclined his head, striving to keep his face expressionless. He was not sure how well he succeeded. Connor looked frustrated, which could have meant anything.

"All right, then," said Harry, and sat down, and started to eat his breakfast.

Connor leaned forward. "I won't let you ignore me—"

“Potter,” said Millicent, and Harry had never known how coldly she could speak the name. “It might have escaped your notice, but you’re near the Slytherin table. And you’re threatening our House Seeker, who won the match for us yesterday—the one *you* lost thanks to your bloody stupid flying. Now get away from us before someone puts a hex up your arse.”

Connor paused for a long moment. Harry knew him well enough to see him opening and closing his mouth without even looking up.

He didn’t look up.

“*Fine*,” said Connor, in a deeply meaningful tone, and turned to trudge back to the Gryffindor table.

“Bloody stupid sod,” Millicent muttered, and sat down again, making a motion from the corner of her eye that Harry thought meant she was tucking her wand away. “He never learns, does he?”

“No, he never does,” said Draco, and then leaned against Harry. “It’s going to be all right, Harry.”

Harry nodded slightly, and flicked a glance at Snape, whose face had relaxed enough to say the same thing with his expression. Harry did think it was curious that he needed to lean right over Sirius’s plate again, his sleeve almost trailing in his godfather’s goblet.

“Oh,” said Neville, and his face lit. “That’s a simple way to remember it. I never really thought of it that way before.”

Harry smiled. “That’s all right. It’s not like I ever thought of it before, either.” He turned the parchment around, so that Neville could see the whole of the table he’d drawn. The first third of it was a list of Potions, the second third a list of plants from Herbology, and the last part a small box that explained the connection between the Potions and the plants. “See? You can remember what ingredients a Memory Potion takes by remembering it as a series of plants, all of which affect—“

“Memory.” Neville leaned over the chart, his eyes already devouring it. “Thank you, Harry.” He hesitated, then glanced up again. “Thank you for not making me feel stupid.”

Harry blinked. “You’re not stupid, Neville.”

“I feel like it,” muttered Neville, looking down at the chart again as a blush crept over his cheeks. Harry felt Draco shift impatiently beside him. He hated Neville’s self-deprecation, probably because he’d never had a moment of truly doubting himself and his purpose in his life. Harry, having been on the other side of it himself, understood it only too well. “Professor Snape thinks I’m stupid.”

Harry sighed. *He’s my guardian, but he’s so far from perfect that it’s not funny.* “Yes, he does,” he had to admit. “But that doesn’t mean you *are*, Neville. You can learn Potions, really you can. Just study the chart.” He tapped a finger on the parchment and turned to welcome the person he’d felt hovering around the edge of his awareness for the last five minutes. He’d been slightly surprised that she wasn’t already here when he and Draco came to meet Neville.

As Hermione drew nearer the table, and her glance flickered at Draco, Harry thought he understood.

“Hello, Harry,” said Hermione quietly, and took a seat across from him. Her face was closed, quiet. She had a book held in front of her like a shield. Harry looked at the title, and was only mildly surprised to see that it was *Hogwarts, A History*. Hermione often carried that one around.

“Hello, Hermione,” he said, and saw her cast another anxious glance at Draco. “You don’t need to worry about him,” he added. “His bark is worse than his bite.” Hermione’s lips quirked in a smile.

“My bite and my bark are equally as deadly,” said Draco, sounding offended, though Harry thought it very likely that he didn’t really know what Harry meant. “If I’m a dog at all, I’m a Grim.” He turned back to his Charms homework, but Harry knew he was on edge, listening and ready to attack the moment Hermione said something remotely offensive. Harry knew how much of an effort it took for him to sit here and just listen, instead of leaping in or calling Hermione a Mudblood. He *did* appreciate the effort it took, he thought firmly. He would have to find some way to show Draco that. It would never do to have him think that Harry was ignoring him, or thought better of the Gryffindor witch than he did of his best friend.

“You looked as if you wanted to do some research after the meeting yesterday,” Harry told her. “What did you find?”

Hermione took a deep breath and laid *Hogwarts, A History* on the table. “I’ve found out that Headmaster Dumbledore is the fourth Light Lord to be Headmaster of Hogwarts,” she said. “The first one was Cygnus Hedgerow, in the 1100’s. And he was—he was kind of crazy, like Dumbledore. Did you know that he wanted to put up wards so that none of the students could actually practice magic? Just theory until they reached the age of eighteen, and by then they would already have left school. He was more than a little—“

Harry interrupted her gently. “What made you think of Light Lords?”

Hermione leaned forward. “That thing the Headmaster said about you being a Dark Lord,” she whispered. Neville jumped a little in the seat beside her, but went on studying the chart of Potions and plants, and Harry trusted him anyway. It wasn’t as though Neville would run back to the Gryffindor Tower and blab everything to the first person he saw, especially with the Gryffindors’ hostile attitude towards Harry. “I thought I remembered something about the difference between Light and Dark Lords that was interesting, and then I started reading about Light Lords who were Headmasters of Hogwarts. And then I remembered that there was a fifth one. Or, well, he was almost the fifth one. Except not really.” Her fingers played with the edge of the page.

“What was his name?” Harry asked gently.

“Falco Parkinson,” Hermione said, in a whisper, as if saying the name of another Slytherin student were tantamount to wearing the Dark Mark. “And he…” She shook her head, then flipped rapidly through the book until she reached a certain page and pushed it towards Harry.

Harry leaned closer to read.

Falco Parkinson. *One hundred-twentieth Headmaster of Hogwarts, His term endured only one year. It was believed later that the stress of trying to be a Light Lord who set aside the magic of compulsion altogether was what caused him to have the nervous breakdown that forced his retirement.*

Falco began by seeking out dragons, leaving the school untended for nearly a month while he did so. He came back with his left arm missing, but insisting that he had learned the secret of freedom from the dragons. Then he attempted to talk to the centaurs in the Forbidden Forest, spending much time that he should have spent with his students in secret negotiations that resulted in nothing. It is sometimes thought that the centaurs’ wariness and suspicion of humanity dates from this time.

There were rumors that Falco Parkinson was strong enough to tame werewolves, breaking through the grip of the disease on their minds, and he certainly spoke with Veela colonies and the merfolk who have long dwelled in Hogwarts’s lake. But in the end he resorted to compulsion to enforce his will, and apparently came into conflict with his own principles, and retired to live a quiet, and short, life at his own cottage in Surrey. On the last day of the summer term, he apparently sobbed continually, and repeated only the word, “Vates.”

Harry leaned back from the book as if burned. He could feel a tingling excitement racing through his fingers. He looked up and met Hermione’s eyes, though, trying as hard as he could not to betray any of it. He could see Hermione being the kind of witch who would get involved in whatever he was trying to do—the thing that didn’t have a name, unless *vates* was it—purely for the sake of knowledge, of realizing things that she didn’t know before. He couldn’t lead her down that road. If she took risks for his sake, if she even became a pariah among the Gryffindors for his sake, then she had to know everything.

And he couldn’t tell her everything until he was sure that he trusted her.

“What do you think this means?” he asked her.

Hermione shook her head, eyes gone large. “I don’t know,” she said. “The Headmaster called you a Dark Lord.”

Harry nodded, encouraging her to go on.

“And I know that you’re strong,” said Hermione. “And I know that you have the ability to—“

Draco cleared his throat noisily.

Hermione glared at him, and seemed a moment away from putting her hands on her hips. But then she looked back at Harry, and nodded in resignation. The glare slipped from her face, replaced by a quiet, considering look that reminded Harry of

McGonagall. "I remember what you said about being bound by the web," she said. "I remember what you said about wanting Professor Lupin to choose when he had his stolen memories returned." She paused again, and Harry could almost feel her awe at daring to contradict the Headmaster. And then she went ahead and did it anyway. "I don't think you're the kind of person who would choose compulsion over free will, the way that Dark Lords do. That's just not logical."

Harry couldn't help smiling at her. It seemed that Hermione had, after all, arrived by her own road at a place where Harry could trust her.

Hermione held up a warning hand, as though she could hear his thoughts and wanted him to reconsider them. "That doesn't mean that I think what you're doing is right," she stressed. "I think it's stupid, really, to go against the Headmaster. Both of you believe that You-Know-Who is wrong, and both of you value Connor. So I don't see why there should be this much disagreement between you. It's as bad as the goblins and the wizards at the Conference of 1584."

She leaned forward and stared hard into Harry's eyes. "But Connor's my friend, and you're interesting, and maybe right. So I want to help."

Harry let out a harsh breath. "Good. Then can you research the phoenix web for me? I need to know what it is and what it does, exactly, but I haven't been able to find much on it, and the Headmaster would notice if I searched. And I just don't have *time* to search."

Hermione smiled a little. "You need me because I'm a good researcher?" she asked.

"For right now, yes," said Harry, deciding to be honest.

"That's all right," said Hermione. "I'd rather be needed for that than just because I'm a Muggleborn."

"But you are," said Harry, not understanding.

"I know," said Hermione, standing up. "But I think what you do is more important than what you're a symbol of. I'll look up the phoenix web, and tell you about it." She nodded once to Harry, and then moved determinedly off among the aisles of books. Harry watched her go, brow furrowed, and wondering if he'd made a mistake including her in the meeting yesterday as a representative of the Muggleborn community.

"Harry?"

Harry turned back rapidly. That was Neville, and he flinched at the way Harry moved, but then he took a deep breath and met Harry's eyes. He was trembling a little.

"I don't understand what all of that means," said Neville. "But I'm your friend, Harry. I'm here too, if you need me." He blushed and looked down. "I d-don't know if you'll ever need fat, stupid Neville Longbottom, but I'm here."

Harry reached across the table and caught Neville's hand. "You're not stupid," he said. "You're brave. A true Gryffindor."

Neville flushed again, but this time with pleasure. "Thanks, Harry," he said, and smiled at him.

That was well worth it, Harry thought, as he sat back in his chair. He darted a glance at his best friend, and had to smother a smile. *Even though Draco's all jealous over me now.*

Harry slid to a stop outside the Slytherin common room, staring. Millicent and Pansy were waiting for him, which might not have been all that unusual, except that they knew the password themselves and usually didn't have this intent, predatory look. And at Millicent's shoulder stood her father, and behind Pansy's shoulder stood Hawthorn.

Harry let out a long breath and lifted his head. "Is there some point to this?" he asked. "Or did Starborn arrange this?"

He got a small smile and a tilt of the head from Hawthorn, but she said, "No, this was entirely of our own initiative, the moment we felt your power." She glanced at Adalrico and received a small nod, after which she went on. "We know, now, which side of the War we would choose to stand on."

Harry blinked several times. He had thought the purebloods would need more time to make up their minds. On the other

hand, Hawthorn had already shown she could react fast to situations where fast action was called for, and he supposed there was no reason to think Adalrico wasn't similar. He nodded. "My brother's? Dumbledore's?"

"Yours," said Adalrico, his voice rough with exasperation. "Where is the sense that your magic gave you, boy?"

Harry inclined his head. "You realize that I'm going to have to ask you what you want and work out the formal terms of a negotiation. I'm hardly going to be leading a War yet. I'm still in school."

"There's no need for complicated terms," said Hawthorn, and pulled a knife from a pocket of her robe, unwrapping it from a silken cloth as she did so. Harry blinked when he saw that the knife's blade was made of silver, and the hilt was ebony. Hawthorn flinched as she looked at it, but her expression hardened. "You will know what this is," she said to Harry.

"I don't," Draco complained. "What is it?"

"Draco," said Millicent, with infinite gentleness, "go away. You can't be here. Your father hasn't made up his mind yet. You're not allowed to watch what we're doing."

Draco folded his arms. "I can be here if Harry wants me to be," he said.

"This is intensely private, Draco," Harry said, meeting his eyes and holding them for one moment. "And they're right. If your father hasn't made up his mind yet, then there's no way that you can be here, because you might accidentally tell him what you saw here. Or he might read it out of you with a spell."

Draco opened his mouth for a moment, then closed it. He bowed his head and shuffled dejectedly into the Slytherin common room. Harry turned back towards Hawthorn and Adalrico, his heart pounding with a crazy sort of excitement. He had never anticipated this, but now that it was here, he wondered how he could have anticipated anything else.

"It's going to hurt, isn't it, when the blade cuts you?" he did ask Hawthorn.

Hawthorn gave him a look. "Of course it will. It is silver, and I am a werewolf. But I don't care. It must be done this way." She crouched down and drew back her left sleeve, and Harry saw the gleaming black skull and snake of the Dark Mark.

He resisted the urge to put a hand to his scar, even as it began twinging. He watched as Hawthorn drew the blade firmly across the Mark, bisecting the skull. Rich blood welled in its wake, and the skin to either side of the slice turned red and puffy. But Hawthorn's face, when Harry looked at it, was calm, only a whiteness around the lips revealing her strain.

"I bind blood to blood," she said, "blood across blood, blood in honor of purpose and protection." She raised her eyes to Harry's face. "I am Harry Potter's ally. I will not take up magic or arms against him or his family. I will grant him protection should he ask for it or be in need of it. In any dispute about primacy, I follow of my own free will, and will abide by his decisions." She held her bleeding arm out to Harry.

Harry took the blade from her other hand and cut his own right arm. "I call blood to blood," he said, the words flowing faultlessly from his lips after a moment as he remembered the old ritual, "blood throughout blood, blood in honor of choice and change. I am the Parkinsons' ally." He sought Hawthorn's eyes for only a moment, to be sure it was the choice of her whole family and not just her. She gave him a short nod. Harry felt immensely heartened. "I will not take up magic or arms against their family. I will grant them protection should they ask for it or be in need of it. In any dispute about primacy, I accept their following, and will guard their interests as if they were my own." He touched his bleeding arm to Hawthorn's.

The entire corridor disappeared behind the blinding flash that followed. Harry heard Hawthorn crying out hoarsely, swearing in a language that sounded like German, and hoped that she hadn't been hurt. He hadn't anticipated that the light would be so bright, nor the reactions of their blood so fierce.

When he could see again, Hawthorn was staring at her left arm. It was healed, Harry noted, the swelling from the silver-blade cut going down.

No, he realized abruptly, staring. It was *completely* healed. The Dark Mark was an ugly scar on Hawthorn's arm, visible if one looked for it, but far fainter than it had been.

No Mark had taken its place. Harry was glad for that. A Mark like that would have meant he was a Lord, and he didn't want to be.

In the stunned silence, Adalrico laughed, his exaltation as fierce as a storm. "If I had any doubts," he said, "they are gone now." He almost snatched the knife from Harry, and bared his own Dark Mark. "Your Starborn did well, finding us this one," he told Hawthorn, and then turned towards Harry and smiled. Harry became aware that his magic was beating around him, radiating away from him and back from the walls in deep waves. He supposed, from the glazed look in Adalrico's eyes, that it was a good feeling and not an oppressive one.

Adalrico made the same vow, and Harry repeated it and touched his bleeding cut to Millicent's father's. This time, he was prepared for the flash of intense light that signaled a successful binding, and when he looked down at his right arm, he saw two silvery scars cutting past each other in parallel lines.

"Those will break open and bleed if we ever betray you," Adalrico told him, though Harry already knew that. "And our Dark Marks will return if you betray us." He paused, his eyes sparking as they fastened on Harry's face. "I hope that you will never betray us. You are the better choice, in a world of Dark Lords and Light Lords."

Harry shook his head, even though he was smiling. "I'm only thirteen," he pointed out.

"Older than that," Adalrico retorted. "I can see the truth, unlike some people."

"Hush," Hawthorn said, very mildly. "Starborn reassures me that he is talking to Lucius Malfoy, and that Lucius is close to coming around."

"Lucius is a blind fool, and should have seen the truth before now," Adalrico said, getting to his feet. For a moment, he met Harry's eyes directly, and his hand clutched Millicent's shoulder. "And you'll take good care of my little girl, I trust?"

Harry nodded, then looked at Pansy. "And you, too."

Millicent snorted. "Don't forget, Potter," she said, sounding like her old self, "we get to protect you, too." Her eyes lit when she smiled. "I'm looking forward to the next time your brother tries to hurt you."

"He's part of my family," said Harry. "So you can't lift your wand against him."

Millicent opened her mouth, then shut it, looking extremely peeved. Harry laughed, and then glanced at Adalrico and Hawthorn.

"What are you going to do now?"

"You could command us to do something," Adalrico said, watching him closely. "We would obey, of course."

Harry shook his head violently. "I don't—I don't like commanding people," he said. "Or compelling them."

"This is an order, not a compulsion," said Adalrico, and then glanced at his daughter. "I see what you mean about him," he said obscurely.

"Terrible, isn't he?" Millicent sighed, and then turned to Harry. "Sooner or later, you're going to have to lead."

"Maybe," said Harry, as he turned towards the Slytherin common room. "But today isn't that day." He did pause, remembering what Hawthorn Parkinson had told him, and looked back at her. "Wasn't it dangerous for you to come to Hogwarts today?"

Hawthorn smiled. "Not since I declared my allegiance to you. I am under your protection now."

Harry shivered a bit. Adults, witches and wizards who were more experienced if not as strong as he was, were depending on him for protection.

He did not want to let them down.

"Thank you," he said. For the vow, for the trust, for being willing to take silver on the arm... she would know that he meant any and all of those.

Hawthorn smiled at him. "You're welcome." Then she turned away to speak to her daughter. Harry slipped inside the Slytherin common room, and patted a sulking Draco on the shoulder.

“Your father will come around eventually,” he said.

“He *better*,” Draco said darkly. “What does it look like, when the Bulstrodes and the Parkinsons can see sense sooner than the Malfoys? He’s being an idiot...”

Harry listened to a tirade about Lucius Malfoy for the rest of the evening. It was the one way to make Draco feel better, and Harry much preferred having Draco happy to having him sulky.

“You will do well, Harry,” Snape said softly, touching Harry’s messy hair once more, but retracting his hand before he could muss it further. “They are only an Auror and an Auror-in-training.”

Harry nodded.

“And we have discussed what to do.” Snape’s lips thinned for a moment. “We have spent the past week discussing little else.”

Harry nodded again as his gaze nervously sought out the door of Snape’s private rooms. This was where they had agreed to meet Kingsley Shacklebolt and Aidan Feverfew. It was the Saturday of the Ministry visit, and Harry kept wondering what they would do, what they would say, if they would really try to take Snape away from him...

“Has Black given you any more trouble?” Snape asked, probably to distract him.

Harry took the distraction gratefully. “No. In fact, lately he won’t really look at me, and broke down crying once in the corridor when he couldn’t avoid me.”

Snape smirked. Harry narrowed his eyes.

“What did you do to him?” he asked, just as a sharp knock sounded on the door.

“It seems that our guests are here,” said Snape, and swept away before Harry could question him further. He frowned, and then told himself to straighten up and look as neutral as possible. It probably wasn’t possible to look happy, not when he was this worried.

“Auror Shacklebolt, Auror-in-training Feverfew,” Snape was saying, his voice soft and courteous. “Welcome. My name is Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts and Head of Slytherin House.” He waited a moment, as though to allow the next title to fall on their minds. “Guardian of Harry Potter.”

“Where’s your ward?” That was Shacklebolt, a tall black man with piercing eyes that put Harry in mind of a lynx. He caught sight of Harry just then, and nodded slightly. “Never mind.” He rifled through a box of parchments that he held, and drew out one of them, which he held out to Harry. “Mr. Potter, would you mind explaining this?”

Harry took it, thinking it would be his original letter naming Snape his guardian. But it was, instead, the parchment he’d marked and sent to the Ministry last weekend, listing the coercive magic he was under. It said only *phoenix web*.

“Why, Auror Shacklebolt?” he asked, looking up and blinking. “It means just what it says. Unless you don’t trust the legal magic, of course.” He couldn’t entirely hide a smirk, and his magic rose around him, shimmering, in response to his amusement. The Auror looked as though Harry had taken a sledgehammer to his head.

“But—a phoenix web isn’t coercive magic,” said Shacklebolt, blinking and recovering. Harry could see the Auror-in-training now, who was in intense conversation with Snape. He was a slight young man with pale hair and a habit of twitching his nose like a rabbit, and looked slightly awed of Snape. “This parchment means only that you *think* of the phoenix web as coercive magic. It’s perfectly legal.”

“Legal doesn’t mean morally right, Auror,” said Harry, leaning back against Snape’s desk. “You ought to know that, when so many Dark wizards got out of Azkaban after the First War by claiming they’d been under Imperius.”

Shacklebolt made a slight, irritated gesture. Harry ducked his head to hide his grin. He and Snape had planned this, to knock their visitors off-balance as soon as possible and keep them there. *Make this more about them than about us*, Snape had said,

and we are free.

“I know that,” Shacklebolt snapped. “But, as it happens, I know where this phoenix web comes from.” He leaned nearer and stared significantly at Harry.

Harry smothered a flare of irritation. How many people had Dumbledore told? Or was Shacklebolt’s knowledge something new, something that Dumbledore had told him in an effort to wrest back control of Harry?

“So?” Harry asked, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. “All it means is that this web has a different kind of origin than you believed. It doesn’t make things right. It doesn’t mean I think of it as any less coercive.” He stared hard at Shacklebolt. “What questions did you come here to ask me?”

The Auror fumed a moment, then sighed. “Are you happy with Severus Snape?” he asked finally.

“Very,” said Harry, and waited.

“Why did you choose him?” Shacklebolt spat the words as if they were pebbles.

“Because he’s my Head of House,” said Harry. “He has been very supportive of me, especially last year when it was found out that I was a Parselmouth, and some people feared me for what they thought was a Dark gift. He has trained me to control some of the wilder excesses of my magic, and assisted me in finding constructive things for my power to do.” The last week had been...interesting in that respect. Harry found it much easier to brew the Wolfsbane Potion when his magic was darting about the potions lab, bringing ingredients over as he needed them. “He is the best guardian I could ask for.”

“Not Albus Dumbledore?” Shacklebolt asked. “Not your own godfather?”

“I do not trust the Headmaster,” said Harry bluntly. “And my godfather thinks that I have Dark magic merely because I’m a Parselmouth.” He adopted an injured expression. “You can ask him, if you want, but he just wants to get me away from my guardian because he can’t stand Professor Snape, and thinks all his magic is Dark. It’s more a matter of schoolboy rivalries than wanting what’s really best for me.”

He thought, in amusement, of them questioning Sirius. *Oh, yes, do let them question him. I don’t think he will impress them much with his sanity, or his fitness as a guardian for a young wizard.*

“What about your brother?” Shacklebolt asked.

“What about him?” Harry echoed blankly. He couldn’t tell where the conversation was going now. Was the Auror about to suggest that Connor should be Harry’s guardian instead of Snape?

“Do you feel resentment towards him?” The Auror’s eyes raked him. “Jealousy? Some people in the Ministry and the *Daily Prophet* have suggested that you mean to take his place as savior of the wizarding world, and that’s why you released your magic in public, at a Quidditch match.”

“Are you supposed to be asking me questions like this?” Harry asked, imitating the tone that Snape used with Neville. “I’m sorry. I thought you were only supposed to ask me questions about my guardian, and whether I was in my right mind when I chose him.” He glanced towards Snape. He had finished with Feverfew, it seemed, intimidating him into a quivering mass. “I want my guardian here if you’re going to ask me questions like that,” he went on in a louder tone, and Snape’s head snapped up.

“Has my ward committed some crime, then?” he asked, taking a step forward. “Why do you look as though you’re facing a criminal, Auror Shacklebolt?”

Shacklebolt gave a frustrated growl, and Harry thought he understood. This would be the excuse that Dumbledore gave the members of the Order, to try to pivot them against Harry. He would say that Harry was jealous of Connor’s prestige, that he was ambitious enough to try and make people notice him instead for his magic, and that the timing of his magic’s release from its cage was not coincidence.

Now that he knew, he could fight it. Harry said, “He was asking me about my brother, if I was jealous of him. And I didn’t think he was supposed to do that. I thought he was only supposed to question me about you.”

“He is.” Snape’s voice was clipped. He moved the rest of the way forward, so that his shadow completely sheltered Harry.

“Your partner has finished asking me all his questions, Auror Shacklebolt. If you have nothing else to say, then I suggest you leave.”

For a moment, Harry thought the Auror might argue. Instead, he inclined his head, neck tense as a bowstring. “Very well,” he said, almost spitting the words. “But the Ministry shall require another visit, in a few weeks, to know how your guardianship is progressing, and if Mr. Potter has made any progress in restraining his wild magic.”

“Good day, Auror Shacklebolt, Trainee Feverfew,” said Snape, and watched them go. Harry saw the awed look that Feverfew cast back at his guardian, and smiled. It seemed they might have won one ally, or at least swayed him closer to being impressed.

The moment the door of his rooms shut, Snape hissed and tore at his left arm. Harry hastily shifted aside the cloth, and stared when he saw the Dark Mark for the first time, ignoring the way it made his scar prickle. It was inflamed, the skull a deep sable and the snake an ugly, poisonous green. Harry could only imagine how sternly Snape must have been controlling himself to appear composed in front of the Aurors.

“What does this mean?” Harry whispered.

“That the Dark Lord is returning,” Snape whispered back. “That somewhere, he is stirring, and feels happy, and we—ah!” Abruptly, he went to his knees, his lips clenched. Harry knew how severe the pain he must have been in was, that he permitted even that tiny gasp to escape his throat.

Acting on instinct, he touched the Dark Mark and focused his magic on it. *Stop hurting him*, he told the Mark, and hissed it aloud in Parseltongue, focusing on the snake, for good measure.

The color vanished from the Mark. Snape stared at him, then at the Mark, then at him again. Harry stepped away, shrugging self-consciously.

“I don’t know,” he answered Snape’s incredulous look. “It just seemed like something I should do.”

“It no longer hurts,” Snape said softly, and then stood, still giving Harry his piercing stare. For a moment, it seemed as though he might say something. Harry waited, rather nervously, for what it would be.

Then Snape turned away, and Harry let out a breath as the tension relaxed. It grew again with Snape’s next words, however.

“The Mark’s message remains the same. The Dark Lord is growing stronger, and you will be one of his primary targets. You are to remain within the school unless it is absolutely unavoidable, as for Quidditch practices, do you understand? And then you are to have people around you. I know that you have allies among the purebloods. Let them guard you. You are *never* to be alone with Black, not at all.”

“Surely you don’t believe that *Sirius* is working for Voldemort?” Harry protested.

“I believe in limiting your emotional damage as much as possible, Harry,” Snape snapped at him. “And that means limiting your contact with him.” He smirked as though something were funny. “Leave him to suffer with full knowledge of what he did wrong.”

Harry opened his mouth to ask about that, but then Snape added briskly, “And, of course, you will not be attending any of the Hogsmeade weekends unless you manage to convince a professor who is not Black or Lupin to chaperone.” Snape smirked at him again. “I plan to be occupied with brewing.”

“*What?*”

They had an argument about that for a good half-hour, which Snape won, and Harry sulked about for another hour, until Snape sent him off to do Transfiguration homework. He was grinning as he prepared his parchment and ink in the crowded, chattering Slytherin common room, to the accompaniment of Fawkes’s sleepy croons, and it took him a long moment to realize why.

It felt...*good* to have a parent again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Nineteen: Strength of a Soul

Snape watched with his usual blank expression as Black drank his heavily drugged pumpkin juice. Behind the blank expression, of course, he was grinning, but no one else needed to know about that.

It was nearly three weeks now that he'd been giving the empathy potion to Black, and so far everything had worked out the way he had hoped. Black was reliving the same pain that Harry had suffered, the same memories of being bound and tortured and abused. That Harry had not experienced them as binding and torture and abuse at the time did not matter. Black retained his own perspective, even as he suffered the emotional and mental pain. He would know the burden Harry had been laboring under.

His gaze drifted down the table to Remus Lupin, who was picking at his food—understandable, given that the full moon was near. If Snape had not been reasonably certain that Lupin's mind would change when he finally allowed Harry to remove the Obliviate, then he would have been tempted to give Lupin the empathy potion, too. Both of them needed to understand what they had done to the boy. It was justice. It was right.

And it is so entertaining to watch.

A movement near the Slytherin table caught his eye, and Snape watched as Harry slipped out of the Hall. He knew where his ward was going. He would do homework for a few hours, then slip out of the castle, to watch his brother in company with Black. So far, Harry believed Snape ignorant of these little trips outside of Hogwarts, and Snape let him think so. It wouldn't do to make Harry feel caged. So long as he stayed within Hogwarts' wards, Snape could check on his presence and reach him easily.

Eventually, of course, Harry would have to learn that Snape took his guardianship more seriously than wielding it in petty power plays over whether or not Harry could go to Hogsmeade. But that time wasn't yet.

Black's fork cracked loudly against his plate. Snape looked back at him, and this time did permit a smirk. Black's face was pale, eyes unseeing as he stared at the memories that Snape himself knew well, since he had put them into the potion when he was brewing it. That potion would have been impossible to make if he'd never had access to Harry's mind.

Perhaps he is reliving the times Harry cast pain curses on himself, Snape thought contentedly as he picked up his own goblet. Or the times that he was scolded for not studying faster, in case his brother might need him.

Snape hummed as he drank. He had other doses of the empathy potion in preparation. He thought they might make a fine Christmas gift for Lily and James Potter.

Harry glanced over his shoulder, and sighed with relief when he noticed no one coming after him. Millicent and Pansy had been very vigilant lately, as though they really *had* realized that Harry didn't spend all his time in the Slytherin common room or the library, and Draco was worse. If Harry left him alone too long, he returned to a turned back and a very tight grip on that bloody bottle.

But he thought he'd managed to fool them well enough tonight. A few gentle reminders of what homework was due in every class had made them yelp and scramble to work—and since Harry himself had purposely distracted them from that homework yesterday, he knew how much writing they still had to do.

He shivered as he slipped across the lawn, under the protection of a Disillusionment Charm, and towards the Quidditch Pitch, where Peter had asked him to meet this time. He checked the detailed map he'd created of the Hogwarts grounds, and relaxed when he saw the dot labeled "Wormtail" already in place, with no "Dementor" dots anywhere near it. Three times their conversations had been interrupted by Dementors, who still did not seem inclined to listen to Harry when he asked them to stop pursuing Peter. Harry was hopeful that this time Peter would get to tell him everything, since the phoenix web had calmed down so much. Harry hadn't felt its presence at all in over a week.

A conversation with Peter, and then time to go protecting, he thought as he lengthened his stride. Sirius and Remus would be running tonight, given the full moon, and they had asked Connor to go with them, or so Harry had surmised from overhearing his brother's mysterious hints. Harry was not about to leave Sirius alone with his brother in the Forbidden Forest, with Remus trapped as Moony and largely incapable of helping if something should—happen.

Connor's lessons with Sirius always leave him all right, if more prejudiced against Slytherins than ever, Harry thought as he stopped in the shade of the Ravenclaw stands and removed his Charm.

And they end at a certain time, Harry answered himself. *Everyone expects Connor back at such and such an hour, and Sirius wouldn't dare keep him later. But in the Forest, when no one knows he's going along with Sirius and Moony? Oh, no. I should be there.*

He really should have been there all along, Harry acknowledged, as he consulted his map by the light of *Lumos* and looked for Peter. His first duty was to protect his brother. He'd let it go shamelessly lately, frustrated by Connor's inability to speak to him without insulting him and enthralled by the intricate dances that he performed with most of the Slytherins.

But not tonight. If Peter isn't going to come forward—

"Harry," said Peter quietly, and then he was there, seeming to melt out of the darkness. Harry supposed he had to have got used to hiding, to avoid the Dementors and all the people hunting for him so long. "Thank you for coming. I want to tell you what I got interrupted on the last three times, so I'll try to keep it short."

Harry nodded.

"Have you heard of the Soul Strength Spell?" Peter asked, without further preamble. His eyes were wide, and his nose twitched now and then, the only remnant of the rat he showed in human form.

Harry blinked, taking the moment both to search his memory and give the phoenix web time to react. His mind remained blessedly dark and cool, and he shook his head. "No."

Peter smiled grimly. "It's a spell that answers a specific question the caster asks about the strength of someone else's soul. Dumbledore used it on us—" by which, Harry knew, he meant the Marauders—"when trying to find out who would have the strength to betray you and leave you open to the Dark Lord's attack, then go to Azkaban afterwards so that no one would find out what the Lord of the Light had done." Peter spat Dumbledore's title. The weariness Harry had heard in his voice at the beginning of the year had long since given way to ancient, dusty hatred. "No surprise, is it, that he found Sirius would crack if he was asked, and Remus would collapse without his friends, and James was too devoted to Lily? I was the strongest. I was the one chosen to make the sacrifice." Peter closed his eyes and expelled a long breath.

"He sent you to Azkaban primarily so that no one would find out what he'd done?" Harry breathed.

"Of course," said Peter. "That was the only way, with the phoenix web to make me look primarily jealous and a crime so heinous that no one would demand a really *detailed* trial. Otherwise, we either would have to put up with questions that might uncover the truth—a relative of that blasted Skeeter woman came quite close as it was—or having people know that Dumbledore was a man who would sacrifice children and lose all trust in him. And, of course, if we'd arranged it another way, they would have to do without the legend of the Boy-Who-Lived." He closed his eyes more tightly.

Harry stood there and stared at Hogwarts, and thought about that. His own sacrifice paled next to Peter's, he thought. The man had given up *everything*, and known he had done it because he was not the weakest but the strongest of the Marauders.

"And you must know," Peter went on, after a pause that Harry thought was shorter than it should have been, "that Dumbledore also used the Soul Strength Spell on you and Connor before the attack, to see which one of you could bear the burdens and sacrifices of being a weapon more easily." His eyes flared open, and seemed to pierce Harry. "And you were the stronger one."

Harry felt himself begin to shake. He sat down in the grass and wrapped his arms around himself. He'd brought a cloak, but he was still cold. Of course he was, he thought absently. It was already the end of November, and the wind carried ice in its teeth.

"Harry?" Peter whispered. "Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard," Harry whispered back, as quietly. He didn't know why he was shaking. He'd heard everything that Dumbledore had done. He knew all his crimes. Why did he want to shake? Why had hearing something else unexpectedly hurt and upset him so much?

It's a good thing that he used that spell, in fact, he told himself firmly. *Imagine if Connor had been trained to protect you. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you? You wouldn't want to see him crack and fall apart because he couldn't bear*

the burdens. Dumbledore chose wisely. He even tried to arrange things so that the person who would be the best savior would become the savior, even though that was really Voldemort's doing. I bet the spell doesn't test for things like compassion or gentleness. That's Connor all over.

He felt Peter grip his arm. "I'm sorry, so sorry," the older wizard whispered. "I wish there was some way I could turn back your life, Harry. Some way I could have carried you from Godric's Hollow that night the Dark Lord fell. Your life would have been so much happier."

"Yes, but what would the cost have been?" Harry said back. He could talk, if he didn't try to talk too loudly. "Connor would have to bear *everything* all by himself, and you just said he couldn't do that. They might have hunted and killed you for what they would see as a true betrayal. And I would be left without the purpose in life that I was always meant to fulfill."

Peter made a soft frustrated noise. "That's the thing about prophecies, Harry. They're not as simple as—"

He turned his head abruptly, and Harry felt the cold of Dementors. He sighed. He knew it was no good. He couldn't force them to stop hunting Peter, and until he understood how to free them and what the consequences of it would be, he couldn't do that either.

"You'd better go," he said, but Peter had already risen to his feet.

"I will," he said. "Take care of yourself, Harry. But, please, think about what I said. Just because you were strong enough to go through what you have and survive *does not mean* they should have put you through it."

He transformed and ran then. Harry sat in silence for a little while longer, then stood up and shook himself. The moon was fully risen. Werewolves were running.

It was time to run with them, and guard his brother.

Harry swore under his breath as he stepped carefully along the path that Connor had taken after Padfoot and Moony. He didn't dare use his magic to run through the Forest as he had once before, since he was sure that the stir it would cause would draw too much attention from Sirius and Remus. His only consolation was that Connor couldn't keep up, either, and was pausing to rest every few hundred feet. Harry would catch up to him soon. He knew his brother had his Invisibility Cloak, but Harry had checked his specialized map before entering the Forest. There were thick trees ahead, and Connor would have difficulty changing his path much. Harry was relatively confident that he was still right behind his brother.

His own Disillusionment Charm was beginning to wear away, the ambient magic of the Forest nibbling at it. Harry snorted and waved his wand to renew it.

A werewolf's voice cut the sky. Harry smiled, then shivered slightly. The sound came from ahead of him, and he suspected it was Moony, voicing his exaltation the only way he knew how.

Harry stopped to rest against a tree, not wanting to stumble onto Connor too suddenly, and because he *was* tired from picking his way over brambles and between patches of moonlight and darkness and what *looked* like darkness but was actually small hollows in which he could twist an ankle. He looked up at the full moon and surprised a yawn out of himself.

Moony howled again.

Harry abruptly straightened, then, as he realized that there was no way that second howl could have been Moony. It was much closer, and to the side instead of ahead of him.

That might mean it was to the side of Connor.

Harry wrapped his magic around himself and began to pass lightly through the undergrowth. He would draw attention, but that could not be helped. He would rather save his brother than stay in hiding.

That philosophy had been the source of much of his difficulty, he reflected, as he darted around the trees like a wisp of smoke. If he'd managed to save Connor undetectably in his first year, then Snape and Draco might never have suspected he was anyone remarkably different from what he seemed, and he could have remained as he was.

He grimaced. *And would you really want that? Your magic would still be bound.*

He jerked his thoughts back to the present. Now was not the time to be thinking about the phoenix web and how different his life was now that he knew about it. Now was the time to think about Connor and how he was going to defend him if the second werewolf in the Forest was aiming for him.

Harry followed the path down into a little hollow, leading him between a mounded ridge on the right and a bank of thick trees on the left. He froze as he saw a sudden glint of movement from ahead. He let out a slow breath when he realized it must be the trailing edge of Connor's Invisibility Cloak, and then smiled slightly when he heard his brother cursing under his breath. He seemed to be fine so far.

A scuffling, snapping sound came from the top of the ridge. Harry looked up, and saw a dark, crouched shape silhouetted against the moon.

Then the shape howled, and leaped downhill, heading straight for Connor.

Harry shouted and broke his own Disillusionment Charm. He saw the startled shuffle that was Connor turning towards him, but he didn't care. There was a *werewolf* coming, and his brother was standing there like a...like a...

Like a child, which was what he was.

Harry flung himself into motion, and arrived, thanks to the lightness his magic inspired, between the werewolf and Connor. The werewolf saw him and altered its stride, impossibly fast and graceful for such a large beast. Harry didn't have time to see much before it spun to the left and then whirled around to face him, paws raking long furrows in the earth, but he did see black fur and eyes full of a wild, alien fire. This was a werewolf not under the control of the Wolfsbane Potion.

And now Harry could see the moonlight striking the long stripe of gray fur that ran from the tip of the immense black wolf's muzzle to his tail.

This is Fenrir Greyback, Harry thought, and felt his heart leap from immobility into sudden motion.

His mind cleared as it did so, though, and his eyesight sharpened. This was the kind of battle he had been trained for. He knew exactly where everyone was. Connor was behind him and slightly to the left, with the way he'd turned. Greyback was in front. The ground beneath his feet was mostly solid, but slippery with rocks and dirt and leaves; he would have to remember that.

A slight snarl was the only sound Greyback made before he charged, bearing down on Harry like the Killing Curse. Harry shifted his grip on his wand, and saw the werewolf's eyes turn towards it.

He didn't use it. He flung his magic forward instead, edging his voice with the same will that he had once used in these same woods to crack an egg-shaped stone and save Draco's life.

"*Stop.*"

Greyback rolled over as though someone had slammed him all along his left side. He whimpered as he rolled, but he came back on his feet almost immediately, and this time he was closer to Connor. Harry turned to cover his brother. He heard Connor ask a breathless question, but he didn't have the time to listen. Werewolves were highly resistant to magic. He had always known that. It was part of what made them so dangerous, even to highly trained adult witches and wizards such as Hawthorn Parkinson.

It was a problem when facing Greyback, but Harry did not intend to let it defeat him.

He looked deeply into those wild eyes, burning with hatred and bloodlust, and sought some trace of humanity, the odd recognition that Remus had displayed on the last full moon night and again at the Quidditch game. If he could find that part of the werewolf, could connect with it, then perhaps he could convince Greyback to back off and not hurt Connor.

He found nothing like it. Perhaps that only worked with people who were under Wolfsbane Potion. Harry nodded, and slowly the priorities in his mind shifted. He could feel his objections shrinking, becoming small and cold and silent. He lifted his wand and held it towards Greyback, in spite of the fact that he probably wouldn't need it.

He was preparing himself to kill, for the first time in his life.

Greyback *bounded* this time, hitting the ground with all four feet at once and bouncing off, aiming at Harry's chest and head. Harry focused and sharpened all his will, and held it in a shearing blade a few inches in front of his face.

He let it go when Greyback was too near to avoid it.

Greyback screamed, his face and his muzzle tearing open as he landed and plowed into the dirt a few inches from Harry's feet. The strike hadn't blinded him as Harry had meant it to do, though, nor killed him. He scrambled up, snapping his jaws, well inside Harry's personal space.

Harry didn't have time to step back before the heavy body hit him and bore him to the ground.

He tried to shout for his brother to run, but his air was gone. He grabbed Greyback's neck, holding him there as long as possible, wanting to give Connor some time to get away as well as himself a moment to find a weapon that worked.

Greyback's jaws snapped in his face. Harry's arms were already shaking from the effort it took to hold his head back.

He heard feet shuffling, and hoped Connor was running. He tensed, prepared to strike if Greyback should get distracted.

The werewolf didn't even look around, though he must have been able to smell Connor. His claws were plunging into the ground on either side of Harry now, driving him forward. Without his magic lending strength to his limbs, Harry was fairly sure he would have been bitten already.

Revelation struck him like lightning.

He didn't come to assassinate Connor. He came for me.

Harry had just finished processing that when something pale flashed past his vision and struck Greyback. Once again, the enormous werewolf went rolling, this time with a whimper that he could not quite escape, and the sound of cracking bone. It seemed to be his night for it, Harry thought, as he stood and wiped dirt off his robes. He was trembling slightly, and it took him a moment to understand what he was seeing.

Greyback, his tail to the trees, faced a smaller, paler werewolf, probably fawn in color, though it was hard to be sure in the moonlight. He was snarling continuously, and she was replying in the same language. Harry was fairly sure that she turned her head towards him for a quick glimpse, and that he saw the hazel eyes of Hawthorn Parkinson in her face.

Greyback charged while her head was turned.

Harry had no time for finesse. He knew only that he had promised to protect Hawthorn and her family, and here she was, risking her life for *him*. Granted, their bargain went both ways, but he was the stronger. He should be the one doing the defending.

He reached out and called up the ground at Greyback's paws with the force of a *Reducto*. It tore itself apart in a fountain of earth, and Greyback screamed, halted and caught halfway through his leap. Harry heard another sound of cracking bone, and this time, when the black werewolf touched down, his left foreleg dangled uselessly.

Hawthorn struck at his right shoulder, silent and blinding fast. Her fangs flashed, and Harry saw a bleeding wound sprout just to the side of the gray stripe. Greyback howled in misery, and snarled for a good show of it, and then turned and limped furiously across the path and up the ridge. Hawthorn snapped at his heels for a moment, then spun back and trotted over to Harry, sniffing at him.

Harry held out a shaking hand. Yes, it was Hawthorn. She graciously permitted him to rest his fingers on the end of her muzzle, and met his eyes with the same grave, calm politeness that she showed in human form. Harry found that recognition in her gaze that he had missed in Greyback's.

"What am I?" he whispered. "Do you know?"

Hawthorn only stepped away from him, with a speedy flowing movement that proclaimed how very much she was a wild creature at this moment, and looked up the slope. Harry tensed and turned, but it was only Adalrico, his hand loosely clasping his wand.

“Good as your word,” he murmured, sounding satisfied. “Lucius is a bloody fool.”

Harry let out a sharp breath, and glanced along the trail. “Have either of you seen my brother? He would have been wearing an Invisibility Cloak—“

“Then we wouldn’t have seen him,” said Adalrico.

Hawthorn snarled at the older wizard and began sniffing up the trail. Harry relaxed and started to take a step after her.

“But if you mean the younger wizard currently blubbing like a fool in Black’s arms,” said Adalrico, “then yes, he’s well enough.” He tilted his head at Harry in curiosity. “I would have thought you would be more concerned about the other one.”

Harry frowned. “Other one?”

“We were following Greyback before he transformed,” said Adalrico. “He was muttering something about a second death, something to punish the son of someone reluctant to help raise the Dark Lord—“

Harry never doubted the conclusion his mind snapped to.

Draco.

He ran full out for the school, ignoring the trailing yelp behind him. The trees blurred past him, and his feet no longer touched the ground, and still Hogwarts loomed on the other side of the trees, impossibly far away.

Draco yawned and put his book down, rubbing his eyes. It was all very well to study Charms for hours on end, but he wished Harry would come back—

Harry.

Draco sat up, not swearing, because a Malfoy did not permit profanities to cross his lips in front of a common room full of observers, but angry enough to do it. Harry had maneuvered them all *again*. Draco could see it now, the continual pattern of fun yesterday that had distracted and cajoled them away from their studies. Harry had chattered at them about there being other things to do than homework, and landed them all with it today so that he could have some time alone.

Draco stood and marched up to their bedroom to put his Charms book away. He was going out into the corridors, curfew or no curfew, and look for one Harry Bloody Potter.

He stepped into the empty room—Vince and Greg were with Pansy, who was trying to teach them both some Potions basics they should already have grasped, and Blaise was in the library—and then paused. Something was...out of place. The room was empty and dark and quiet in the way that it should be, but something was still out of place. Draco couldn’t have said what it was, and knew his father would be annoyed with him for that. The curtains did not tremble, as if in a strong wind, but it felt as though they should have. The air did not tense and tighten with a spell resting unspoken on a tongue, but it should have.

Draco muttered to himself, to distract himself from the sudden nervousness, and then bent down to put his Charms book in the trunk at the foot of his bed.

Something under the bed hissed.

Draco jumped back, the pain of his sudden headache from powerful and malicious magic good as a shout of warning. Jaws snapped where his ankle had been, and then the thing slithered into the light.

Draco knew at once it was a magical item, no natural snake. It was just too dark, and its green scales had the sheen of jewels. It inched towards him, silver fangs bared and ruby eyes gleaming. It stank of cinnamon and almonds, and Draco shivered. He recognized the scent from several deadly poisons that had been in their Potions textbook.

He opened his mouth to cry out, and then felt the unmistakable presence of silencing wards on the bedroom. The door locked with a sudden little snick in the same moment.

The snake waited for a moment. Draco stared at it, and felt his mouth dry and his hands clench helplessly in front of him. Malfoys did not become afraid, but it seemed as though he were afraid now.

The snake lunged.

Draco barely escaped. He was sure he felt the fangs tear the leg of his trousers. He scrambled to his feet, his hands shaking so hard he could barely draw his wand. Then his nerves stood up on end and shrieked.

He couldn't see the snake.

He stamped down and spun to the left, trying to think of something that would affect a snake which was clearly made of Dark magic. Serendipity, and not any good planning, saved him. The snake had been waiting to his right, and its next strike missed, too.

Draco stumbled another step away, and rammed into his bed. He aimed his wand as nearly straight as he could, and shouted, “*Stupefy!*”

The snake moved, and the Stunning spell missed it entirely. Draco jumped up on the bed with a shriek. Now he didn't know where the snake was, under the bed or crawling up the posts. Fuck, the thing was *fast*.

He caught a glimpse of green off to the side, and shouted, “*Petrificus Totalus!*”

He missed again, at least if the way the coil vanished instead of freezing was any indication. Draco climbed to his feet, balancing as best as he could on the bed, and concentrated on means of lifting himself. He would have to hope that the damn thing couldn't fly.

“*Wingardium*—“ he began.

The snake boiled up and across the sheets at him. Draco shrieked and lost the thread of the spell. He grabbed the nearest thing at hand, which happened to be his favorite pillow, and slammed it down on top of the snake.

Fangs burst through the pillow, shredding the cloth and missing his hand by an inch. Draco let the pillow go and hopped backwards again, nearly in tears from fury and frustration and terror.

The door abruptly exploded.

Harry swept into the room in a roil of power and Dark magic and the scent of roses, at least to Draco. He cried out, this time in relief, and saw the snake freeze on the bed and turn towards Harry.

Harry immediately began hissing. The snake swayed back and forth as it listened to him. Harry went on hissing, his voice low, urgent. Of course, Draco thought everything in Parseltongue, which he couldn't understand, sounded urgent. Harry had a hand out now, coaxing the deadly toy towards him, his hissing never faltering.

The snake moved again, and Draco screamed again in spite of himself. This time, though, the snake shot away across the floor, coiled around Harry's leg and then his wrist, and became motionless, a bracelet clasping its tail in its mouth. Draco felt the aura of Dark magic retreat.

Harry closed his right hand over the snake and squeezed. It crumbled to powder. Harry stamped on the powder for good measure, and then a wind swept into the room and marched the remnants past the kindling of the door. Draco didn't think the wind was a coincidence.

He realized, dimly, he was shaking. *So this is shock*, he thought, in wonder.

Harry stared at him, his eyes desperate. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Draco managed to nod. He was, wasn't he? The snake hadn't bitten him. He did lean down and check his ankle, but he couldn't see any bite there.

He didn't have time to straighten up before Harry half-knocked him down with an enormous hug. Draco hung on and closed his eyes. There was nothing shameful about holding on to someone else when you'd nearly died, he thought, even for a Malfoy.

“Thank Merlin, Draco,” Harry was murmuring, voice half-hysterical. “First the werewolf, and then this. Merlin, if Adalrico hadn’t said something, I wouldn’t have known, I would have been too *late*, you would have *died*...”

Draco opened his eyes and managed to see over Harry’s shoulder, to his bottle, sitting on the table. It was entirely fierce, dark purple, the color that meant Harry’s protectiveness towards him was in full force. Then Draco frowned. He noticed a bit of black, a color he hadn’t ever seen before, in the corner of the bottle.

“What’s that?” he asked. His voice was shaky. Draco frowned more fiercely. *That wouldn’t do around Father.*

“What’s what?” But Harry did him the favor of turning around and looking, so that Draco didn’t have to speak again.

Harry blinked when he saw the bottle. “Huh,” he said. His voice was flat.

“What does it mean?” Draco insisted. He already sounded stronger. *Good. Being in shock does not present a good impression.* He couldn’t seem to do anything about the hold his hands had on Harry’s shoulders, though.

“It means that if the person who did this was in front of me right now, they’d die,” said Harry, his voice still flat. “I probably wouldn’t even mean to kill them. They’d just crumple with their hearts stopped.”

“Oh,” said Draco, and then blinked again. “What was that about a werewolf?”

And then he fainted, because there was apparently only so much that even a Malfoy could take.

Harry hovered beside the bed; Madam Pomfrey had managed to make him back off, but she couldn’t make him leave completely. “And you’re absolutely certain?” he asked. His voice sounded tired to his own ears.

“I’m absolutely certain,” said Madam Pomfrey. *She* sounded exasperated, but Harry didn’t really care. He nodded sharply. He had assumed that Draco had gone white-faced and limp in his arms because of the snake’s poison. But it seemed that he really was fine.

“Harry.”

Harry turned in startlement. He had expected the voice eventually; after all, he couldn’t stay in the Forest forever. But he hadn’t known that Connor would come back to the castle so quickly, nor that Harry and the hospital wing would be the first things he would seek out.

He nodded to his brother, whose eyes were focused past him, on Draco. “Connor,” he said.

“I...” Connor let the word fade away as though he didn’t know how he would continue, assuming he wanted to continue. Then he said, with a determined attempt at cheerfulness, “Going to be all right, is he?”

“We think so,” said Harry, ignoring the way that Madam Pomfrey snorted and muttered about presumption. He might not be a mediwitch like she was, but he was the one who had played a part in Draco’s diagnosis as much as she had. Without his summary of what had happened in the bedroom, she wouldn’t even have known what to look for. “A magical snake was loose in our bedroom, trying to bite him.”

Connor blinked. “What happened to it?”

“I destroyed it,” said Harry, and clenched a hand as he thought about how. He wished that he had another snake like that with him now, so that he could destroy that one, too. He did not want to use his magic for anything else. It had rampaged up and down the hospital wing until Madam Pomfrey, without glancing away from Draco, had snapped at him to control himself. Harry had therefore spent his time since dreaming of revenge.

“Maybe you should have kept it?” Connor asked tentatively. “So you could know who sent it?”

Harry shook his head. “It might have come to life at any time. I only calmed it because I’m a Parselmouth. It was best to destroy it.”

Connor nodded uncertainly, and they stood there in silence for a while more. Harry glanced at Draco, and judged the speed of his breathing and the color of his face. He thought it was all right. He thought Draco was all right, and that was such a huge change from the mood he'd been in as he ran back to the castle that he was shaking from the fierce contrast.

"Harry."

Harry glanced hard at his brother. There was a new tone in his voice, and he had one hand extended.

"Thank you for saving my life," he said formally.

"Sure," said Harry, and clasped his brother's wrist back. He thought this gesture should probably mean more to him than it did, but a lot had happened since he first thought Connor might be in danger. His gaze kept going back to Draco, even when he didn't mean it to. He was a target, as Snape had so snippily informed him some time ago, and even Connor he could accept as a target in a certain light. But someone had tried to kill Draco, just for what his father had done, and maybe because he was Harry's friend.

Harry could not accept that. He wanted to know who it was, and he wanted to destroy that person.

"I'll leave you here," Connor whispered, and his hand tightened on Harry's shoulder for a moment. "I'll explain things to Remus and Sirius."

"Thanks," said Harry tiredly, and leaned his forehead against the bed as his brother walked softly out of the hospital wing and Madam Pomfrey bustled off, probably to fetch clothes for Draco. He was tired. Spell exhaustion was catching up to him, and all the running he'd done earlier in the evening, and the sheer effort of using so much wandless magic at once. He yawned.

A hand brushed his shoulder. Harry looked up, blinking through eyes already hazy with sleep, and saw Snape standing there. He nodded. The other Slytherins would have seen the door smashed to kindling. They had certainly seen it when Harry hurtled past them towards the hospital wing, Draco borne behind him on a wave of golden-white wind. They would have fetched him.

"What happened?" Snape asked.

Harry blinked at Draco. "Someone turned a snake loose in his room," he said. "A Dark magical artifact of some kind. I came in and destroyed it, but I thought he might have been bitten, so I brought him here."

"How did you know?" Snape's voice was distant and lulling. It was very easy to speak in response to it, and Harry did so. He had felt lately that he could be honest with Snape, anyway.

"Adalrico Bulstrode told me," said Harry, and yawned again. "He heard Fenrir Greyback talking about an attempt to murder someone in the castle, right before he attacked me."

Snape's hand was abruptly on his shoulder again, gripping like fishhooks. Harry blinked at his guardian, brought half-awake again, but not understanding the terrible expression in the dark eyes.

"What?" Snape said.

Harry tried to shrug off the grip. It refused to be shrugged. "Please let me go," he said, keeping his voice even.

Snape did, but his voice was as firm as his fingers had been. "What happened?"

"I was in the Forbidden Forest, guarding Connor," said Harry. "Fenrir Greyback came for him. The people who are trying to resurrect Voldemort probably sent him." He considered telling Snape that Greyback had been trying to assassinate *him*, then discarded the notion. He didn't have any proof, just the flashing brief second when Greyback had seemed more interested in him than Connor. The werewolf had probably thought of it as eliminating the greater threat. And besides, then Snape would be more unreasonable than he already was. Harry had survived. He was all right. "I got in the way, and he tried to bite or kill me. But I defeated him with the help of Hawthorn Parkinson, and he ran away. Adalrico Bulstrode was with her. He was the one who told me that Draco was in danger." Harry turned back to Draco. He was stirring towards wakefulness now, muttering, his eyelids fluttering.

"That is the end of it," said Snape.

Harry blinked at him. “The end of what?”

“The end of your little trips outside the castle’s wards.” Snape’s eyes narrowed at him. “Yes, I knew about them. And you are not to venture outside of Hogwarts again unless you are practicing Quidditch or I am with you. I thought I could trust you to take care of yourself. It seems I was wrong.”

“I *did* take care of myself,” said Harry, indignant. *I’m glad I didn’t tell him that silly idea about Greyback wanting to kill me or make me a werewolf, not if he’s going to be as silly as this.* “I’m alive, and I prevented anyone from getting bitten.” He felt Snape wasn’t giving the proper weight to that.

“You nearly *died*.”

It was worse that Snape didn’t yell. He simply spoke the words fiercely, and made Harry feel as though a cold wind had taken up residence in his bones. He looked at Snape’s face, then quickly down and away. What he saw there would be natural on Lucius Malfoy’s face when he was looking at Draco, or Lily’s face when she was looking at Connor. It made him intensely uncomfortable when it was focused on him.

“Doesn’t that matter to you?” Snape whispered. “Doesn’t it matter, that you would hurt me and Draco and your brother if you died?”

“Of course it matters,” said Harry. “But I would sacrifice my life in an instant if it meant saving one of you. You already knew that.”

“That is the thing that we must rid you of, then,” said Snape. “You will not be free until you begin to value your own life more.”

Harry glared at him from beneath a lock of dark hair. “I’m *fine*.”

“You will still obey me,” said Snape. Harry couldn’t read him at all now. His face and voice both took on the weight and inscrutability of dark stone. “No venturing outside Hogwarts except for Quidditch practice or if I am with you. No going into the Forbidden Forest again, for any reason. You will spend a portion of every day with me, in which you will tell me what you plan to do that day and where you are going.”

“But...that would take up more of your time,” said Harry, who knew how much Snape valued the hours he had where he didn’t have to be teaching or eating in the Great Hall.

“I said that I was not your guardian only in name, Harry,” said Snape calmly. At least Harry could tell that he was calm now. “I meant that. Other children have parents, and have had them all their lives. You have not. You have one now. I promise you, cross me and you will learn how seriously I take this.”

Harry shook his head wildly. “What if something happens to Connor or Draco because I’m not there?”

Snape learned towards him. “It is parents who should think that way,” he said. “Not thirteen-year-old boys.”

Harry clenched his fists and forced himself to calm down. His magic was on the verge of boiling one of Madam Pomfrey’s precious potions. “Regardless of whether or not I should, I am,” he said. “This is what I am. This is what my training made me. I don’t want to be treated like what you think I *should* be. I want to be treated the way I am.”

Snape studied him in silence. Then he said, “And what need do you have of a guardian, then?”

Harry shut his mouth. “I still like the time I spend with you,” he said at last. “I’m grateful for your help with the Ministry. And thank you for teaching me to brew the Wolfsbane Potion. I even—I even want a parent, in a way. But the restrictions have to be loose enough that I can still do what I was born —“

“Made.”

“—*born* to do,” Harry corrected stubbornly. “And that’s protect the people who are important to me.”

Snape studied him again. Harry had no idea what he was seeing, and so stood silent, staring back, only reaching out a hand to stroke Draco’s hair when the other boy made a sleepy little sound.

Snape dipped his head. "Very well, Harry. If you come and speak with me, then we can work out exceptions to those restrictions at times when you think there might be danger. Until then, I shall expect you to obey me."

Harry relaxed. It was the best compromise he could hope for. And he really did owe Snape something. He couldn't simply take from the guardianship; he had to give, too, though Merlin knew why Snape wanted the things he had to give other than protection.

"Thank you, sir," he said, and turned to answer Draco's questions. Snape laid a hand on his shoulder one more time, and then left the hospital wing.

Snape returned to the dungeons in a rage so deep that he was glad, in a distant fashion, that he had not encountered anyone along the way. Venting his fury would have been enjoyable, but Dumbledore probably couldn't have kept him out of Azkaban if he'd done it.

He stepped into his offices and examined the brewing empathy potion. Then he shook his head slightly.

I will reserve those doses for Black, he thought. Well, perhaps one for James, if I think of no better punishment.

He turned towards the racks of potions, and studied them all, one by one. The rage sank into him, deepened, and turned cold.

In the end, he decided, very calmly, that none of them would work. None of them were vicious enough. He didn't want to hurt Lily Potter for what she had done, nor kill her, nor make her suffer the way he was doing to Black.

He wanted to annihilate her. He wanted to obliterate her.

He went to read one of his Dark Arts books. He highly doubted that anything he found there would satisfy him, but it would turn his mind in the right directions. At least it kept him from contemplating the awful, overwhelming scope of what it would take to heal and free Harry's thoughts, and his own heart-stopping terror when he had heard that Harry was in danger.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: Revelations Upon the Waves of Air

December 1st, 1993

Dear Mr. Potter:

You have done well, you know. I am pleased at your progress. And I am pleased that you have taken my words to heart, and that you no longer seem to fear your own magic. The release of your power is long overdue, and I think it will yet benefit our world. I am not like most of those people around you, you know, who fear what you could become. I am afraid for you, but that is a different thing.

But I greatly fear what could happen if some of your attitudes do not change soon. This is a war. It will be a war until Voldemort is finally and absolutely destroyed. You know this. Yet still you hold back when you could have destroyed an enemy; still you stayed your hand for so long that Fenrir Greyback only escaped wounded, and did not die as he should have. You must learn to harden your heart, Mr. Potter.

I would never advise you to compel anyone alive. I will not advise you to threaten others onto your side. But there are some now alive who are your implacable enemies. No matter how long you give them, they will not come back to you. They have made their choices. When one of them tries to kill you, strike hard, and strike fast, and do not delay. It is your responsibility, if you do become the kind of wizard who is not a Lord, to protect yourself against that kind of murder attempt. We, all of us, need you alive too badly.

I can give you two names now. I was raised among them, your enemies, and I know two of them who will never turn back from Voldemort's cause. Fenrir Greyback is a monster who must be destroyed, as he has destroyed the lives of so many others. Walden Macnair is another. He will never relinquish his hatred and his bloodlust. He has made sacrifices already for his cause. For no other reason than because Voldemort asked it of him, he murdered his own wife.

And now, I must give you a bit more information on that matter which I wrote to you about last time.

Ask, Mr. Potter, ask whoever you can find, why Sirius Black did not go to Azkaban.

I remain, in shadows and starlight,

Starborn.

December 1st, 1993

Lucius:

By now, you will have heard about the attack on your son. You may not have known why we made it. You, of course, will be opening and closing your mouth in furious denial, thinking that you sent us the blood.

Yes, you did. And do you know one interesting thing about blood, Lucius? It can be used as a mirror.

We used it to read your intentions, Lucius. You have indeed been playing with us, pretending to commit to our cause while seeking a way out—or a way in with us, if you decided ours was the better path to survival. But you haven't been able to decide, have you? You have been kept hovering in the middle, foiled by the implacable dedication of those closest to you. Poor little Malfoy. Poor little Slytherin.

Poor, indeed, in everything but money. Look to those closest to you, Lucius. One of them is not quite so dedicated as you seem to think.

Understand: The attacks on your son and Harry Potter were both warnings. See how easily we can reach into the grounds? Well enough to slip a savage werewolf and a Dark magical artifact past the wards. We anticipated that the attack on Potter would fail, and that he would then return and save your son. It is the reason that we used a snake when we know that he is a Parselmouth. We do not wish to alienate you completely, only to play with you as you seem to so delight in playing with us.

But think of it, Lucius. One moment later on Potter's part, and your son would have died. Or Potter would have been a werewolf, or dead. He is only a child, Lucius. He can be destroyed as easily as any other child.

Do you understand us now? Do you see how serious we are? Do you see the advantages of committing to us?

Swallow your silly pride, Lucius, and bow your head. To some yokes even a Malfoy neck must yield, and you chose one of them when you took that brand upon your arm.

Send us a letter back within a week with your formal declaration of allegiance, or the next attack will come. And perhaps this one is the one we mean.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty: Wrecks of a Dissolving Dream

“Hey, Harry.”

Harry blinked and came slowly awake, putting a hand automatically to his scar. There was a faint trace of blood there—unsurprising, since he'd once again dreamed of the dark figures writhing in pain and the circle of shadows closing itself around him. He clenched his fingers carefully inward, making it seem as though he were wiping away sweat instead of blood, and then turned around with equal care. He had a crick in his neck from sleeping in the chair beside Draco's bed.

The first thing he checked on was that Draco was still asleep, his hand tucked beneath his cheek in a distinctly childlike gesture. Then he turned and looked at Connor. His brother seemed tentative, his eyes darting around in several directions before they settled on Harry's face.

“I, um,” said Connor. He caught his breath, and caught his lip between his teeth as though in complement to it. “I went and talked with Sirius and Remus. They knew that you'd probably want to know why they didn't come and help when we heard the second werewolf howl.”

Harry nodded tiredly. The dreams still lingered in his mind, wanting to poison it, but he forced himself to put aside the fear.

He would worry about them later. He had to worry about his brother right now.

Connor shook his head. "Remus just went too far into wildness. He was having so much fun running that he didn't know what the werewolf's howl meant. And then Sirius was with him, and got caught up in the run, too, and didn't realize that I'd fallen so far behind, or into such danger." His eyes darted to Harry's and then away yet again. Harry supposed he didn't know how to feel. This was only the third time that Connor's life had been in such intense danger. Only Voldemort had ever threatened him so much before.

"That's all right," said Harry. "But I think they could watch out for you better next time, if they're going to take you with them again."

Connor nodded fervently. "Headmaster Dumbledore already made them promise to watch out for me."

So Dumbledore is good for something after all, thought Harry, and stretched his arms above him, shaking his head slightly to convince his hair to lie flat, or as flat as it ever got. *At least I can trust him to make provisions for Connor's safety.* "Thanks for telling me, Connor. I would have wondered." He glanced again at Draco, and smiled when he saw that his eyelids were fluttering.

"Harry..."

Harry turned back to his brother. If Connor didn't know how to deal with the danger, he thought, he must especially not have known how to deal with his brother saving his life. This time, Connor knew what had happened. The last time, Harry had *Obliviated* him.

He winced at the thought. *I swore that I would give Remus back his memories. What can I do about Connor's? Is there a way to heal his mind without making him hate me?*

Connor drew in his breath, then let it all out in a rush and said, "Thank you for saving my life. I know that you're good after all, no matter what Sirius says about Slytherins. Thank you." He nearly hopped forward and gave Harry a quick, tight hug, leaning back almost before Harry could manage to return it.

But it was only almost, and Harry embraced his brother firmly. He could feel a weight he'd borne for so long as to hardly be conscious of it dropping from his shoulders. He had his brother's good will back again. There was nothing half so important, not when he was being honest with himself.

"Harry?"

Harry turned, and met Draco's eyes. Draco had flushed, and was scowling. Harry shook his head when he realized that Draco was probably jealous of Connor and the attention he was getting from Harry. It seemed that there was very little that Draco wouldn't be jealous of, and the more ridiculous, the better. Harry let Connor go, nevertheless, since it was obvious that his brother wanted to leave.

Connor slipped to the door of the hospital wing, and turned to smile back at Harry, pointedly avoiding Draco's eyes. "I'll see you at breakfast, Harry."

Harry nodded at him, and then turned and met Draco's gaze, raising his own eyebrows. "What?" he asked, when Draco's scowl didn't fade.

"You nearly died for him last night," said Draco. "And then he comes and treats you like that."

Harry blinked. "What do you mean? He brought me good news. He hugged me. That's hardly treating me poorly."

"He should have been groveling," said Draco. "I can't believe that he'll speak a few simple words, and you'll just accept him like *that*." He snapped his fingers, which was a gesture Harry had never seen him make. "You *nearly died*, Harry!"

"So did you," Harry pointed out, deciding to quash the line of thought Draco was building up as swiftly as he could. Draco wasn't Snape, and he would probably listen to the quashing. Harry was already regretting telling either of them about Greyback's attack. Connor probably wouldn't have said anything, and neither would Sirius and Remus or his pureblood allies. Harry had promised to be more honest, but when people were unreasonable in response to his revelations, could he be blamed for keeping them to himself?

Draco quieted at the reminder, dropping his eyes to his hands. “Yes,” he said. “And I owe you another life debt, Harry.”

“Oh, no, you don’t,” said Harry, remembering exactly what Draco had used his last life debt to make him do. “You wouldn’t have been in danger if it weren’t for me. I think someone was trying to hurt you to get at me. So I just saved the life that I put in danger.”

“I can have a life debt to you if I want,” said Draco, looking mutinous. Then he smiled. “Unless you refuse to accept it, of course,” he said. “Or unless you’re going to *force* me to withdraw it.”

Harry ground his teeth. “Please, Draco,” he said, “don’t bind yourself in a life debt to me.”

“Why not?” Draco tilted his head to the side and folded his arms. “I’m waiting for a good reason, you know. What you did with the snake last night was pretty fucking impressive.”

“Because it embarrasses me,” said Harry. “And I would really prefer not to have a debt that I might feel tempted to invoke just because you were being petty.”

Draco snorted. “Harry, you’re the last person I would think would abuse pureblood rituals for petty reasons.”

“You’ve forgotten other things about me,” said Harry, with a slight smile. “I might want you to stop annoying me about Connor, or leave me alone, and invoke the debt to make you leave me alone instead of maneuvering you so that you have so much homework you *have* to stop following me.”

“You’re too Slytherin for your own good,” Draco muttered, and then flopped back in the bed. “I have to stay here,” he added in a pathetic voice as Madam Pomfrey appeared. “I feel shaky, and I see the snake every time I close my eyes.”

Madam Pomfrey clucked at once. “Of course you must, you poor dear,” she said. “It’s not every day that one of the students at Hogwarts almost dies.” She waved her wand and cast a spell that Harry vaguely recognized as a ward which would tell her the physical and emotional state of her patient when she checked. “Just stay here. We’ll make sure no Dark artifacts get you.” She swept away.

Harry shook his head. “Who was saying something about being Slytherin?” he asked, and received a smug smile from Draco. He stood. “I have to get to breakfast.”

“You could stay here with me,” Draco suggested. His voice was soft and playful, but his gaze was intent. “I think Madam Pomfrey wouldn’t let you leave if you told her what really happened last night. And I could use the company.”

Harry sighed. “I’m sorry, Draco, but I really do have to attend classes.” He reached over and gripped the other boy’s arm hard for a moment. Draco turned his hand upward so they were palm to palm. “Why don’t you think about writing to your parents? They’ll be frantic, I’m sure.”

“I wish I could say the same about yours,” Draco said, and then flopped down, his face mostly discontented.

Harry shrugged, and moved out of the hospital wing. He was already working on burying the memories of Greyback’s attack. He wanted to make sure that he looked absolutely calm and composed when he met Snape and talked with him about these new restrictions his guardian had decided to impose.

I know that he’ll be silly about some things now, and he’ll take note of any weariness or weakness I display—even if that really comes from the dreams and not the attack.

Halfway to the dungeons, much to his annoyance, he had to detour to the loo and wash blood off his scar again. At least his head wasn’t hurting.

“You are ready this time, I trust?” Snape’s voice was casual, and he didn’t look up from the essays he was marking.

Harry looked up from his own book and nodded, once. He saw no point in speaking. He thought his voice might shake in spite of all his preparation.

They’d received word three days ago that the Ministry intended to visit this weekend and check on Harry’s “progress.” The

too-polite Ministry letter had revealed more than Amelia Bones perhaps intended it to, and Harry knew that Kingsley Shacklebolt had authority to ask more probing questions this time. He wondered idly if Dumbledore had spoken to Madam Bones, or if she'd simply got impatient and nervous at the thought of someone in the press getting wind of the Aurors' non-progress in breaking the spell on his parents. There had been no more articles specifically about him since the first release of his magic, but Skeeter was always taking the opportunity to steer her other articles back towards him in some form or fashion.

Harry glanced once at the clock on the wall, and blinked. The Aurors should have been in Snape's private rooms twenty minutes ago. He bit his lip thoughtfully and went back to reading.

A sharp knock on the door a moment later made him nearly drop the book. Snape stood up and glanced at him. "As we prepared," he said.

Harry nodded. His breath was coming too fast, and he told himself to shut up and stop being ridiculous. He'd faced Fenrir Greyback. It was stupid to be nervous around Ministry Aurors who couldn't do anything to him.

Magically. But they could take away Snape's guardianship, and force you to live with Dumbledore or Sirius or your parents.

Harry didn't want that. His feelings were still a jumbled mess towards all of them. He was afraid that if he spent too much time with them right now, one of them would wind up severely injured or dead.

He stood and waited as calmly as he could while Snape opened the door to usher the Aurors in. Snape gave a single violent twitch of movement, though, and by that movement let Harry know something was wrong. He shook his sleeve and let his wand fall into his palm, while all around him his magic stirred and opened one eye.

But then Snape was stepping aside, as he certainly wouldn't have if the Aurors had come in with drawn wands or Dark Marks, and saying, "This is an unexpected honor. Welcome. I am Professor Severus Snape, Potions Master at Hogwarts, Head of Slytherin House, and guardian of Harry Potter."

Harry frowned and craned his neck, since he couldn't yet see beyond Snape's head. *Did they send someone new, that he feels the need to introduce himself again? The letter only said that Shacklebolt and Feverfew would be coming.*

They had indeed sent someone new, someone who strode into the room ahead of Shacklebolt and Feverfew as if he owned the place. Harry stared. This man was older, and walked with a slight limp that did absolutely nothing to diminish his air of ancient dignity—the mark of someone trained in pureblood ways almost from the time he could move. He wore glasses, like James, but his eyes were a startling yellow. He held his head up even as he nodded at Harry, as though it were impossible for him to really bend his neck.

"Mr. Potter," he said, in a deep voice a little like a lion's growl. "My name is Rufus Scrimgeour, Head of the Auror Office."

Harry stared harder. He'd heard of Scrimgeour, of course—he'd studied his family along with the Malfoys and the Parkinsons and all the others who might someday be valuable as allies or important as enemies to Connor's success. They had been among the proudest and most prestigious of the purebloods, always Sorting Slytherin, until Scrimgeour's grandfather had taken it into his head to marry a Muggleborn Gryffindor witch, apparently because he wanted to. His halfblood father had become a Ravenclaw, and blown himself up in some mad Potions experiment while his son was still a baby. Then Rufus Scrimgeour had come to Hogwarts, Sorted Slytherin, and declared an intention to use no Dark magic, ever, when he was still twelve. He never had.

The Scrimgeours are a bloody confusing family, Harry had thought, the first time he finished studying them.

But—and this was the important thing at the moment—Rufus Scrimgeour had never been a friend of Dumbledore's.

Why he was here, why he would have been allowed to come into an investigation controlled by an Order Auror, was beyond Harry's comprehension.

Then he caught a glimpse of Shacklebolt's furious face over Scrimgeour's shoulder, and it clicked into place. Shacklebolt was still under his superior's control, whoever he might serve in secret. If the Head of the Aurors wanted to invite himself along on this kind of investigation, Shacklebolt was hardly in a position to say no.

Harry smiled sincerely, something he hadn't thought he would do during the visit, and inclined his head. "Hello, sir. My name is Harry Potter, as I'm sure you know by now, and you've already met my guardian, Professor Snape."

Scrimgeour made a soft sound that might or might not have been a chuckle. His eyes hadn't left Harry's face. Harry wondered what he was seeing there. "I have indeed. Now. I understand that Auror Shacklebolt spoke with you last time?" Harry nodded. "Then I think he should speak with your guardian this time, and I will interview you. Alone," he added, as though he had felt Feverfew's movement to come along with him. Feverfew sagged. Harry thought that was due less to a desire to listen in—he still didn't know if Feverfew was part of the Order—than to a desire to avoid being left with Snape.

"I think that is an excellent idea," said Snape smoothly. "I trust that you will not ask my ward any questions that are out of line, Scrimgeour?"

The older wizard turned and faced Snape fully, making it look as though his limp were a natural part of his gait and not an infirmity at all. He didn't look upset by his lack of a title, either. "No," he said. "Of course not. What kind of Auror does that?" Then he turned back, met Harry's eyes again, and nodded towards the back of the room, near Snape's bookshelves.

Harry went along with a will. He was already wild with curiosity. Scrimgeour might have come along just to spite Dumbledore, but that would mean he had to already know something about the investigation and the unusual nature of it. Harry highly doubted that the Head of the Auror Office just strolled out constantly and left the Ministry on a whim.

Scrimgeour leaned against the wall and watched Harry. Harry watched him back. He realized he had no idea what would happen next, and was rather happy about that. At least he knew he was fencing with an opponent who wasn't interested in putting a phoenix web on him.

"Now," said Scrimgeour, who seemed fond of that word. "I would like the answers to a few honest questions."

Harry raised his brows, let a small smile play around his lips, and nodded.

"Why did you choose Professor Snape to adopt you?" Scrimgeour's lips flickered for a moment, in an expression so quick that Harry couldn't have said whether it was smile or sneer, and his eyes took an equally quick tour of the room. "I can feel Dark magic everywhere in here."

Harry nodded again. Scrimgeour had hunted down Dark wizards for a living for over thirty years. That he had a sensitivity to that kind of magic didn't surprise Harry. "I chose him because I trusted him," he said. He paused, then decided that, trained in pureblood ways though this man obviously was, he didn't seem inclined to perform the dances, and Harry had no reason to do so with him. "And because I thought he could protect me from Dumbledore's interference."

Scrimgeour's gaze was absolutely *locked* on him now. Harry saw him note everything about what Harry had said, including the lack of a title for Dumbledore, and then he smiled. Harry blinked. That was a full, open, dazzling smile, one that transformed the man's whole face into something approachable.

"Yes, well, Dumbledore should have known that his tame Dark wizard could be used against him sooner or later," Scrimgeour murmured. "And why do you trust Snape more than your godfather?"

Harry hesitated for a long moment. He had to step carefully. He had little compunction about maneuvering Dumbledore into a trap; Shacklebolt's involvement here just proved that Dumbledore was still trying to trap him. But he had no right to reveal Sirius's past.

"I don't trust *him*," he settled for saying at last.

Scrimgeour grinned at him, a fierce expression. "I see," he said. "And would that have anything to do with the rather large Dark legacy that the Black family represents?"

Harry blinked again. Scrimgeour was offering him a way out of being forced to stay with Sirius—a way based on a claim that Scrimgeour would know was false, but which everyone else would surely believe, since they knew how dim a view the Head of the Aurors took of Dark wizards. Of course, some people would say he was being unreasonable, but that was all right. Scrimgeour had far more room to legally obstruct matters than Harry did. Let him in to mess with things, and the Ministry's quick investigation would turn grindingly slow.

"Why?" Harry whispered.

Scrimgeour's eyes went to the far side of the room, where Snape was being scathingly polite at Shacklebolt. "One more piece of information from you," he said. "I've thought for a long time that Shacklebolt seemed more than usually attached to

Hogwarts. Is that true?"

Obviously, being devoted to the Light doesn't prevent him from having a brain Harry nodded.

Scrimgeour exhaled and gave that feral grin again. "I knew it," he said, and then focused on Harry. "I don't know how much you know about Lords," he said.

"Quite a bit," said Harry, thinking of Starborn's letter.

Scrimgeour nodded. "Dumbledore's a Light Lord. You-Know-Who is a Dark Lord. I don't like 'em. Neither of 'em." Harry recognized his suddenly informal diction as an affectation, but had to admit it was effective. "That's why I work for the Ministry. The Ministry's inefficient and simple-minded and petty and choose whatever other adjective you like, but it's a *normal* place. It gives normal wizards a chance to change things, since we don't all have the power of a Lord. On a normal day, we balance 'em. I don't like Lords mucking about with my Ministry. Dumbledore is doing that right now." He stared straight into Harry's eyes. "Now, maybe you're going to become a Lord, and if you are, then I'll fight you as hard as I've fought all the rest of 'em. But until you do, then you're someone else Dumbledore's trying to control, and, moreover, someone who could fight him a hell of a lot more effectively than other people could, if you can just get rid of some of the barriers in your way. I'll do my part with the legal barriers. You can repay me by not becoming a bloody Lord and ordering people about the way the rest of 'em do."

Harry felt his heart lift in wonder. Scrimgeour was confusing and contradictory, a Light-devoted Slytherin, a pureblood who talked like a Muggleborn, and it seemed he liked having the freedom to be that way. Harry was inclined to respect someone like that. He nodded. "I can do that."

"So you don't trust Sirius Black because he's a Dark wizard," said Scrimgeour, looking keenly interested. "And what about your parents? That was Dark magic cast on them. I knew it the moment I saw them."

Harry's breath caught in his throat. Scrimgeour stared right through him. He *knew*, he had to know, that Harry was the one who'd cast the *Fugitivus Animus* spell on his parents.

"It is Dark magic," said Harry, treading carefully. "I—I don't want to go back to them yet."

Scrimgeour tilted his head at him. "Scared?"

"Of myself," said Harry honestly.

The Auror nodded sharply. "Of course," he said, a little louder. "You're only a child, after all, for all your power. Of course a thirteen-year-old wizard would be scared of a household where Dark magic had been used."

Harry couldn't help smiling.

"Most natural thing in the world," Scrimgeour went on blandly. "I can see that you'll want to stay here because at least here you know where the Dark magic is coming from, and of course you wouldn't try to learn it yourself because of that fear, oh no. And of course you trust your Head of House. It might be a grim home, but you know what to expect from it. And isn't that the greatest need of growing children, after all? Stability, and security, and peace?"

Harry thought he would have given a good deal to be in the room when Scrimgeour made the same arguments, in a tone of absolute and utter calm, to Amelia Bones and the rest of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He definitely sounded as though he believed himself, and if anyone could shake him out of his mask of calm reason, Harry didn't know who it would be.

"I know *I* need a lot of stability, and security, and peace," he managed to say, keeping his tone woeful.

"I know that you do."

Harry squirmed. Scrimgeour was *looking* at him again, and seeing far too much. Lucky that the man would be leaving in a little while, he thought fervently.

After that keen glance, Scrimgeour nodded and stepped away from him. "I've seen all that I need to see here," he announced imperiously. "Shacklebolt, Feverfew. Let's go. I'm quite satisfied that the boy's proper place is with the guardian he's chosen."

Shacklebolt paled. “But, sir—“

“Not now,” said Scrimgeour. “The stench of Dark magic here is making me sick.” He strolled to the door. “We’ll talk everything over on the way back to the Ministry, won’t we, Kingsley?”

Feverfew practically scurried out the door. Shacklebolt lingered a moment, and glared at Harry and Snape both.

“This isn’t the end of things,” he breathed.

“Of course it isn’t,” said Scrimgeour from right behind him, making Shacklebolt jump a foot in the air. “Come along, Kingsley. There’s still *paperwork* to file.” He made it sound as if he would look forward to it. Harry felt a horrible kind of admiration rise up in him. *Damn, he’s good.*

Shacklebolt trailed out, looking embarrassed and frustrated and furious beyond measure. Scrimgeour casually shut the door behind them.

Harry burst out laughing the moment he was sure the Aurors were far enough down the hall not to hear him. Snape’s face wore a smirk as he settled into his chair and pulled the pile of essays towards him again.

“That was...interesting,” he said.

Harry flung himself down on the couch next to his book and grinned at him. “Why do we have allies in the *Ministry*, of all places?”

“It is not we,” said Snape, peering at him. “It’s you.”

Harry blinked, then picked up his book. People seemed to make a habit of disconcerting him today.

Lucius Malfoy was having a nervous breakdown.

It was the only way he could identify his present behavior to himself. His gaze darted back and forth continually between the last letter he’d received from those demanding he declare allegiance to Lord Voldemort, and Hogwarts. He currently stood in the outer edges of the Forbidden Forest, not far from that disgusting half-giant’s hut, his hands white where they clutched the letter.

He knew he had no choice but to pursue the path he’d come here to take. That didn’t mean he had to like it.

Lucius tried to straighten his shoulders and put his Malfoy mask back on. It didn’t work. It hadn’t worked from the moment that he received the first letter threatening Draco’s life, and all the ones that had followed, whispering secrets that no one could have known about Draco unless they were inside Hogwarts.

He had thought of showing the letters to Narcissa, but he knew that she would not have understood the complications of the situation. She was blindly besotted with Harry Potter, certain the boy was going to save them all. She would have given him a single hard look and told him to join Potter’s side of the war. She already trusted Potter beyond all reason simply for saving Draco’s life—the way he’d been meant to do, apparently.

Besides, tell Narcissa that her son was in danger, and she was bound to do something blind and stupid.

And...

Lucius stared at the letter in his hand again. Two lines leaped out at him, just as they had in his first hurried scan of it.

And do you know one interesting thing about blood, Lucius? It can be used as a mirror.

Lucius knew of no spell that could do that, and he was sure that he was experienced enough in Dark magic that he would have heard of one. Quite obviously, the people threatening his son had access to Dark magical artifacts (as if their attack on Draco with the snake hadn’t proven that!) And Lucius had no idea what they were, nor what they might be used for next.

That also meant they might be watching him right now, but since he had no idea if they were or how to tell if the Dark artifact was focused on him, he had to act as if he had a chance at success.

Look to those closest to you, Lucius. One of them is not quite so dedicated as you seem to think.

That was the other reason he'd chosen not to show the letter to Narcissa. The letter writer was most likely lying, trying to encourage Lucius to distrust his wife, but just in case...just in case...

Lucius lifted his gaze back to the castle and shook his head. He had sent the letter declaring allegiance to the Dark Lord's cause because he had no choice, and that meant that the best time to move was now, while the Dark Lord's followers thought he was one of them. He would take Draco from Hogwarts, so that no one could threaten him again. He would send him to Durmstrang. The Malfoys had powerful friends there, wizards who would protect Draco *and* teach him Dark magic, and who would not care about the Dark Lord until he had actually returned and was threatening them. And Lucius would not tell Narcissa until the matter had actually been accomplished.

She was the one who wanted Draco to go to Hogwarts, Lucius remembered. Could she have known, even then...?

Then he shook that thought off, because some suspicions were too paranoid even for him, cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself, and moved forward. No one looked towards him, even though several students were flying above the Quidditch Pitch. Lucius curled his lip. *Inefficient. If I were Headmaster of the school, I would have wards that would detect such Charms in operation.*

He made it inside Hogwarts without anyone noticing, waited a moment to make sure he did not track muddy footprints across the floor, and then moved slowly towards the Slytherin dungeons. Even from here, he could feel a hollow echo, beating in his head like a drum, that signaled a coming headache.

That would be Harry Potter, then.

Lucius had no doubt the brat was powerful; he had felt as much himself when Potter was at the Manor for the summer. Lucius also had no doubt that the brat was incapable of defeating the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord had studied for decades, and had experience as well as magic behind him that Harry Potter could not match. Raw, untamed strength was no use against the Dark Lord's knowledgeable cruelty.

That was the thing Narcissa had not understood, though Lucius had tried to argue the issue with her in abstract terms. She had insisted that Harry Potter would be able to protect them, that Lucius simply did not understand the strength of his magic. Of course, she also insisted that Draco was utterly devoted to the boy—another thing Lucius had been able to see for himself that summer—and that she wanted them to remain Potter's allies for Draco's sake more than for any other reason.

Lucius sneered. *She does not appear to have considered the possibility that it is Potter's magic that calls to Draco, and makes him so unlike a Malfoy, by taking part of his personality away.*

Lucius knew the symptoms, and knew that when Draco was removed from Potter's presence for a long enough period of time, he would recover. That was another reason to free his son from Potter, so that Draco could make an actual choice that he never could with that kind of magic overpowering him.

And, of course, there was the fact that Malfoy pride would not allow Lucius to bend his neck fully to anyone but a Lord. This child was not a Lord. He was only a child, one who had somehow swayed both Lucius's son and his wife.

Lucius knew he would have a fight on his hands after he removed Draco from Hogwarts, but he expected his son to see sense. Narcissa would take a little more effort. But they would have to draw together in the face of whatever attacks Lucius would face from the enraged letter writers. Narcissa would choose family loyalty over whatever fussy principles she had. She always did.

Lucius smiled as he stopped at the door to the Slytherin common room and waited for a student to exit so he could slip inside. It was perfect, really. Once his son was out of danger, then his mind would stop clouding with panic, and he could face his enemies with the fury that waited, boiling, behind the panic.

The wall slid open. Lucius prepared to step inside, and then stopped, staring, as Harry Potter stepped out of the opening—

And looked straight at him, magic welling around him like ripples in a pond, like painful drums, like wings.

“Mr. Malfoy,” said Potter calmly, “I don’t know what you’re doing here, but you’ll have to go through me if you want to harm Draco.”

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-One: Pomona and Septimus Renewed

Harry could feel Lucius’s tension, and his shock. It boiled off him like warm air. Harry watched his face, and saw the slight shudders there, the way that Lucius’s eyes wanted to dart off to the side and the way he controlled them and refused to let them do so. Something had come close to splintering the man’s mask, probably the near-death of his only child.

Or perhaps not, Harry thought, remembering the dream that had awoken him and driven him out of the Slytherin common room. A dark shadow had stalked towards Draco, who lay peacefully sleeping in his bed, unaware of it. Harry had only come out into the corridor for a breath of fresh air at first, but then he’d seen Lucius standing there, and his dream made much more sense than they usually did.

Lucius finally drew himself together enough to respond. He lifted his chin. “You are not the arbiter of how I should raise my son, Mr. Potter,” he said, voice gone cold enough that Harry would not have been surprised to see ice frosting the stones. “We are currently in truce-dance, and I would prefer not to have to hurt you. Stand aside. I am invoking the *Officium Auctoris*. There is nothing you can do to prevent me from taking my son from the school.”

Harry blinked. The *Officium Auctoris* referred to the eldest living member of a pureblood family’s right to decide what was best for the other members. Harry hadn’t read of an invocation of it in the last fifty years, since it was generally considered bad form to intervene too drastically in another wizard’s life, and a sign of having failed in the dances, that one needed to resort to such a crass weapon. That Lucius would reach for it now was surprising...

And out of character. Harry narrowed his eyes and waited, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Stand aside, Mr. Potter,” said Lucius, his voice grown even colder. “You know that you have no authority in this matter.”

“I am waiting,” said Harry.

Lucius simply narrowed his own eyes further. He didn’t need to sneer, like Snape did, Harry thought. He conveyed his authority with his whole body, shoulders and hands and feet at least as much as his face.

Save that he was showing more fear than glacial command now, and Harry found himself glad of it. Frightened people did stupid things, and Lucius having done a stupid thing was the only hope Harry could count on that he wouldn’t be forced to yield to him.

“Waiting, Mr. Potter?” Lucius asked, when Harry had made it clear he wasn’t moving anywhere.

“For the salt and the smoke and the silver,” said Harry, and waited again.

Lucius hissed between his teeth. “I do not need—“

“Yes, actually, you do,” said Harry peaceably. “Not if you simply wished to invoke your right to control Draco’s life, no. But when you invoke it in the middle of a truce-dance, you need the salt and the smoke and the silver to create a space into which I cannot enter.” He clasped his hands together more firmly as he saw the storm building on Lucius’s face, and called his magic to rise around him. “My truce is with your whole family, Mr. Malfoy, not merely yourself. If you try to take Draco away without the proper rituals, then I might simply assume that you’re an impostor and attack you. And I would be within my rights—in fact, within my duties, in defending a member of your family from an improper *Officium Auctoris*. A true Malfoy surely would not have forgotten such details. Shall I check you for Polyjuice?” Harry kept to the tone of courtesy, certain that he would win this dance.

And he did. Lucius broke, his eyes blazing with true fury.

“You are impudent, boy,” he whispered. “Stand aside, *now*.”

Harry shook his head. “You have no authority to command me to stand aside. We are equals at this point in the truce-dance.”

Lucius reached for his wand. Harry lifted all the controls on his magic. Lucius promptly slumped back, gasping, and the

slightly glazed look that Harry had expected came into his eyes. Starborn had said his magic called to purebloods. Harry had not imagined the results would be so dramatic.

“Harry? What are you doing?”

Harry looked over his shoulder. Draco had slipped out of the Slytherin common room, too, and his eyes were blinking in sleepy confusion, while one hand rose to rub at his face. Then he saw Lucius, and felt the magic in the air, and frowned.

“Father, you *didn't*,” he said.

Harry lowered his magic a little, tucking more of it behind barriers. He hadn't meant to send Lucius into quite *this* state of... shock, awe, wonder, whatever it was. Luckily, it seemed that Lucius could recover from it quickly. He straightened and gave his head a little shake, and then was burning and clear-eyed again.

“I will not be scolded by my own son, Draco,” he said. *He's still shaken, a bit*, Harry thought, watching him. He would have been able to command Draco's obedience with no more than a look if things were as normal.

And Draco would certainly have obeyed. Instead, he folded his arms and launched into a lecture.

“Has it occurred to you that I'm capable of making up my own mind about my friends, Father?” he asked. “You raised me with the capacity to judge power for myself, and not only in the name of survival. I was supposed to be true to the Malfoy name.” His eyes were lit with an emotion that Harry had seen only once before—last year, when Draco had out-danced his father. “And I think I have been. You, on the other hand, have an unfortunate habit of forsaking our honor and leaving it for me and Harry Potter to guard. And now it is happening *again*.” He narrowed his eyes. “Our honor is rather lonely, Father.”

Lucius's fury had gone bone-deep now. Harry tensed as he took a step forward. *Perhaps this was what the dream meant. He certainly looks ready to hex Draco now.*

“I told you,” said Lucius, his voice quieter than Snape's had ever been, “I will not be scolded by my own son. I have come to remove you to Durmstrang, Draco. You will be happier there.”

“Safer, you mean to say,” Draco murmured, and then laughed, a sound so full of choking bitterness that Harry looked at him askance and wondered what he had missed. “Isn't it obvious that I'm safer here, Father? You've felt Harry's magic. You know that he would kill to protect me. He saved my life from the snake.” Draco's cheeks were flushed now, his eyes glittering in a match for his father's. “And now you tell me that that's not good enough, that I'll be safer at bloody *Durmstrang*, in the midst of Dark wizards? That's doubting Harry's ability as well as my judgment. How many more insults will you pile up, Father? Don't you care at all about soothing matters over with powerful wizards? Or is that always going to be my bloody job?”

“Draco,” said a mild voice from behind Lucius. “Language.”

Draco immediately stood straighter, and the flush disappeared from his cheeks as he inclined his head. “My apologies, Mother.”

Harry blinked as Narcissa Malfoy walked around her husband and came over to stand next to him and Draco. Lucius was staring at her in shock equal to what he'd shown on feeling Harry's power. Narcissa gave her son a gentle look and a murmur of, “I shall expect you to guard your tongue better in the future.”

Then she turned and gave her husband a glare that made Harry want to duck.

“Did you think I wouldn't follow you out of the house, Lucius?” she asked softly. “If you really distrust me, you should have unhooked me from the Manor's wards. That would not have let me feel you leave.”

“What are you talking about, Mother?” Draco asked. “Why would he distrust you?” He shot his father an accusatory glance, which Lucius seemed to be doing his best to ignore.

Harry took a short step backwards. Obviously, this was much more a private family affair than he had realized, and he was sure that Narcissa could take care of her son. He should probably—

Narcissa's gaze darted to him, and she shook her head slightly, even as she answered Draco. Harry blinked and stood still.

“Your father has been receiving letters,” said Narcissa, and Lucius’s face paled further. “They are from someone threatening to resurrect the Dark Lord, and threatening your life in order to make your father cooperate. Your father has gone along with them so far, as I believe he could not see a way out of it. But today he came to the school, and intended, it seems, to abduct you from Hogwarts and take you to Durmstrang.” Narcissa paused for a moment, and then fixed her eyes on Lucius and said, “You are an idiot, husband.”

Lucius finally seemed to have recovered from the triple shock of his son’s defiance, his wife’s appearance, and his wife’s knowledge. He straightened and moved a hand to his sleeve, as though he would draw his wand. Narcissa rolled her eyes and made a very slight movement with one wrist.

Lucius’s wand tore itself from his grasp and sailed to her. Narcissa tucked it away among her robes, and then took a step forward. Harry didn’t think it was coincidence that her body shielded both him and Draco from any attack by Lucius.

“Did it ever occur to you,” said Narcissa, in the kind of voice she might use to ask what a fine day it was, “that I might be able to help you? That I might be able to understand the intricacies of the situation better than you know, because I have been in almost constant contact with Draco? That I would have understood the threat if you showed me those letters, but I would have been able to think of some way to deal with it?”

Lucius was breathing harshly, his pale cheeks flushed with spots of color. Harry supposed he thought there was no harm in showing emotion now, since his mask had been not just ripped off but stomped on.

“No,” said Narcissa. “I can see that you did not think that. Why?”

“You would have reacted blindly if your son was in danger, Narcissa,” said Lucius, finding his voice at last. He stood and leveled Narcissa with a glare that actually made Harry feel a bit better. He could think under stress, then. Harry would have felt slightly unnerved to find a Malfoy so broken and beaten back that he couldn’t. “Stupidly.”

“As you have done?” Narcissa asked.

Lucius opened his mouth, and ended up sealing it again. His gaze went to Harry. Harry returned the gaze calmly. It was Lucius’s decision as to what to do. Perhaps his dream wasn’t right, and Lucius wasn’t a threat. If he moved to be one, Harry would stand ready.

He felt Draco’s steady pressure against his right shoulder. Without looking at him, Harry draped an arm around the other boy, and felt Draco relax against him.

Lucius’s eyes narrowed, as if that sign of trust and affection had been the banner he was looking for, and he turned back to Narcissa. “He is a *child*,” he said, his voice burning with cold. “You have already seen what our enemies are capable of, Narcissa—hiding in Hogwarts and sending a Dark magical snake to threaten our son, a snake that could have killed him.”

Narcissa nodded slowly. “And that shows what our enemies are capable of,” she said. “What escapes me is how you have missed what our allies are capable of, Lucius. Harry saved Draco’s life.”

“He was *meant* to!” Lucius flourished a piece of parchment at her. Narcissa took it from him and read it. If the contents affected her at all, Harry couldn’t tell. Narcissa looked up at the end of it and met her husband’s eyes.

“And it never occurred to you that they were lying, to try and save face after their plans failed?” she asked. “That they had underestimated Harry, and didn’t want you to know it? I read one of the early letters, Lucius, that mentioned something about Harry not being very powerful. That is obviously not true. Why would you trust them at all?” She folded the letter into four neat squares and held it out to him.

Harry could see Lucius making a mighty attempt to recover himself. It was like trying to steer a plunging Pegasus with only one rein, though. He shook his head, and his temper won out again as he snatched the letter back from Narcissa.

“It is different for you than it is for me,” he said. “You know why.” He made the smallest of motions towards his left arm.

Narcissa snorted. “Oh, yes. Because you wear an ugly brand, you should let the brand dominate your life and become more important than your family. Very winning behavior, Lucius. You did not let it become more important twelve years ago; why should it do so now?”

“*Narcissa*,” said Lucius in a snarl, his eyes darting to Harry.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Malfoy,” said Harry calmly. “I’ve known since my Christmas with you that you were Marked, and that Mrs. Malfoy wasn’t.” He paused for a moment, wondering if he should say what he was thinking, and then shrugged and gave in. It was best that Lucius know exactly where he had stood. This was a matter too severe for the indirect dances. “And I’m going to make sure that Draco is never Marked.”

He heard a hiss from beside him, but he wasn’t sure what expression was on Draco’s face: surprise, or gratitude, or hope. His gaze was fixed on Lucius’s face, and the emotions there. There were too many to see all at once, a storm of them. He wondered how many months Lucius had labored under his lonely pressure, the stress of the letters mounting. He wondered more why the man had never thought to trust his wife, but that was over and done with. What was important at the moment was what was in front of him.

“Thank you, Harry,” said Narcissa, her voice warm. “And I will add my voice to yours.” She turned and faced Lucius. “You should know, Lucius,” she said, casually, “that Draco will never be Marked as long as I live, either.”

Lucius flung his head up. He looked like a stag backed against a cliff by a pack of wolves, Harry thought in sympathy. Of course, matters would have been much easier if he had just thought to *ask* someone before now whether it would be a good idea to trust Harry Potter or the Dark Lord’s servants.

“You have chosen your side, then.” Lucius carefully enunciated his words, his eyes looking only at Narcissa this time. He had gained that much control of himself, then. “I did not think it would be so soon. There are still reasons to follow the Dark Lord, Narcissa. You know them as well as I do.”

“I do,” said Narcissa. “And were it not for certain things that have happened this year, then I would even agree with you that we should consider those reasons. But those things happened.” She turned and looked directly at Harry this time, not seeming nervous that her husband would strike at her back. “Harry,” she said. “I felt your power. I have heard from Draco that you never intend to become a Lord. That is true, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded.

Narcissa nodded back. “Then I am your ally,” she said.

“That is *impossible*,” Lucius snarled from behind his wife. “Anyone who has the kind of power the boy does must become a Lord, but he is not that yet, and will not be for many years. He would die if he faced the Dark Lord.”

“He has faced the Dark Lord twice, Lucius,” said Narcissa softly. “Once at the end of first year, and once in the Chamber of Secrets.”

Harry blinked at her. “How do you know about that?” If she knew that he and not Connor had banished Tom Riddle...

Narcissa gestured to Draco. “I listen to my son.”

Harry relaxed. If Narcissa got the story from Draco, she would have heard only the carefully modified versions that he told most people, and in both of those, Connor was the hero of the story.

“He would still die if he faced the Dark Lord in full power,” Lucius interjected stubbornly. “And that is what will happen.” He paused for a moment, as though trying to recover some of the coolness he had lost, and then plunged ahead. “You know this, Narcissa, since you have read the letters. This group may be small, but it is determined. They will resurrect the Dark Lord in the end, and then how will you face him, Potter?” He was all but snarling at Harry. Harry remembered the expression from when Lucius had faced his parents in Diagon Alley last year. “Not the pitiful remnants of him that may have been in that diary, but the real thing?”

“The same way I have so far, sir,” said Harry quietly. “With my brother, who defeated him once before—and as a far younger child than I am.” He had decided it was no use disputing Lucius’s classification of him and asking the man to call him an adult. He would simply adopt it, adapt it, and use it as necessary.

“You *think* that.” Lucius sneered. “I think it far more likely that you would die, and your allies with you.”

“That’s funny, Father,” said Draco, all perfect, bright brittleness. “I didn’t think you were so eager to see me die.”

Even Harry winced at the look on Lucius’s face when Draco said that. Lucius drew in a thick breath, as though shards of

something were caught in his throat. Then he knelt and held out a hand. “Draco,” he said. “Look at me.”

Draco stirred at Harry’s side, but from the motion, he’d simply pressed his face into Harry’s shoulder.

“I came here to save you,” said Lucius softly. His extended hand trembled. His voice did not. Harry had some idea of what that mastery cost him, and was properly impressed. “I promise, Draco. I would never leave you here to die. I was going to keep you out of the battleground that Hogwarts will become. You will go to Durmstrang, and be safe there. I promise it.”

“No,” said Draco softly. “I don’t want to go. I want to stay with Harry.”

“I am your father, Draco,” said Lucius. “You will go if I say you will.” Already, Harry could see, he was trying to force himself past that moment of vulnerability. His face was tightening, turning sharp and chill.

“Then I have no part in my son’s fate?” Narcissa asked. The very softness of her voice was a danger signal. Harry backed up a step, pulling Draco with him.

“Stop this, Narcissa.” Lucius tried to sound commanding. It didn’t work. “I am making the only possible decision for all of us. We will not die. We will stand on the winning side—“

“With all due respect, Mr. Malfoy,” Harry asked, “how is that possible if pulling Draco out of Hogwarts isn’t what these enemies want you to do?”

Lucius narrowed his eyes at him. “The Dark Lord will return,” he said. “I have no doubt of it. I merely intend not to see him return this way.”

Harry made a sound of surprise that turned into a chuckle halfway through, and rather choked him. Lucius went on glaring. Harry got himself under control and glanced at Draco, whose eyes were shining with perfect agreement. “Do you want to tell him,” Harry asked, “or should I?”

“Oh, you,” Draco urged him. “I don’t think he would take it as well coming from his own son. You’ve already seen how my insults devastate him.”

Lucius growled. Harry nodded to his best friend and turned back towards that best friend’s father, determined to keep his smile small and his voice as diplomatic as possible.

“Mr. Malfoy,” he said gently, “you’ve already chosen your side. I *know* what the Dark Lord was like in the last years of his reign, and I’ve faced him twice, as your wife told you. Do you really think that he would forgive treachery against an attempt to bring him back?”

Lucius went still. His extended hand stopped trembling, and his eyes went on staring with no sign of the emotions under the surface. But Harry knew what the stillness was a sign of, and pushed forward.

“You stand with us,” he said. “Your concern for Draco shows that. I can’t believe that you would really hurt him to get him to leave Hogwarts. That’s why you came in and tried to abduct him in the first place, instead of use a coercive spell to bring him home. I can’t allow you to do harm to his free will, either, of course. But perhaps I didn’t need to worry about that. I think you always knew what side you were on. You just needed an announcement to make you see it.”

Lucius was utterly still for a moment longer. Then he began to breathe wildly. Harry shifted, ready to step in front of Draco if he needed shelter from a sudden burst of magic.

“You dare accuse me of doing harm to my son’s free will?” Lucius whispered. “*You dare?*”

Harry frowned, wondering why that statement out of all of them was the one Lucius had taken exception to. “Yes, Mr. Malfoy,” he said slowly. “I saw a shadow in my dreams just before you arrived. The shadow was threatening Draco. I don’t think now that you would physically hurt him, but you *did* intend to take him away from Hogwarts when it wasn’t his choice to go.”

“And what do you think you have done to him?” Lucius asked in a steadily rising voice, as he stood.

“Father, no, *don’t*,” Draco said abruptly. His voice was small, and desperate, and went utterly ignored.

Harry clenched his fists. "What have I done to him?" His own voice sounded like a distant gong in his ears, competing with his heartbeat.

"You've changed him," said Lucius flatly. "My son is not the same now as when he went to Hogwarts, and the change happened immediately after he met you. Your magic is too strong, Potter. You will wind up a Lord, whether you want to or not. You have already compelled Draco into changing into someone else, something else, merely to fulfill your desires to have a pet."

"No," Harry whispered.

But he turned and met Draco's eyes, and saw them widen, and knew there was at least some truth in what Lucius had said. And his mind leaped then, and made the connection with the last time Draco's voice had sounded that desperate.

When Hermione nearly told me...

"My magic doesn't just attract other wizards," he whispered. "It compels them. And I didn't know."

"Is not knowing an excuse for doing it?" Lucius pounced on his words like a wolf. "It has happened, Mr. Potter. My son is not the same person as he was. I would wager that many people near you are not the same people they would have been without your interference, your *influence*." He laughed sharply. "At least the Dark Lord was honest about who he was, and what he wanted. He wanted to change our world. You have altered and twisted and broken minds for no reason other than a mere child's desires to be safe or comfortable or have friends."

"*Lucius*," said Narcissa, her voice deadly.

Harry didn't hear what happened next. His world was falling around him, the careful justifications he'd built to keep from panicking since the release of his magic. He *had* compelled people. All his fulminations against Dumbledore had been for nothing. How could he be angry at the Headmaster for binding him, when he had bound others? Not wanting to do it was not the same thing as not doing it. He had thought he had some time before he began to possibly compel people with the force of his magic alone, but it seemed he did not. His magic had done that even when itself compelled to obedience by the phoenix web. What was going to happen now that it was free?

He swept his magic around him, wrapping it as close as he could, and then put it to a good use for once, sending himself to a place where compulsion was practiced all the time, and so where he would feel most at home.

He felt Hogwarts' wards against Apparition trying frantically to resist him, but Harry smashed straight through them, his body bending, his mind twisting, and then the room vanishing behind him.

Lucius had only a moment to enjoy his victory before Narcissa's palm connected with his face.

She had chosen the slap carefully, he knew, and had hit him in such a way that the handprint would be highly visible, and red. He had heard the wandless spell she hissed under her breath, and knew the handprint would not fade. Lucius took a stumbling step backwards and touched the handprint. He felt numb. In all the years of their marriage, Narcissa had never hit him this way. It was how a Dark witch marked her husband for doing something savagely, unforgivably stupid. He would wear the marking until she chose to take it off.

Narcissa stepped away from him, eyes wide and brilliant and still. Draco was shattered, staring at the spot where Potter had been, his hands clenched in front of him. His wife moved so that she entirely shielded their son from Lucius's sight. Those brilliant eyes fixed on him.

"I informed Draco about the possibility of his being compelled by Harry's magic months ago," she said, enunciating every word. "He took appropriate steps, and in the end decided that he was free enough to continue being Harry's friend. But he waited to tell Harry until he could find the words. And now you have undone that, Lucius, and possibly upset the fragile mind of a very powerful and very unstable young wizard." She paused, and the silence burned. "Congratulations," she said at last.

Lucius said nothing. He didn't lower his eyes from his wife's, but he didn't say anything, either. He was feeling the backwash of the magic that Potter had used to vanish now, lapping waves of pain and power.

The boy was stronger than any wizard he had ever felt, even the Dark Lord the night before he had gone to destroy the Potter twins. Lucius felt as though he were bathed in roaring black surf. Every part of his body tingled and began to ache the way that usually only his head did when he faced another wizard's unleashed magic.

Lucius began to glimpse, dimly, then, what he had done.

Footsteps sounded down the corridor, and Severus rounded it at a dead run, his wand drawn. He paused when he saw all three Malfoys, but his eyes swept past the two adults and found Draco. "Where is Harry?" he asked bluntly.

"He Apparated," Draco whispered. "Father upset him."

Severus turned and gave Lucius a look that reminded him of the one he had received last year, when Severus had been carrying Potter to the school in his arms. Lucius lifted his head and met the glare. They weren't Death Eaters anymore. There was nothing Severus could do to him.

Then he remembered some half-read rumor in the paper, that Severus had adopted the boy, or chosen to play legal guardian to him for his own obscure reasons.

Severus would have every right to hurt him for hurting the Potter boy.

Lucius felt his head began to ache more fiercely.

"I am not going to kill you," said Severus. "Harry would not like it. I will leave you to contemplate your own stupidity, Lucius, and to explain to the Headmaster what that blast of magic was, when he comes looking. I am going to search for Harry." He turned on his heel and strode away, his robes snapping around him. Draco wriggled out from behind Narcissa and ran after him.

That left Lucius alone with his wife. Narcissa did not move as she stood there, and her eyes never wavered.

"You do not deserve a second chance, Lucius," she said at last, her voice cold and pitiless. "You should have consulted with me the moment the letters began arriving, the moment you noticed that Draco was drawn to Harry by the strength of his magic. You have interfered in your son's friendship and broken *my* word. I promised that no one would hurt Harry or Draco, as long as Draco was sure that this friendship came about of his own free will.

"You do not deserve it, all things considered," she went on thoughtfully, after a pause, "but you will be given it, because you are Draco's father, and my husband, and, as Harry pointed out, his ally by your own actions." She extended a hand.

Lucius stared at her palm. *Dare* he clasp it? He had been humiliated as never before today, and normally he would have been imagining the vengeance he would take on the ones who had done it. Now, however, there was only the thick, cold taste of shame in his throat.

"For once, Lucius," said Narcissa, her voice forceful and serene, "bend your proud neck. I can help you, but only if you let me."

Lucius reached up and clasped her hand.

Harry sat on the bed in the Shrieking Shack and stared at the far wall, while his mind whirled and cut and danced around thoughts that he had never believed he would think.

He could remember, now, the way that Draco had altered his behavior in first year. He had gone from cool and assured on the Express, and even the first few nights after Harry was Sorted into Slytherin, to a devoted friend. And why? He'd had no choice. Even then, Harry had leaned on his mind, woven his own web, used his magic to force out the kinds of reactions he'd wanted from Draco.

And Snape in the first year? Snape was an Occlumens. Harry was sure he could feel the intrusions of the magic on his thoughts and deal with them. That would certainly account for his volatile attitude. But he had mellowed since then, as he became more used to Harry.

Or the magic mellowed him for me.

Harry swallowed a moan. He'd wanted someone to trust, hadn't he? And his magic had provided it for him. His magic would probably try to give him everything he wanted of others, if he let it.

I cannot let it.

Hawthorn, Adalrico, Dumbledore, his parents, Sirius, Remus...how many of his altered relationships were the fault of his magic? How many of the changes in the people around him could be traced back to that? Had he leaned on Sirius's fragile mind and snapped it more? Had he drawn his pureblood allies to him when they would rather have stood with the Dark Lord, who at least represented the world they had always known and the ideals they would more naturally fight for? Had he committed worse crimes than Dumbledore's, through not knowing what he was doing?

His parents...

He had cast *Fugitivus Animus*, a Dark spell, on them almost without thought, solely to ease his own pain, because he wanted to slip out of Hogwarts and die in the middle of his released magic. And he hadn't taken it off since, despite plenty of opportunities to do so. He could have removed it at any time during the summer, at any moment until he left for Hogwarts, at the Quidditch game. Instead, he'd probably only reinforced it when his magic burst free.

And the horrible thing was that he knew that if his parents hadn't been under the influence of the spell, if they had been paying attention to him, he would probably have killed or maimed them.

No matter where I turn, Harry thought, there's no comfort. No matter what I do, I'm going to hurt someone. Snape and Draco might care for me, but I forced them into it. It isn't natural. My magic is entirely unnatural. Dumbledore was right, and Starborn telling me that I could be a leader is laughable. What am I ever going to be but a Lord, cutting people off from their own ambitions and freedom?

His hands clenched, and the Shack abruptly trembled around him as if it would take flight. Harry smoothed down his rage again. He couldn't allow himself to get angry, even if it was at his own stupidity.

So what is left? Suicide?

He contemplated it calmly enough. He had always known that his chances of survival were not great. If he could die in the War to save Connor, then he could surely die by his own hand to keep from influencing people the wrong way. He would rather die than use compulsion. He had said that. He had felt that. Did he mean it?

And then the world turned around and made sense again.

Connor.

Harry's breathing came easier. He couldn't commit suicide. He had to stay alive for his brother's sake. Not only would Connor be left without protection if Harry died, but he would be devastated by grief. Harry winced at the thought of hurting someone else like that.

Are you sure that you didn't compel him to care for you, too?

No, Harry thought, he wasn't. But he thought it unlikely. His and Connor's love for one another had begun in childhood, when the phoenix web was still there to protect other people from unnatural influences. If there was any relationship in Harry's life that was free of the taint of his magic, it was his bond with his brother.

And perhaps...

Harry sat up and breathed out, slowly. He allowed himself to feel hope, and that was painful, but since when had he been afraid of causing pain to himself? Other people's pain was far more to be feared.

Connor has been learning compulsion magic, he thought. He can teach me techniques, I think. He can teach me how to start controlling this, how to limit the influence my magic has on other people.

Because that was the problem, the crux, the heart of the matter, and why he couldn't simply turn back to the phoenix web and the way things had worked in his childhood, Harry finally admitted to himself. Binding his magic only caused more problems. And he knew that Draco and Snape would struggle and argue with him if he tried to do it, because it would

probably take a while before their true personalities returned and they ceased to care about him. He would rather not cause them any more agony than he had to in withdrawing the compulsion.

And there were the promises he had made to Peter, and Snape—even though he had caused some of Snape’s sacrifices, such as his reduced loathing of Sirius, and hadn’t noticed it—and to Remus, to free him of the *Obliviate*. There were the implied promises to the creatures in the Forest, even though he didn’t know what they were yet, and to the Dementors, and to Fawkes.

For all those, he needed his magic.

I can’t bind it, Harry decided, and slid off the bed. I can’t ignore it, the way I have been doing. I have to do the harder thing. I have to face it. I have to learn to use it, the way Starborn suggested I do.

He remembered the story of Falco Parkinson, who had died trying to walk this path through his magic, and what Starborn had said in his letter, that other powerful wizards had died or gone mad trying not to be Lords.

Harry laughed, and was glad to hear that it sounded grim, instead of defeated.

Since when has anything in my life been easy?

But to gain some time and space for the training, and to give Draco and Snape time to recover from what he had done to them, he would have to insure that he parted from them for a while.

Harry knew the perfect way.

Neville let him into Gryffindor Tower with no questions asked, and directed Harry to the third-year boys’ room when he asked after Connor. Harry found his brother there, pretending to work on a Charms essay but actually chattering with Ron. They both fell silent and stared at him.

Harry took a deep breath and met Connor’s eyes. “I promised you once that we would spend all our Christmases together,” he said. “And then I broke that promise last year. This year, I don’t want to. Can I come home with you over Christmas?”

When Connor’s face welled into a smile and he lunged at Harry over the bed, grabbing him in a fierce hug, Harry knew he’d made the right choice.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Two: Christmas With the Potters

Harry wondered idly if it was possible for someone to expire of rage. He supposed he would know in a moment. Snape would either expire of it or finally speak, as he hadn’t since Harry had arrived in his office.

Harry lifted his head and calmly met his guardian’s gaze. Snape didn’t try to use Legilimency on him. He was probably incapable of remembering the incantation right now. Harry waited.

Snape broke.

“You *stupid* boy,” he hissed, lunging up from behind his desk. “What are you *thinking*? You cannot go back to that befouled place yet, let alone for weeks.”

“I’ve made my decision,” said Harry, letting Snape’s words roll off him. This was a mindset he hadn’t summoned in some time, the one in which everything except Connor ceased to matter. He had forgotten how wonderfully clear and simple everything became when he used it. He still felt rage, and regret, but far stronger was the knowledge that he was doing this for everyone else’s own good, even if it was his brother’s that came first. “I know that Draco told you about what his father said.”

“And it was *wrong*,” Snape said.

Harry tilted his head. “I can’t compel other wizards with my magic, then?” It would be good news if it could be true, he

mused. It would shatter the nightmare he'd been living in for the past few days, while he avoided Draco and Snape as much as possible and brooded on Lucius's words. Snape had finally managed to corner him and command him to his office. Harry didn't think he had done it in order to wake him up from the nightmare, though.

"You can," said Snape, "but I have not been compelled."

Harry shook his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't believe you."

Snape took one long step towards him. Harry went on observing. He wasn't afraid. He didn't feel much of anything, except determination. It was obvious that Snape needed far more time away from him than Harry had thought he did. The claws of his magic were hooked deeply into him.

"I am an Occlumens," said Snape. "Did you think I would not have felt it, Harry?" He was trying to change things back to the way they had been, using his first name, Harry realized. The magic was probably making him do it. Harry's magic obeyed even his unconscious wishes, and Harry really did wish for a waking from the nightmare. It would not happen. He knew that now.

"I think you did feel it first year, sir," said Harry. "And then matters changed. I remember the way that you felt you had to protect me after Tom Riddle's attack."

"Do you remember what Tom Riddle did to your mind?" Snape sounded as if he would start snarling any second. Harry wondered if he should call Remus in. He and Snape could compare ferocious noises.

"Of course I do, sir," said Harry. "That's why everything changed. But my magic was influencing people even under the phoenix web. Draco was changed. You were changed. It just took longer to work on you, since you had the protection of your mental shields." He sighed. "I'm sorry. I would have stopped it if I knew how to control it. I would stop it *now* if I knew how to control it."

Snape mastered himself with a visible effort. "Harry," he said.

Harry nodded to show he was listening.

"What do you believe would happen if you were suddenly to remove your compulsion from me?" Snape asked. He was leaning forward, his eyes intent on Harry's.

"You would go back to being your normal self, sir," said Harry. "The man you were before I enslaved you."

Snape's voice came out low and cold, the sign of his true anger. "I know what slavery feels like, Harry." He touched his left arm, and the Dark Mark hidden on it. "And you did not enslave me."

"But that's why it's so insidious, sir," said Harry. He was a bit confused. Snape must have read up on the theories of powerful wizards compelling others to follow them from the sheer strength of their magic. He'd been around Voldemort and Dumbledore, both. He would have felt it, from both of them. Why he should refuse to believe that Harry had done it was a mystery. "You didn't notice it. It crept into your mind and your thoughts, and bound you. Even now, it binds you. You think you feel affection for me. You don't, not really." Those words still hurt to say, as they hurt to think, but that was part of the point. Every time Harry thought he had caused himself pain, he remembered that he had caused other people far more.

"I will thank you not to tell me how I feel, Harry," said Snape, and his eyes narrowed further. "You have done a disservice, to me, to yourself, and to Draco. Have you listened to him at all when he tries to speak to you?"

"I did tell him that I was going home for Christmas, sir," Harry said. "He had a screaming fit at me."

Screaming fit was too mild a term for what had happened with Draco, really. Harry had not really wanted to know that Draco thought all those things about his parents and Connor. For a Malfoy, Draco had an extraordinarily foul mouth. Harry thought now that he might have learned those terms from his mother.

"Draco has been to see me," said Snape, and paced one more step forward. Harry was craning his neck back to look up at him. That was all right. He could do this. When he came back after Christmas, Snape would already have noticed the difference, and probably have strengthened his Occlumency shields against the compulsion creeping in again. "He says that he knew about the compulsion beforehand, and that he had already decided to stay friends with you."

“Yes, he told me that, too,” said Harry, unmoved.

“And?” Snape probed, his eyes glittering.

Harry shrugged. “The compulsion’s feeding on him, too. He thinks he feels all these things that he really doesn’t. He thinks he made the decision to stay my friend, but he really had it made for him.”

Snape ground his teeth. “And how, Mr. Potter, do you know that, when you have admitted that you do not know how deep your compulsion runs?”

Harry smiled. He knew it was a sad smile. Most of his smiles were, lately. Connor hadn’t been able to understand why. He’d even seemed pleased that Harry had a gift so similar to his own. “Don’t you see, Professor? *I can’t take the chance*. I have to get away from you for a little while. If your feelings for me change noticeably—and I think they will—then I know that they were the result of my compulsion. But I can’t know that until I test it.”

“And if they do not change?” Snape asked harshly.

Harry let his breath out. “I don’t understand,” he whispered. “As you said, you know what slavery feels like. Why would you want to risk being enslaved if you stay near me? My compulsion could be unusually powerful or far-reaching. It may make some decisions for you and not others. It might influence you on some things and not others. The most horrible part of this is that I can’t ever be sure, and there isn’t one solution that will fix it all. Why would you want to take the chance that you’re being compelled, even if you’re absolutely sure you aren’t?”

Snape moved. Harry had expected the man to stride back behind his desk, or perhaps even raise his wand and unleash a hex, but he knelt down in front of Harry instead. Harry eyed him warily. Snape’s hands twitched, but he made no move to touch Harry, instead gazing at him evenly.

“Harry,” he said softly. “I choose to risk it. When I change my mind about that, you will be the first to know. I chose to help you rebuild your mind. I chose to become your guardian. I chose to teach you the Potions knowledge that you requested from me. Every choice I have made concerning you since at least the end of last year has been motivated by compassion and admiration and, yes, affection for you. I am absolutely sure of that. I know what slavery feels like. *This is not it.*”

Harry fought to control his own trembling. He tried as hard as he could not to feel anything, not to respond to Snape’s declaration. If he did that, then his magic might reach out and compel Snape to recite more of the same words.

Of course, it might do that anyway, responding to wishes that Harry didn’t even know he had.

How could he trust himself, ever again?

“Stay here,” Snape whispered. It seemed as though the words were choking him. “Do not go to your parents for Christmas. You deserve more than a house full of cheer that does not include you, and parents who will ignore you, or injure you if they ever see you again.” He closed his eyes, and held still for a long moment. Harry wondered what was coming. Then Snape forced it out. “Please.”

He wouldn’t have said that. The magic made him.

I’m compelling him just by standing in the same room with him.

Harry fled.

“Harry.”

Harry sighed and tucked an arm around his head. Fawkes, who was sitting with his own head beneath his wing on the foot of the bed, gave a sleepy chirp and huddled down further, fluffing out the feathers on his breast.

The curtains opened, and Draco was there. Harry didn’t have to look at him to know he would have his wand out, glowing with *Lumos*. Draco had been very, very persistent since Lucius’s visit. He didn’t seem to understand that Harry was trying to give him space to grow his own personality back. He kept insisting that he knew what he wanted, and Harry had no right to take it away from him.

Harry wanted, desperately, fiercely, to believe him, but how could he?

Draco sat down on the bed beside him this time, and said his name again. Harry waited for the hand that would shake his shoulder and force him to face his friend—his compelled friend, his tamed pet, his *something*. He felt even worse about what he'd done to Draco than Snape. Snape had resisted the compulsion for a whole year, and Harry also thought he would recover faster. Draco had been under Harry's influence for two and a half years. Harry had deprived him of the person he could have become, the other friends he could have had, the interests and hobbies he might have developed out of Harry's shadow. Guilt writhed like snakes in his belly whenever he thought about it.

Snakes. Sylarana. Oh Merlin, did I compel her too?

"Fine," said Draco, his voice exhausted. "Just listen, then. I have something to tell you, Harry."

Harry did not see what it could be. Draco had already told Harry that he'd known about the compulsion in September, that his mother had sent him books on how to resist it, that he had made his own decisions and renewed his friendship with Harry out of his own free will. Harry did not believe it. Draco had still been too close to him when he was making that decision. And perhaps he might even have fought free, but then Harry had reached out, greedily, selfishly, and dragged him back into the charmed circle.

How many mistakes have I made? The sooner I can get some training from Connor, the better. Connor had already shown him how to concentrate and focus inward, pulling in his will until he barely leaned on the world at all. Harry didn't know how well that would work when all of his magic and not just one specific part of it wanted to change people's minds, but he was hopeful. If he could get away from Hogwarts, then he might even stop wanting so much. He already knew where he stood with his parents and Remus and Connor. He shouldn't want to alter their behavior.

"Harry," Draco whispered, and then his hand stroked Harry's hair. It felt good. Harry did not want to let it. He closed his eyes, trying his best to withdraw his will from Draco. But the voice followed him into the darkness, even as Harry dived, spinning and cutting among the portions of his mind he'd rebuilt in May.

"I didn't even know about you until I met you on the Hogwarts Express," said Draco. "And then I felt your magic. I felt it as pain, the way that Malfoys always have. I thought you were the Boy-Who-Lived at first, and that you and Connor were playing a joke on me. It wasn't until you named yourself that I realized I was wrong." He hesitated, as though about to say something else, but then went on.

Harry tried to focus on the bridges of magic he'd created across the gulf of his thoughts. He had controlled his own thoughts last year, when he fought Tom Riddle—almost exactly a year ago, now. He ought to be able to confine his magic to himself again, if he really tried. Not bind it forever, certainly, but direct it more specifically than he had so far. Then he would only do what he wanted to do with it.

"I felt so betrayed when I thought you had compelled me all the time, that our friendship was a lie," Draco whispered.

Harry hunched, and then forced himself to lie still and breathe calmly. If he felt too hurt, then he would probably try to soothe the hurt, and that would involve compelling Draco to do things he hadn't agreed to. Breathe slowly and deeply. That was it.

"And then I realized that it didn't matter," Draco said. "There are things in our friendship that couldn't have been compulsion, Harry. *Think* about it. You saved my life in our first year. You gave me back the life debt, and I used it to force you to do something you didn't want to do, visiting my family at Christmas. I asked you again and again for the full story of what happened with the Dark Lord at the end of first year, and you never gave it to me. You drove me from your mind last year the moment you felt you didn't need my any longer, and I had no ill effects from that. You let me go with you into the Chamber last year even though you didn't want to, and you could have easily forced me to stay behind. And then this year you've saved my life again and then defended me from my father when you thought I needed it." He paused, as if to draw breath. "There's too much there, Harry. I won't let you dismiss it. And I won't dismiss it, no matter what you think. Even if I find my feelings changing when you leave Hogwarts, I don't care. I'll still be here when you come back, because of that too much. You can't end this friendship because you feel guilty. It's not only yours to end."

Harry wondered dismally why his magic liked yanking affectionate speeches out of people.

Because you want affection, of course. You felt used by your family when the phoenix web lifted. But you could have managed to win affection the normal way, instead of compelling it. That's the way normal wizards would have done it.

“And if you come back from your Christmas broken,” Draco whispered, “I swear to Merlin that I’ll pick you up and put you back together again.”

Harry didn’t let himself listen. He would turn around if he did.

Draco eventually went back to his bed, and Harry rolled over again and stared at the closing gap in the curtains where he had been. What scared him most wasn’t the declaration itself. He could have expected that Draco would make a declaration like that. The magic was quite capable of getting anything it wanted—or he wanted. That was the more accurate depiction.

What scared him was the calm determination behind Draco’s words. Compelled or not, Harry thought it might be a match for his own.

Snape ate his breakfast in silence that morning, and watched Black drink the last dose of empathy potion he would have for a time with much less than the usual good humor he felt at the sight. Black and Lupin were going to be in the same house as Harry for weeks at a time.

Snape knew he could have forced the issue. He could have used his legal authority as guardian to make Harry stay.

And that would have shattered his relationship with Harry far more effectively than Lucius’s words had.

Snape put down his fork and sighed. He could do nothing. He hated being helpless, and he especially hated to be helpless in the matter of Harry. The boy had suffered enough, and he was going back into the house with the people who had caused the majority of that suffering.

No, he thought, as he watched Black. There is one thing I can do.

“Black,” he said.

The man started, slopping pumpkin juice all over his hand, and turned towards him. He really did look bad, Snape thought clinically. His skin was nearly pasty white now, and the circles beneath his eyes looked like bruises. Had he not done what he had done to Harry, Snape might even have been persuaded to care.

“I know that you are going to Godric’s Hollow with Harry,” he said. “If you do something to hurt him, be assured I will find out. And then I will hunt you down and kill you.”

Black stared at him for a moment. Then he said, “You would go to Azkaban.”

“I don’t care,” said Snape. “I will torture you before I kill you—one hour for every year I expect to spend in Azkaban. It cannot make up for what you have done to Harry, but be assured, it would satisfy *me*. And the torture would make what your brother suffered at Voldemort’s hands look kind.”

Black gave a stifled cry at the mention of Regulus. He clenched his hand beneath the table, then said, “I could tell Albus that you threatened me, and he would—“

“He would do nothing,” said Snape. “Not when he needs me.”

“Potions Masters can be replaced,” said Black.

Snape snorted. “You are a fool if you think that is all he needs me for. And a threat is only a threat, Black.” He held the other man’s eyes and lowered his voice until he was sure that every word was burning past Black’s ears. “It need not become real unless you take some action yourself. Remember. Any torture you inflict is cause for your own death by torture.”

Black stared at him with wide eyes. Then he stood and bolted out of the room.

Snape leaned back in his chair, and avoided Albus’s inquisitive gaze. He brooded on Harry instead, sitting at the end of the Slytherin table and ignoring every attempt from his Housemates to initiate a conversation.

I let him go into danger, in the knowledge that holding him back would be worse.

Is this what all parents feel about their children?

So far, Harry thought, stretched out on the couch in front of the fireplace but posed to shift if one of their parents should come over and try to sit down on him, Christmas with his family had been all right.

His parents ignored him utterly, of course, and Sirius did much the same thing, as though he had gone back to being under *Fugitivus Animus*. Harry had his suspicions about that, since he had seen Sirius flee the Great Hall soon after Snape spoke to him on their last morning at Hogwarts, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was making a great effort not to even think about Snape, so that his magic wouldn't decide that he needed the Potions Master and try to compel his feelings again.

But Harry had Connor's attention, and that was always glorious. Connor spent many hours working with Harry on training his compulsion, showing him the calming process he'd learned from Sirius, and how to aim his will and push it out towards a single target, rather than simply spread it out and let it dangle in the air. And he spent many hours with Harry when he didn't have to, when their parents would have been happy to speak with him or play with him or pamper him silly. They talked about the history Connor was learning, and Quidditch, and Connor had already promised that Harry would get a few of his Christmas gifts, since Lily and James didn't think to buy him any.

Couldn't think to buy him any, Harry told himself firmly. He always wanted to remember whose fault this was. Forget who was to blame, and he stood a good chance of turning into one of the compellers Connor had warned him solemnly about, the ones who simply used their gifts to order everyone around because they thought it was their *right* to do that, by virtue of being born with the magic. Compellers had to be careful of their impact on the world, Connor had said earnestly. That was why it had been such a relief to him to find out that his gift was of the Light from Griphook Fishbaggin's book. That meant he would never have to worry about the impact he made.

Harry knew he couldn't be assured of such prophesized status himself, so he was concentrating. And he thought it worked. The first day he was home, a bit of bread had skimmed out of the kitchen and into his hand when he was barely aware he was hungry. Now, on Christmas Eve, he really had to concentrate to summon the simplest of objects, and his magic certainly wasn't attending to his subconscious desires.

That you can tell.

There was always that, of course. Nevertheless, Harry thought he had a right to be cautiously pleased.

"Harry? Can I talk to you?"

Harry blinked and put down his book, which was a review of wizarding history he already knew but wanted to brush up on, this time playing special attention to the role that Lords had played. "Sure, Remus," he said, shifting his legs aside so that the werewolf could sit down on the couch opposite him. Remus was shaking, and Harry studied him carefully. "Do you need more Wolfsbane?"

Remus shook his head tightly. The full moon was still a few days away, Harry remembered then. *Silly of me to forget*. He smiled apologetically and sat up. "What is it?" he asked, when Remus kept silent.

Remus flattened his hands in front of him. "I think you should know why I refused to let you remove the *Obliviate*," he said.

Harry felt his insides curl up and freeze. He didn't want to talk about anything associated with Hogwarts here—

But of course he couldn't escape it, not when Connor's every second conversation with their parents was about that. And he had promised to help Remus heal. It was progress, that he was willing to talk about this. Harry made himself nod.

"Tell me," he said gently, and tried not to reflect how much he sounded like their mum when she was coaxing some small envy or petty hurt out of him.

Remus let out a breath. "Do you know how close I came to killing Severus, when Sirius played that prank?" he asked.

Harry jerked at the mention of Snape, and then forced his body still when Remus gave him a curious glance. Neither Sirius nor Remus—nor Connor, for that matter—knew about his changed relationship with Snape, or the reason that Harry had come to Godric's Hollow for the holidays instead of staying with him. And Harry didn't want them finding out, either.

Of course, blessed with a werewolf's nose, Remus was sniffing. "Why do you smell so fearful, Harry?" he asked gently.

"We weren't talking about me," said Harry. "We were talking about you."

It was a clumsy maneuver, but he had thought that Remus must really want to talk about this in order to seek him out, and that meant he was vulnerable to distraction. It turned out to be true. Remus's face clouded, and he gave a difficult nod.

"Of course we were," said Remus. "Do you know how close I came?"

Harry shook his head. "No. Dad only ever explained about the prank in its bare outlines, and how he saved Snape's life, and how Snape owes him a life debt for it." He could speak the words calmly, including his guardian's name, he thought. He could. See? He had just done it.

"Very close," Remus whispered. "And I still remember the anger that filled me, that savage, mindless bloodlust to kill and kill. I know it affected Severus too, of course, but it left its mark on the beast in me. At the full moon, in the brief moment when I change and before the Wolfsbane Potion lets me get control back, the beast wakes up and remembers that moment."

"Why?" Harry asked, puzzled. Remus had transformed dozens of times in his life by now. Why would that one transformation matter so much?

Remus smiled grimly. "Because," he said, "Severus got away. The beast never wants anyone to get away."

Harry swallowed. Remus nodded. His face was calm, but his eyes were burning.

"There is no compromise with this *thing* in me, Harry," he said. "Understand. I'm not a wolf. I'm a *werewolf*. This is a disease. A curse."

"I knew that," Harry whispered.

"Yes, but you don't understand," said Remus. "Fenrir Greyback bit me as a child. Do you know why he likes to bite children?"

"To punish their families," said Harry, remembering that part of the history of the First War.

"Only partially," said Remus quietly. "Many bitten children die, but if we survive, we adapt differently to the curse, since we took it into our bodies so young. The beast's rage becomes ours. When we get angry, we get angry the way a werewolf would." He took a deep breath and spread one hand in front of him. "I'm not rational when I'm in a rage, Harry. I've been tempted to bite people before."

He met Harry's eyes directly. "And since I know I would be angry when I found out the memories behind the *Obliviate*, I don't want it removed. I would essentially be a werewolf without the transformation." He leaned forward. "Can you imagine being that angry with your own friends, Harry? I don't *want* to. I know that there would be no going back once I learned what they did to you. And it would be because of me, not them. They may have done unforgivable things, but I would do unforgivable things, too, in my anger."

Harry shuddered as he remembered the cold, black, *silent* rage that had welled out of him in the Chamber of Secrets. Remus was wrong. Harry understood all too well. He had his own curse, though as far as he knew, there was no potion that could aid him in controlling it.

"But, at the same time," Remus whispered, "I want to know. I look at Sirius and James and Lily, and it's like I don't know them at all anymore. I wonder what's behind the masks."

Harry said nothing. He didn't know what he *could* say. Remus was the one who had to make this decision. Harry couldn't make it for him—wouldn't make it for him, not if someone told him he had to make it or die. He had said he would rather die than compel someone else.

Yes, I do mean it, he realized, in a rush of wonder and relief. He hadn't been sure that he did.

"I know Lily was a good woman," Remus whispered. "I know that Sirius and James were good men. But *were, were, were*. I don't know if they really are the people I thought they were anymore." He smiled grimly. "And I think I'm most terrified of discovering they never were the people I thought they were."

“Remus,” Harry asked, because he had to ask, “why did you stand aside and let Peter go to Azkaban, knowing he was innocent? And why did you never tell me the truth?”

“At first?” Remus asked lowly. “Because Albus asked, and I trusted him. And I saw Sirius after the spell finally broke and Regulus died. He looked worse than now. I spent days with him in a room while he screamed, nights with him while he had nightmare after nightmare. He wanted to forget, to let the whole thing die, to let Regulus pass out of memory. And I was willing to give him anything he wanted, to enable myself to forget his suffering.”

“What about Peter?” Harry asked. He knew his voice was sharpening towards accusation, but it was okay to let it, he assured himself. He was angry on someone else’s behalf, and not his own.

“I never valued him as much as the others,” said Remus. Though his voice obviously scraped his throat, he admitted it readily. This was an ugly fact he had made his peace with a long time ago, Harry realized. “James, Sirius, me—we were the close friends. Peter was the sidekick, the tagalong. We all felt that way. I don’t think we ever realized it until Albus tested us, but we did.”

Harry looked aside. He didn’t know what to say, again. No wonder it had been easy for Voldemort to believe that Peter was sick of being in his friends’ shadows, he thought. It might even have been partially true.

“I know that I’ll have to come to my own decisions, and you have to come to your own,” said Remus, placing one hand on Harry’s shoulder as he rose. “But I wanted you to know that I’m afraid of my own anger. It’s cowardice, Harry, but it’s a specific *kind* of cowardice.” For a moment, his smile flashed, knowing, self-deprecating, more like the old Remus.

Then it vanished, and he limped from the room.

Harry spent the rest of that afternoon on the couch, since no one else insisted on coming over and sitting down, and Connor was playing some game with Sirius that made his laughter scatter around the house like butterflies. He thought about what Remus had said about making his own decisions.

He thought of something he could do near the evening.

Thoughts chased themselves around his head as he considered it.

Do you really want to do it? Are you sure?

But no matter what objections he came up with, they always slammed straight into the inflexible barrier of his principles. It didn’t matter if he wanted to do it or not. He had said that he would die before he used compulsion. He wanted to work to undo it. He couldn’t do it with Remus, because Remus had to choose, and had the ability to choose, now that he knew he was missing memories.

But there were others in the house whom Harry had compelled, directly, and who would not get a chance to choose.

And Harry was tired—tired of being alone except for his twin and Remus, tired of not having a parent except one whom he had magically compelled in one way or another.

He missed his mum.

He stood up, slowly, at last, and when dinner was finished, he went into the kitchen. Lily was alone there, charming the dishes to zip around and clean themselves. Harry could hear laughter from upstairs, where Sirius and Connor had now pulled James into the game, which seemed to be a card game, from the sound of it. Remus had already gone home; the fatigue of the approaching full moon had been affecting him. Besides, he’d joked, he wanted to be ready for Christmas the next morning.

Harry took a deep breath, and listened for a long moment. Laughter, and soft music from the WWN in the other room, and his mother’s voice lifting in small breathy snatches of melody as she sang along with it.

He didn’t draw his wand, because he thought he should end this the same way he had started it. He focused all his will, and raised his power to the level it had been when he left the Chamber of Secrets, and whispered, “*Finite Incantatem.*”

He felt the snapping and parting of the *Fugitivus Animus* from Lily’s mind. Her thoughts brightened, sharpened, shifted.

Then she froze.

The dishes hovered in place for a moment. Lily at last made a jerky gesture, and they clattered back onto the table and the counter. She stood in silence for another moment more, and her breathing matched Harry's in rapidity. Harry thought her heartbeat probably did, too, though he couldn't hear hers.

Then, slowly, inch by inch, she turned to face him, until a pair of wide green eyes were staring at him, the twins of his own.

"Hi, Mum," said Harry softly.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Three: Harry And His Mother Have a Little Chat

Things fell and shifted and crashed into place in Lily's mind, and she knew, now, what had sometimes made her pause in the last months and question her own sanity, that she had a sense of a person missing from the family.

Someone *had* been missing from the family. Someone who had just announced his return by lifting the spells that had obscured her memory of him.

Lily met her son's eyes, and saw the power that burned there, unbound. Harry might think he was shielding everyone else from the effects of his magic, but he wasn't, not really. Fear waited to tear Lily apart if she thought about it, heart-rending, soul-shrinking fear.

But the Headmaster had sent her a letter months ago, one that Lily had kept in spite of not knowing what it referred to. It had two lines on it. One was six words long.

The other said simply *You will know what to do with this when the time comes.*

And she did know what to do with it, Lily found, as she stared back at Harry. It would hurt to do it, but she would do it anyway. It was only one more sacrifice in a long string of them.

I am not, Lily thought, as she stared at her elder son, the son with her eyes and her soul, *any stranger to sacrifices.*

Harry waited. His mother only went on looking at him, as though she didn't know whether to hug him or burst into tears or lunge away in terror. Harry hoped it wouldn't be that last, but he feared it would be.

He couldn't speak, himself. The memories overwhelmed him. *This* was his mother, the woman who had trained him and given him purpose in life and made him so much of what he was, the aspects of his personality he had told Snape coddling him like a child would not change. She had hurt him. He could acknowledge that, even feel it. She had not done things the best way.

But she had taught him the meaning of sacrifice, and of facing war without flinching. That was the real reason Harry had wanted her back, so that he could look into her eyes and know that at least one other person understood what he had given up. Oh, Snape and Draco *tried*, but they could only glimpse memories before becoming upset (though he had probably compelled their anger and horror, too). Lily had been there with him all along. Hurt or no hurt, she understood him as no one else in the world would ever do.

And she had been a Gryffindor, and had made a decision to sacrifice her own child, perhaps both of them, if Connor had not stopped Voldemort that night. She was no stranger to courage. She took a deep breath now, and stepped away from the counter, all the time keeping her eyes on his face.

"Hello, Harry," she said.

Harry tucked all the emotions that wanted to burst out of him behind a calm mask. He wasn't entirely sure what would happen if he let them go now. *A storm of laughter or a storm of tears, maybe.* He took a deep breath in turn. "I suppose you're wondering what I did to you," he said.

"I do wonder what specific spell you used, yes." Lily's voice was as calm as his.

“*Fugitivus Animus*,” said Harry. “On both you and Father. Sirius broke it months ago, but that’s only because he has the compulsion gift.”

Lily’s eyes widened for a moment. Then they narrowed. “Dark magic?” she whispered. “Oh, Harry, I would have hoped you knew better.”

Harry clasped his hands together behind his back. They writhed and twisted, and he wished Sylarana were with him, to do something that would soothe or drain away the intense feelings running through him. It was like having a river just under the surface of his skin.

“I know,” he said. “But I wanted to use it. I was frightened that I would hurt you if you didn’t ignore me, if you tried to talk to me, if you tried to hurt me as you had been doing.”

Lily shook her head. “I thought you would have understood that any pain you went through was for Connor’s sake,” she said.

Harry swallowed. Then he swallowed again, and when he was sure he would speak words and not a spell, said, “Even the pain of the phoenix web?”

Lily jerked as if he’d hit her, but nodded. “Yes,” she said. “You must know the circumstances of how you received the web now, if you’re able to think so independently of it. You know that you consented, and that we did it because we were afraid for Connor’s life.”

Harry shook his head. “When we were *four*?”

“Yes,” said Lily. “Your magic is unnatural, Harry, unnatural in its strength and the way it kept growing. We tried other bindings, and none of them worked. The magic shrugged them all off.” She closed her eyes, and the memory of bitterness was in her face and her voice. “We lived in terror daily, waiting for the moment when you would turn on us.”

“But I didn’t,” Harry whispered.

“You were bound before you could,” Lily corrected him.

Harry swallowed, and swallowed, and swallowed. “Why did you think I was like Voldemort?” He didn’t realize the question was welling up his throat before he asked it. “Why not like Dumbledore?”

“Because your magic grew the way it did,” said Lily softly. “You were siphoning off something else, Harry. Your magic came from some other source. It was the only explanation for the way it increased. Who knew when you would turn and start siphoning off us?” She closed her eyes. “It was like living with a vampire. I told Albus it was like living with a tiger, but a tiger only tears you limb from limb. A vampire *feeds*. Maybe you were even feeding from Connor. We didn’t know. We couldn’t tell.”

Harry watched from the back of his mind while his thoughts reeled, as though someone had punched him in the solar plexus. He’d surrounded himself with a thick layer of fuzz and shock to keep from going completely mad at once.

Wonderful. Something else I can’t control. Not only do I compel other wizards, I feed from them. Did even Voldemort do that?

“I’ve never felt myself doing it,” he managed to say. The words crawled over the jumbled shards of sanity in his throat. “I don’t think I did it.”

“But you could have,” said Lily, and in her eyes was the same terror that looked back at Harry from the mirror, when he bothered to confront it. “How could anyone ever know? So we bound you. We needed a secure future for Connor, Harry. Surely you can understand. You were made part of securing that future, instead of threatening it.”

Harry felt the deep surge in his soul, the recognition, as the words touched the bit of the phoenix web that was left to him. He *had* trained to defend Connor. That had been his whole life until he went to Hogwarts. How could he dispute what Lily was saying? Wouldn’t he have urged them to put the web on him, if he had known this about himself and understood the issues involved?

He swallowed. “You could have told me when I was old enough,” he said. “Asked me if I wanted the web when I really

understood it.”

Why am I complaining?

But he knew the answer. It was the same reason he had lifted the *Fugitivus Animus* spell from Lily instead of simply letting her remain under it. A false peace was no peace at all. The kind of progress he could achieve with his mother ignoring him was nothing to the progress he could achieve if she backed him. And while he could work through the answers on his own, perhaps, fumble and stumble until he was finally as loyal to Connor as he had ever been, he wanted her to tell him. She had always reassured him before this. She must have the answers to this, too. He would drag out all the questions and have her answer them once and for all. Then he need never trouble with it again.

“We could not have,” said Lily. “And four *was* old enough, Harry. Not for other children, but for you.”

I want Sylarana. I want Connor. I want Draco. I want this to end.

But it would not end until he reached the end of it, until he’d heard everything, so Harry asked, “Why did you decide to train me into Connor’s guardian, then? Was that another way of binding me? I know the training started even before the phoenix web was cast.”

Lily shook her head. “That was the prophecy,” she said. “The prophecy said that you were to play your destined role as Connor’s guide and guardian. He needed someone to shield him. He needed someone who would *always* love him, no matter what happened, no matter what he might do. And we determined that that person was to be you.”

Harry frowned. He debated not asking about the uncertainty that had just burst into his mind, but then it would just pop up again at some point, and he wanted this done with. He asked. “If the prophecy bound me to a certain future as Connor’s guardian, then it should have happened anyway, whether or not you trained me as a weapon or to love him. And you shouldn’t have needed the phoenix web. You knew that Connor had to live to defeat Voldemort, and I had to guard him until then, not drain his power.”

The terror in Lily’s eyes deepened exponentially. Harry blinked at her. *Why would she fear me knowing about this thing? Why would she fear it more than my having my magic unbound?*

“Harry,” Lily whispered, “I never thought of it that way before.”

Harry felt his eyes freeze. “What?”

Lily was staring past him at the wall. “How could I have?” she asked, and Harry had the feeling that she was talking to herself now. “I never—I never thought to *ask* how true the prophecy was. I just trusted Albus’s word that it would come true, but that we all had to do our parts to make it come true the right way. And that sometimes prophecies are tricky, and it might actually let something bad happen to Connor while still letting him defeat Voldemort. Why did I never think about the contradiction between the wording and what we needed to do?” She stared at the floor. “I was so sure that you would hurt Connor, and you could have, and we were reeling from the War, but I...I never phrased it to myself like that. I just never.” She hunched and stared at her hands without finishing the last sentence.

Harry took a step forward. He could feel himself quivering. His eyes stung as though dust had got into them, which he did not understand, but he was not going to worry about the sensation, not when his mother was in front of him speaking words he had never thought he would hear. “What?”

Lily’s face was wizened with sorrow. “Oh, Merlin,” she said, and Harry could barely hear her. “What have I done? What have I done to one of my children, in the name of war?”

A deep richness filled Harry’s chest, and somewhere within him, a pain he hadn’t realized he was feeling stopped. “What?” he whispered again.

Lily began to cry. She did it silently, and Harry knew the shudders that shook her were real, that the disgust and fear behind her shaking shoulders was real, that the way her voice trembled when she finally managed to speak was real. “I d-didn’t, oh, Harry, oh in the name of *magic*.” She had her head in her hands now, and the words sounded as though someone were tearing them out of her throat with a fishhook. “What have I done? What have I *done*?”

Harry put his hands up in front of his eyes. His own fingers shook against his skin. He had a headache. He swallowed again and again, and tried to remind himself of what Snape had said—that this was a befouled place, that he could not trust his

mother.

This was his mother.

Yes, she is, he thought, and forced himself to speak again. “Mother, are you—are you sorry for what you did?”

“Yes,” said Lily, and the word broke halfway through the middle into a huge, gasping sob. “I, I can’t believe, such a blind fool, what the *fuck* was I thinking, oh Harry. Apologies aren’t enough.” She abruptly plunged a hand into her robe pocket and drew out her wand, lifting it towards her own temple.

Harry lunged forward, catching her wrist. Lily stared up at him, much smaller than he ever remembered her being, bleeding in heart if not in body, and terribly, terribly vulnerable. Harry knew that he could unleash the full force of his temper on her now, and she would never recover. Snape certainly would have urged him to do so.

Snape is more vengeful than I will ever be.

“What were you going to do?” he whispered.

“Kill myself,” said Lily, her voice utterly flat. “I know that an *Avada Kedavra* is deadly from this close.” She laughed, and the sound rattled in Harry’s ears like bones bouncing off rocks. “I certainly had enough chances to see that in this war I’ve sacrificed everything in the name of, didn’t I?”

Harry found himself able to breathe again. A soaring feeling filled his chest, as though he were in flight and aiming straight towards the sun.

She’s my mother. And she loves me. And she’s sorry.

“Don’t,” he said. “It would be too easy. And think about the way it would hurt Connor. And me,” he was able to say, and it was without guilt for the first time in his life. “You have to stay here and face what you’ve done.”

Lily’s face had had little color left. Now it washed completely, and left her eyes shining in her face like a werewolf’s through the darkness. “Everything?” she whispered.

“Everything,” Harry confirmed. His tongue felt thick and heavy, and he groped for words. His heartbeat sounded in his ears, the door of a sepulcher closed over and over. “The sacrifices you demanded of me, the sacrifices you demanded of Peter, the sacrifices you demanded of Connor. He doesn’t know anything about this. He should have known long ago. I should have told him, but so should you. We have to tell him why I made you and Dad forget me. We have to tell him that I’ve been guarding him. Everything. *Everything.*”

He could have been standing on a field at sunrise, with a cool breeze from the east fanning his face. That complete was his hope, his joy, his feeling of sweetness.

It will take a lot of work, but... things are going to be all right. Things are really going to be all right. I’ll have a family again. Mum will apologize for her mistakes. We’ll endure Connor’s anger, and get past it, and Dad’s fear of himself, and get past it. We’ll help Sirius and Remus. We’ll be a family again.

Remus. I have to tell him that he was right about Mum, that she really is a good woman, that she would die before harming one of her children.

Harry felt his mother nod. It was a tiny, fragile moment, but he held her eyes, and silently challenged her to make it again.

She did.

Harry felt as though his heart would burst. It was too much for him to comprehend, that he was going to have something so much better than what he’d dared to look for. He would have peace. He would not have to worry any longer about training his magic, because his mother would help him train it. She had come up with a kind of complicated training that a child could still master, and increased it in complexity every year, so that he had gradually learned it, never pushing him too fast. She was a natural teacher. She could help him learn to control his compulsive and his feeding magic, too.

There’s so much that’s good in the world, he thought in wonder.

“Harry,” Lily whispered. “I don’t know how you can ever accept all the apologies I want to give.”

“I’ll manage,” said Harry, smiling ridiculously and not caring who saw it. “Come on.” He hugged her close. “Do you think you can stand up and make it up the stairs to Connor and Dad and Sirius?”

“Yes,” Lily said, and gave a half-choked laugh. “Why not? I’ve done so much. Why not this?”

Harry laughed aloud, and then helped her stand up. He looked up at her, and knew that his eyes were shining. Hers were shadowed, but that was only to be expected.

Then he heard what she was saying.

“*Expleo penuriam cum tex—*“

She was trying to cast the phoenix web on him again.

After saying she understood. After saying she would try. After.

Realization crashed home. Harry felt the image of his beloved mother shatter into six pieces, into six thousand, into six million. She was gone, the woman who had done only what she thought best, the woman who had trained him out of concern for the fate of the world, the woman who had loved him.

She would never do this. Not if she loved me.

Lance to a boil, mercy cut to a throat, final and absolute betrayal of trust. Perhaps Harry was an evil person for thinking so, but he was not capable of forgiving her for this.

“—tura! *Phoenix texturae!*”

The spell came at him and bounced. Harry’s magic was hovering in front of him, spread over him like enormous, shimmering wings. Of course the spell bounced. He was not going to let himself be bound, not ever again.

Harry looked at his mother, and felt the insanity rise, shrieking. Her eyes were wide with terror again, and he could do it. He could strike. He could deprive her of life, and how she deserved it for what she had done to him, how she—

No.

Harry seized control of the insanity. *He* was master here, not his rage. He kept saying so. It was time he proved it.

No one to demonstrate it to, this time, except himself.

And he did have a way of demonstrating it.

Harry took a deep breath, grasped his thoughts, and *forced* them into the channels that he had worked so hard to learn, the channels of pureblood ritual and tradition. Such a response would have been natural to a wizard raised in a pureblood home. Harry hadn’t been, but he had studied until he could dance in his sleep.

And there was a dance for this. There was a dance for most everything.

He put out a hand. He was not sure that the item he wanted would come to him. For all he knew, James’s grandparents might have destroyed it. Or perhaps his parents’ ignorance of him for the last six months and his legal guardianship by Snape would confuse the thing.

Then I’ll create one, he thought, and the thoughts rose and echoed from a vast silence within him, which matched the silence in the kitchen. *But, for now, I want it.*

And then it was there, slamming into being, settling into his palm very delicately for an item that had been called from Merlin knew how many miles away. Harry studied it for a long moment. As he had expected, it was a simple box, the sides made of rowan wood, with a silver lid. On the lid was engraved a simple P.

It was covered with dust. No Potter had used it in a very long time, then.

Harry raised his eyes to his mother's.

"What you have done to me cannot be forgiven," he said, beginning the ritual with a sense of relief. Already, the magic was taking hold, calming his own magic, bending it to this one specific task, and insuring that Lily could not leave and no one else could enter the room until it was finished. This dance was the best of them all for this particular moment, designed to contain anger and to *end* it. "I have no wish to face you in a duel, nor to arrange legal means of settling the insult. Both of them would involve seeing you again, and I have no wish to do that, either.

"Therefore, I will take a payment from you, a weregild for all that you have done to me. One time, one shattering price for another shattering price, one apology made in terms that I have decided. We need never see each other again. We will make the exchange, and it will be done." He took a deep breath, because this was the last conscious step of the dance, and the test. "Last time pays for all."

And it *worked*. The kitchen slammed into red and yellow light, as though fire had burst into being through the walls and the air. Harry could feel magic older and stronger than he had ever dealt with swirling through the room, sucking the breath from his lungs and binding Lily in place, to take the price from her that he had demanded.

I was right. She did do me an injustice. Had it not been a true injustice, then the dance would have failed and the magic would have snatched his chosen price from him instead, for daring to invoke it on an innocent.

Harry held the box aloft and opened it. He had no choice anymore. The magic of justice was clutching at him, and it was implacable. The same magic tugged the words from him, the words that always varied every time this ritual was performed, but were what the invoker must say.

"I can never be safe so long as you would bind me with the phoenix web. I am going to make sure you can't. And this is it. This is all I need to satisfy my anger. I never want to see you *again*."

The ritual acted. The red and golden glow became fire, a huge scarlet hand.

It reached out and stripped Lily's magic from her.

Lily screamed as the fingers swept through her body, down from the aura and within, searching out every last bit of power she possessed. Out it funneled as glowing blue light, a delicate counterpoint to the red and golden flame. For a moment, it hovered around her, as though reluctant to leave.

Justice tore it away, and flew to the box that Harry held, and deposited Lily's magic within it. The silver lid slammed down and locked.

Harry released the box. It spun in midair, the rowan wood sides bucking for a moment. Harry watched narrowly. It wasn't often that a reparations box was asked to contain a price so powerful. It was far more likely to hold a certain amount of blood or flesh than magic.

And then the sides settled, and another box appeared, spinning lazily beside the first one. This one was empty, as Harry could see from the flapping lid. It vanished, for use at a later time, and the first one, the full one, followed it.

That was it, Harry thought, as he watched them go. Anything put into a reparations box could never be pulled out again. He wouldn't use or swallow his mother's magic, no matter how much he might be tempted. He trusted the pureblood ritual as he did not trust himself.

His mother was crumpled on the floor now, and Harry understood the difference between the brokenness she had feigned to lure him close and the real thing. He didn't want to look at it for long. It simply made him feel tired.

A wind pushed at his back. The ritual had taken his justice for him, and now it remained up to him to obey his part of the bargain. He had said that he never wanted to see his mother again. The magic was not about to let him remain and contradict that by hexing her, especially when it had just made her a Muggle.

He would have to leave.

Harry had barely thought that when he realized that some of the red and gold shadows in the room had altered; they were growing brighter, instead of darker. Harry blinked and turned to face them. The magic of the ritual was supposed to be fading

away, as long as he left. Had something gone wrong?

Then the red and gold burst into flame, and Fawkes flew over to him. He hovered in front of him, and Harry couldn't see anything except black eyes cocooned in a nest of golden feathers. Fawkes crooned gently to him. The sight of his wings shielded Harry from the sight of his mother.

Harry, raw and aching and with his magic wide open, could understand the phoenix's intention, though still not his words. He nodded.

"Yes, please," he whispered. "Show me where to go."

Fawkes spread his wings wider, until he appeared to float in the air, rather than flying there. Harry watched golden leaves sprout from those wings, shining things of light and song, flapping gently around him and enclosing him in bright walls. They reminded him of the phoenix web for a moment, but he quelled that thought, and instead studied the world that he now stood in.

Where am I?

He understood almost instantly. He was riding Fawkes's fire, in the world that Fawkes flew through, when he vanished and appeared between one place and another. It was a beautiful world. Gauzy veils of scarlet and orange overlapped each other. Blue and gold surged in dazzling fountains that sprang and built off one another, soaring upwards in arched loops. Now and then, a brilliant white point winked into existence, hovered, like the sun, too bright to look at, and then vanished.

And the heat. Heat everywhere.

Harry felt it chase into him and warm away the last bits of the freezing cold rage. He smiled, slightly. He wouldn't be able to share this with Fawkes every time, but he could share it right now, with his magic wondrously free and his mind purged of some of the poison it had carried for so long.

And he knew, beyond all doubt, that Fawkes had offered this up to him freely, that he had in no way compelled it.

He extended a hand. Fire licked around him, tame and playful this one time, wound on his fingers and purred like a Kneazle. Snakes of glittering red crowned his hair. Harry felt himself laughing as the flames poured down his throat and tickled him, and if he didn't sound entirely sane, well, he didn't think he *was* entirely sane at the moment. But then, neither was the fire.

A word began to echo around him, a word that he had only heard a few times, but which repeated and rustled like the fire, as though it were the voice of the flames.

Vates. Vatesvatesvatesvates.

I suppose I am that, then, Harry thought, with a calm that he knew was artificial, forced on him by the remnants of the ritual and Fawkes's magic. But so? A pureblood wizard would be able to accept this. He would be able to accept it, too, since he was thinking like a pureblood wizard at the moment. Far be it from a pureblood wizard to be afraid of his own magic.

For a moment, his grip on the thoughts slipped, and he saw the vast gulf beneath him, the gulf where he would have to think about what his mother had done—

And he twisted away, and renewed his grasp on the learned thoughts. It was over. It was done. He had claimed his payment from her, and it was done. This time, there truly was no turning back and letting her hurt him again. The magic of justice had agreed with him that there was justice to be done, and Connor and James and *she* would just have to learn to live with it.

Last time pays for all.

The rustling, rasping voices subsided, and then the fire fell away altogether. Harry caught a brief glimpse of a white world, and knew that Fawkes had borne him somewhere familiar, on a snowy night. But before the fire let him go completely, it exhaled and breathed out across the whiteness in a shining array of nets.

Harry stared in silence at the nets, and then the misty glimpses of figures they connected to, figures who appeared at the ends of the threads like fish on a line.

House elves. Centaurs. Dementors. Unicorns. Dragons. Goblins. Runespoors. Werewolves. Giants. Merfolk. Hundreds and

hundreds of others, all connected, all bound, all tied.

All compelled.

The wizarding world was built on webs, hundreds of them, thousands of them, ancient and interconnected. Harry wondered how he could unbind all of them.

And then the vision vanished, and Harry saw Fawkes sitting on a bare, icy tree branch in front of him, regarding him calmly. His head was tilted to one side, his eye a glittering black gem in the midst of the feathers. He uttered a long, slow croon.

“He says that that is why you are the *vates*. You will figure out a way.”

Harry turned and nodded to Dobby. He wasn't surprised to see the house elf. He was incapable of being surprised right now, he thought. Too much had happened, and he was holding very, very tightly to the patterns that were keeping him sane.

“Hello, Dobby,” he said. “Will you please run and ask Mr. Malfoy if he minds very much having me as a guest for Christmas?”

Dobby bowed. “Dobby would be delighted,” he said with dignity, and vanished.

Harry stamped his feet and blew on his hands, warming himself in the cold. All around him lay snow. Overhead lay stars. In front of him, surrounded by its wards like a crown of blades, lay Malfoy Manor.

“You brought me here for a reason, didn't you?” he asked Fawkes.

The phoenix crooned again, this time a smug sound, and then fluttered off his branch and landed on Harry's shoulder. Harry relaxed, letting the warmth from the feathers drain into him. He stroked Fawkes's neck and wondered idly if Lucius would really let him stay. He had sent no truce gift for solstice so far. Harry had thought he was allied with him, but he really had no idea what had happened since he kept away from Draco.

That will have to stop, he thought. Until they officially dissolve anything that we put between us, they are still my allies, and I can't afford to keep away from them.

Would his presence mean compelling Draco?

Harry forced himself not to worry about it. He would ask for guest-rights. Lucius could let him in or deny him. If he denied him, there were other places to go. If he accepted him, that meant he was accepting the risk of his son's mind possibly being influenced, not to mention his wife's and his own.

Draco would take it further than that, of course. He would insist that they settle matters on a more personal level. But Harry felt as though he could accept that. He could accept anything at the moment. There really was a dance for most everything.

Dobby appeared just then. “Mr. Malfoy says that Mr. Harry Potter is welcome in his home, sir,” he said, bowing his head.

Harry smiled distantly. He was glad that Lucius had decided to stop being stupid.

Applies to more people than just him, doesn't it?

“Mr. Malfoy says that he hopes Mr. Harry Potter will accept his apologies,” Dobby added, his too-large eyes peering hard at Harry.

Harry nodded. “Please go ahead of me, and tell him that if I can forgive him for the diary, then I can forgive him for this.”

Dobby nodded, and vanished again, just as the Manor's door flew open and Draco's voice shouted, “Harry! Harry!”

Harry took a deep breath, and did the second hardest thing he'd done all evening: he started forward, instead of away. He was within the wards in moments, with them parting for him like curtains, and then he was walking across the snow, his feet making brisk sloppy sounds, Fawkes shifting on his shoulder as though to get more comfortable.

Fawkes was forced to take to the air with a startled squawk when Draco grabbed him and knocked them both into the snow, but Harry didn't really mind. He grabbed Draco, and held on tight, and thought about guest-rights and letting other pureblood

wizards take risks, and nothing else.

What he *really* didn't understand, a moment later, was why the dusty feeling returned to his eyes, and his face twitched, and he then burst into tears. And he let Draco escort him into the warmth and light of the Manor, because while there really was a dance for most everything, there wasn't a dance for this.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: Another Letter From Severus Snape

December 24th, 1993

*To: Hellebore Shiverwood
Department of Magical Family and Child Services*

Dear Madam Shiverwood,

My name is Severus Snape, Potions Master and Head of Slytherin House at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. I have found myself rather unexpectedly taking charge of a thirteen-year-old boy after long years in which I had no children of my own. If you have been following the Daily Prophet, you have learned by now that this child is Harry Potter, the twin brother of the Boy-Who-Lived.

I find myself quite anxious to make sure that I am doing the right thing. While I had a pureblood mother and was raised with full knowledge of many wizarding laws and customs, my father was a Muggle, and I had learned before I was seven to expect no children of my own. Therefore, my mother neglected to teach me the many pureblood dances that deal with the relations between parents and children. I would like to request information from your department so that Harry might know the pureblood side of his heritage, and also to know how the Ministry approves of treating children.

The Ministry's good opinion is important to me. While the Head of the Auror Office, Rufus Scrimgeour, recently visited Harry and me, and was gracious enough to say that he thought Harry could remain with me, I would appreciate it deeply if the Department in the Ministry most concerned with cases like mine and Harry's could make a recommendation concerning his treatment. It is only because of the unusual nature of Harry's case that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and not your office has handled it. I would trust your advice more than theirs.

I understand that some of the information that I am requesting—anything connected with the laws on child-care, for example—is sensitive. Please be assured I would not have written this letter were I not concerned for the welfare of my ward. This information shall be used only to benefit him.

With respect,
I remain,
Severus Snape.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Four: Compulsion Against Compulsion

Snape recovered from the dizzying swirl of the Portkey, which an owl had delivered to him along with Narcissa's letter, and looked around his landing place. It was a small, pleasant room, laden with frost-patterned windows through which Snape could see fields of unmarked snow. A fire blazed in a huge hearth on the far wall. A house elf hurried forward with a glass of amber liquid, which Snape accepted and sipped slowly. The warmth helped combat both the cold he'd encountered when traveling outside Hogwarts to use the Portkey and the nauseated feeling he usually received from that method of travel.

"Welcome, Severus. I am glad that you felt able to come to our home, when you and Lucius recently had such an overwhelming disagreement."

Snape turned and met Narcissa's eyes. The woman wore a long white gown with silver on the bodice and hem, which Snape hazily recognized as the clothing that a Dark witch wore when she wanted a guest to feel comfortable in a potentially hostile place. Snape supposed that was good. He found that he cared little, right now. He always *had* missed most of the pureblood subtleties, and he wanted to see Harry.

"I came here for my charge," he said. "Where is he?"

“In a room down the hall, Professor Snape,” said Draco, and then slipped in through the door across from Snape.

Snape raised his brows. Draco’s face was—changed. He looked as though he had been through some shattering experience, both tragedy and triumph, and it had given him a new depth to his eyes. Snape had always thought the boy would probably have one like it, given his pureblood status and his devotion to Harry, but he hadn’t expected it to come so soon.

But he dismissed it, because, while the change in Draco was intriguing, the boy had his parents to watch him here, and Harry had had no one until he arrived. “Take me to him,” he said.

“In a moment, Severus.” Narcissa glided forward and put a hand on his arm. Snape fought not to shake her hand off. He *did* glare. Narcissa only looked calmly back at him, blue eyes piercing. “I didn’t give you specifics in the letter because I didn’t know what your reaction would be, but there are things you should know before talking to Harry.”

Snape tilted his head and waited. The knot of tension in his belly got worse. It had been present since he received Narcissa’s letter, though, and it could wait a moment longer. At least he was in the same house as Harry now, something that he had wished were true since the boy went to Godric’s Hollow.

Narcissa took a deep breath. “From what Harry told Draco yesterday—“

Snape deepened his glare. *They had Harry here for at least a day and didn’t tell me?* He would remember that.

“—his mother tried to do something to him,” said Narcissa. “We don’t know exactly what it was. But, whatever it was, it smashed directly through the shields of blindness about her that he’s been maintaining all his life. He used a pureblood justice ritual on her to remove her magic, and then came here.”

Snape blinked. For a long moment, he was not sure what surprised him more: that Harry had had the good sense to flee to Malfoy Manor, or that Lily Potter, the woman he had dreamed of destroying quite often in the last few months, was now a Squib, or possibly a Muggle.

“Take me to him,” he repeated.

“You *must* understand.” Narcissa’s face was implacable. Snape wondered if Harry realized that he had another protector here. *Probably not, if he’s still in the state he was in when I last saw him.* “Harry has acted differently since he arrived here. He’s using the dances to maintain his sanity. If you find him excessively formal, don’t expect to alter it with a few words.” She took a deep breath. “I believe that it is only the particular ritual Harry used, in which he knows that he can trust the magic’s judgment as certain, that is keeping him from breaking. The rituals are the only things he trusts right now.”

Snape nodded slowly. *That* would fit with the boy he had seen leave school. At least Harry could function.

“I still want to see him,” he said.

“I know,” said Draco, surprising Snape, who had supposed an answer would come from Narcissa. He turned to look at his student, and found Draco’s eyes glittering with determination as sharp and cold as the frost on the windowpanes. “Harry’s been formal, but it’s pathetically obvious that he still thinks he’s compelling us into liking him. I want to make sure that he stops that.” He tilted his head back, and his hands clenched. “Want to help me?”

Snape smiled. He knew it was not a pleasant smile, because his smiles were never pleasant, but it was the first one he had worn since Narcissa’s letter had summoned him. “Lead the way, Draco.”

Harry stirred slowly and opened his eyes. He recognized the effects of a sleeping draught in his unusually hazy mind and the way it took him two or three blinks before he could move his head.

He didn’t mind. He’d smelled the sleeping draught in the cup of milk Draco had brought him last night, and drunk it anyway. He’d needed rest after a very odd Christmas Day spent with the Malfoys, in which everything was too bright and too sharp-edged, and questions appeared to arrive in his ears after he’d given his answers to them. Narcissa and Draco had allowed him to watch the sunrise with them, which was a tradition they had almost every year, and then to simply sit in the room with them and soak up the warmth while they opened gifts. Harry hadn’t seen Lucius at all.

But it was the day after Christmas now, and Harry supposed he would have to face things.

He sat up and picked his glasses up from the table next to the bed. His fingers trembled as he slipped them on. It didn't matter, he told himself sternly. He wasn't in front of anyone pureblooded at the moment. He didn't need to keep up the façade of strength—and that was really all it was—that made him seem invulnerable.

Then the door opened, and Harry turned his head to see both Draco and Snape entering.

Instantly he was on his guard. Harry studied Snape's face, and saw at least some knowledge there. He was grateful the Malfoys had waited so long before summoning his guardian, and he understood why they had done it; Snape was still the one with legal control over him. But he would have to be very careful not to feel much, not to want much. Otherwise, he stood a huge chance of compelling Snape against both their wills.

"Hello, sir," he said, and watched as they both took up positions in the room—Draco on the foot of the bed where Harry's legs didn't extend, Snape standing beside the bed. Harry waited for Snape to sit down, and then decided he wasn't going to. Harry nodded. He could understand that. Snape would probably want to be able to move, to get his wand up between them, if there was a way that he could fend off Harry's magic with a spell. It looked as though the days away from Harry had done Snape at least a little good. His dark eyes glinted with a hard emotion that was certainly not all the affection Harry had pulled out of him.

"Hello, Harry," Snape said, and his voice was soft enough, but with an edge of steel underneath. Harry relaxed a bit. *Are there going to be accusations, then? I can offer my formal apologies, and we can put this behind us.*

"We have come to prove to you that your ridiculous suspicions are ridiculous," Snape continued.

Harry blinked. "Sir?" *Oh, please, don't let that be what I think it sounds like. I don't think my magic has let his mind go after all...*

"You heard me," said Snape. "I made a number of mistakes with you at Hogwarts, and the biggest of those was bowing to your stubborn bloody logic and your insistence that I chose to become your guardian only because you forced me to do so. I am going to *prove* to you, Mr. Potter, that it is not so easy to force me to do what I do not want to do."

Harry shook his head. "With all due respect, sir, you need the time away from me to heal," he said. "If you only—"

"And I'm going to prove to you that I really do want to be your friend," Draco cut in, so smoothly that Harry realized they must have talked about this before they came into the room. *Well, of course they did, he thought. They're Slytherins. They would want to have a plan in place ready to strike at my vulnerability. I wonder if they know just how vulnerable they are, themselves?*

"You might think you do," said Harry. "But that doesn't mean you can convince me."

"Well, we're *going* to," said Draco, and his face turned a flushed color. Harry retained his calm posture, but he felt a tight little coil of unease open up in his gut. "I don't think we intend to do the same thing," Draco went on, and gave Snape a quick glance, "but that doesn't mean that we're just going to give you up."

"I formally request that you give me time to prepare," said Harry. "Five minutes, in the name of Merlin." He could strengthen and focus his magic inward in that time, he thought. It was currently curled around him like some sort of enormous snake, lazy and sleepy as he had been before Draco and Snape came in. Five minutes were all Harry would need to tuck it away.

"No," Draco said.

Harry blinked. "But you know the ritual, Draco," he said. "I used the exact correct wording."

"And I don't have to grant your request," said Draco. "I'm the heir of the owner of a home who's given you guest-right. I read about this. The requests a guest makes in the name of Merlin can be refused, unless he makes them of another guest."

Harry seized that information as swiftly as he could. He had indeed forgotten that particular caveat to the rituals, but there was someone else in the room who didn't have that protection. He looked at Snape. "I formally request that you give me a little time to prepare," he said. "Five minutes, in the name of Merlin."

Snape exchanged a glance with Draco, and Draco nodded. "You have to do as he asks, I'm afraid," he said.

Snape didn't look daunted as he went out the door. Harry didn't understand that. He would have guessed that Snape would look discouraged, as long as he kept up this silly, unreasonable reaction of trying to convince Harry he really hadn't compelled anybody. Snape just looked more determined, the way that Draco did when Harry turned back to him.

"I swore that if you came back broken, I'd put the pieces back together," Draco said, when the door had closed. "Do you remember that?"

"Of course, but—"

"And I'm here," said Draco. "And I am never moving anywhere, Harry."

Harry sighed and shook his head. "I formally apologize for compelling you when I'm a guest in your home," he said. "I thought this might happen when Fawkes brought me here, but I was so broken at that moment that I couldn't think of another sanctuary. I'll apologize to your father and—"

"Compel me."

Harry blinked at him. "What?"

"You think you've already done it," said Draco, his cheeks flushing an intense, angry red. Harry opened his mouth to point out that Narcissa and Lucius would hardly like their only son to display such unattractive emotions, but Draco went right on talking, overriding him. "For two and a half years, you think you've compelled me. And now you're apologizing for taking peace and safety that you desperately needed, because you think the same thing's happened." Draco's hand slammed on the bed between them, and he leaned forward. "So one more instance of control isn't going to make a difference. Make me do something I don't want to do."

Harry shuddered as fierce loathing twisted around in him. His magic was certainly awake now, hissing unhappily in his ear. Harry kept it from getting out of control by thinking about the ancient pureblood families whose symbols he'd learned during his very earliest childhood, and having the magic make their symbols in a faint line of light behind him. "I can't," he whispered. "Don't ask me that, Draco."

"You don't want to?" Draco's face had flushed further, so that he now looked as though someone had Transfigured his head into an apple.

"Of course not!" Harry shouted, and then winced as the room around them shuddered. "Apologies."

Draco waved a hand, in a gesture so dismissive that he didn't bother completing it. "Then how can you think you compelled my affection for you, you *stupid prat*? You hate compulsion so much. Would you ever put someone under it willingly?"

"But I put you under it unwittingly," Harry whispered. "Your father said you had changed—I didn't know—"

"Scary as it is for you to comprehend, Harry, there is a little concept called *forgiveness*," Draco said, his voice cutting. "You chose to forgive your parents and your brother for all the stupid things they'd done, practically forever. And I chose to forgive you for the compulsion when I realized that I didn't know what was real friendship for you and what wasn't. There's no way that I could ever go through books and find all my reactions in them. I'm your friend, and though it may have begun in compulsion, it's continuing with my full knowledge about the risks of being close to you. Yes," he added, before Harry could draw breath, "that includes risking my life."

Harry hadn't been about to say that; he had been about to talk about the future risk to Draco's free will, even if he thought he could choose right now. But now he shook his head. "No," he said. "You can't possibly forgive me for that."

"Why not?" Draco pushed.

"Because—"

"Because why?"

"Because the desire to forgive me is probably just another compulsion that I induced in you," said Harry, finding the answer and clinging on to it for dear life. "I want your friendship so much that I could convince you to go through this whole charade, just so that I could get you back. I can't ever know what's compulsion and what's not."

“No, Harry, you cannot,” said Snape, opening the door and coming right back in. *The five minutes must be up*, Harry thought, even as he wished that Snape would have stayed away for longer. “But I know my own mind. I am a trained Occlumens, and I have been around powerful wizards who did have a reason to wish to compel my obedience, the Dark Lord and Dumbledore both. I know the touch of compulsion. I know what it feels like on my mind. I have felt none of that from you.”

“That probably just means it was too subtle for you to notice,” Harry disagreed. His palms were sweating, his magic swirling around him. He could feel himself being backed up against a cliff, and he didn’t know what would happen when he felt air beneath his heels. He couldn’t think of a pureblood ritual appropriate to handling this. While he had been Lily’s victim, they were his, and doing all of this, even wanting to forgive him, because of his influence.

“Harry.” Snape’s voice all but growled. “Do you think you are a more powerful wizard than Dumbledore?”

“No,” said Harry at once. This was a question that he knew the answer to, and since he couldn’t think of a reason that he would want Snape to ask it, perhaps it was the first step on a road to freedom, something that had emerged independently from Snape’s thoughts.

“What about the Dark Lord?”

Harry shivered as he remembered the feel of the Dark Lord’s magic sliding over him at the end of first year, heavy and potent, able to bind him down and defeat him quite easily. It was only Connor’s innate ability to love that had saved both their lives then. Granted, Harry supposed he might have grown stronger since he’d had the phoenix web unbound, but surely the web would have allowed him to use all the power he had, because he was trying to protect Connor then, and it approved of that purpose. Voldemort had still triumphed over him. And besides, he’d been weakened himself, a disembodied spirit. If Harry could improve in strength as his restraints lessened, surely Voldemort could as well. “No,” he whispered.

“Then why do you believe that you can compel me, when I managed to fight off both their auras?” Snape was glowering at him now.

Harry shook his head frantically. The cliff was behind him, parts of himself spilling out and over into empty air. “No,” he said. “I—I compelled you. I must have.”

“Why?” Snape demanded.

“My mother told me that I can feed on other wizards’ magic,” said Harry. *A twig. I can grab and hold to this.* “If I drained part of your magic, then that would make you weak enough that I could compel you.”

Snape snorted. “That, also, is an ability that the Dark Lord possessed,” he said. “And I watched him employ it often enough, though at great cost to his own strength for days afterward. No, Mr. Potter, I do not believe that you have done that.”

“I did it to my mother,” Harry said, and her broken form on the floor when the justice ritual had finished with her echoed like a note of discordant music in his mind. Snape and Draco did not hear it, or did not care. They did not back off. They were still pushing him off the cliff.

“You did *not*.” Draco’s voice was a vicious snap, a bite that went home as none of Fenrir Greyback’s had. “I know the ritual you used, Harry. Mother explained it to me. There is no *way* it can be mistaken. It would have hurt you if you were wrong. It certainly wouldn’t have drained your mother’s magic unless she completely deserved it. Mother says that you know that, too, and that you were certain the ritual was right, or you’d have nothing to hold onto.”

He’s right. I know the ritual is right. I know it couldn’t be mistaken.

And that was the shove that sent Harry off the cliff. He closed his eyes intensely, hunched in on himself, and waited to hit the bottom. His thoughts whirled in chaos around him.

Into them, swift as a spear, came Draco’s final words.

“That means that she was *wrong*, Harry. And she was wrong about other things, too. Like your having to compel other people to get them to like you. That’s wrong. I’m your friend. Snape’s your guardian. She was *wrong*, Harry.”

And Harry couldn’t think of anything to refute that. To admit his mother had been right about him in any respect would undercut the justice ritual, and that was right, that was true, that was absolutely correct—

Harry hadn't noticed the contradiction in his logic.

He hadn't let himself, really, and he hadn't been in any fit state to notice it when he first came to the Malfoys.

But here it was, and Harry tried to think of a way around it, and couldn't, before the contradiction swallowed him.

He became aware that he was crying again, and that Draco had his arms around him. Harry clung back. He wasn't falling anymore, but his thoughts and his magic still ran in confused circles.

"I'm here now," Draco whispered. "I suppose you might compel me in the future, or we might learn that something specific is the result of compulsion. There's always that chance. But for now, I'm here, and I choose to be here, and I *am* your friend, Harry. I promise."

Harry closed his eyes and hung on, aware for the very first time of how much he really needed this.

Snape watched the scene in silence, as Harry shook in Draco's embrace. His tears had dried up almost as soon as they arrived, but that didn't bother Snape. What amazed him was that they had come at all.

It was not a nice thing at all, what they had done, Snape knew, confronting Harry when he was still vulnerable and acting to drive the truth they wanted him to acknowledge home. On the other hand, had they waited, Snape thought it quite possible that they would never have convinced him. Harry had the greatest ability to heal that Snape had ever known, and Narcissa had said that he was using the pureblood rituals as a channel for his thoughts. Given time, he would have simply grown over the wounds in his being like a sycamore and become a stronger person yet again—but without the ability to forgive himself or listen to his friends. And that would, in the end, have meant another breaking.

This way, building on the one thing Narcissa had said Harry was sure of, they had the chance to truly walk forward.

We are neither of us nice, Snape thought, when Draco finally gently unwound his arms from Harry and nodded to him. *I am glad that Draco has this particular kind of unpleasantness within him, however. I will need help with Harry in the future.*

He stepped forward and sat down on the bed beside Harry, while Draco slipped out of the room. Snape appreciated that, though he suspected it was courtesy on the surface only and Draco would listen at the door.

Harry kept his head bowed as he whispered, "I'm so sorry for thinking that you didn't know your own mind well enough—"

Snape felt his brows rise in exasperation. *He always manages to guilt himself about one thing or another, doesn't he?* "Stop that," he said, sharply.

Harry hunched into himself a bit, and waited. He was shivering, Snape noted, though the room wasn't cold.

"I know that you have the ability to compel other wizards, should you wish to," said Snape casually. "And it seems that you *might* have the ability to drain off other wizards' magic." Now that he thought about it, he believed that Harry had mentioned something like that when describing how Dumbledore tried to attack Draco, but he had not sounded interested in exploring it, and Snape had not pushed. "I assure you I am not eager to be either your victim or your test subject. I *will*, however, be your teacher in attempts to control both abilities."

Harry looked up for the first time. Snape steeled himself not to simply reach over and embrace the boy. It would comfort Harry, but it would also undermine the seriousness of what he was telling him.

"Had you not thought of getting teaching?" he asked, and made his voice icy. "That is the first sign of genuine carelessness with your magic I have seen from you, then."

Harry shook his head. "I thought Connor could teach me," he whispered. "Since he has the ability to compel other wizards, too."

"And you thought his ability resembled yours?" Snape asked.

Harry nodded, hesitantly.

“They are not alike,” said Snape. “The compulsion ability your brother possesses, and which Black also does—“ he was not able to keep the loathing out of his voice, but luckily, Harry did not react to it “—are specific magical gifts, such as Parseltongue. Your ability to compel other wizards is more properly a side-effect of your magic, which calls to other wizards. Dumbledore has both abilities, as does the Dark Lord. However, you have only the one. If you had the other, I would have seen signs of it when I entered your mind last year.”

Harry nodded. Snape had thought the boy understood this already, but he restrained his impatience. It turned out to be amazingly easy. Next to the importance of the victory they had won with Harry today, the small nuances of what he might or might not already know didn't matter.

And perhaps the boy had never been in a mood so receptive to listening, so likely to let words make an impact on his mind. Remembering that, Snape chose his next words carefully.

“Your brother cannot teach you. And, after what happened to Lily, I am not sure he would wish to.”

Harry drew in a sharp breath, and his face paled. But he nodded. He had considered, then, what his actions would cost him with the rest of the people who had lived with him (Snape refused to dignify them with the title ‘family’ anymore). *Good. That will make things easier.*

“I will teach you,” said Snape. “I will teach you whatever you need to know—Occlumency, Legilimency, Potions, Dark Arts. Whatever will preserve your life and insure that you not only survive, but live. You have had enough pain and sorrow in your life, Harry. I assure you, any grudge I bore you because you are James's son died in your first year, and when I came after you at the end of the second, I knew what I risked. I have chosen, again and again, to take the risks.” With relief, he noted that Harry was *listening* to him, this time, and his eyes were steadily widening. “I will not abandon you.”

Harry closed his eyes sharply.

Snape, unable to contain the impulse any longer, reached out and drew him close. Harry didn't look up at him as he leaned against him, and Snape was glad for that. He did not think that Harry would have wanted to see the expression on Snape's face.

What Harry has done to Lily is a beginning. But it is not enough. Nothing will satisfy me but her complete obliteration. And he has not touched James, or Black.

It will be my pleasure to insure their destruction.

Harry paused warily at the entrance to the room. He had thought about not coming; the ritual that Lucius had used to request this meeting gave him the chance to refuse. But then things would have been tense, strained, and unhappy in Malfoy Manor for the rest of his stay, and Harry intended that to last until he went back to Hogwarts. He would have to risk the chances of Lucius hurting him.

He thought it was small, anyway. Narcissa and Draco would—well, do something really horrible to Lucius if he hurt Harry. Harry wasn't sure what it would be. He found that he didn't want to think about it. It was enough to know that they were there, their protective presence wrapped around him even when they weren't in the same room, and that Snape was behind them as well. Snape had refused to leave unless Harry came back to Hogwarts with him, and since Draco didn't want that, he had managed to secure an invitation to stay.

Harry still found it hard to believe that they felt affection for him, but he couldn't *not* believe it. Not anymore. He supposed he would have to get used to it.

“Come in, Mr. Potter.”

Lucius straightened up from the hearth, which he'd been poking at—unnecessarily, since the house elves of course kept the fire blazing brightly—and gave him an even look. Harry blinked. He hadn't seen Lucius since he revealed his compulsive ability to him, and neither Narcissa nor Draco had mentioned anything altered about his appearance. He hadn't realized that there was a huge red handprint splayed across Lucius's cheek.

He kept himself from gasping, which would be a break in the dance as well as rude, and inclined his head, going to one of the

two chairs. They were the only furniture in the room, and were severe, dark wood and white cloth. Harry knew the colors, paired, meant apology in one of the older silent rituals. He didn't think that was a coincidence.

Lucius took the chair across from him. For a moment, they regarded each other in silence. Harry didn't know what Lucius saw. *He saw a pureblood wizard who looked as if he had witnessed a war.*

Or was about to witness one, Harry thought, and then shivered. *Well, that's true enough.*

"Mr. Potter," said Lucius, breaking the silence, "I need to ask you to accept two gifts from me." He gestured, and a white box rose from the floor beside him and skimmed over to Harry. "First, this one."

Harry opened the box gingerly, his magic humming around him; he saw Lucius wince, though he didn't say a word. He had to fight to keep from gaping when he saw what lay inside. It was the truce-gift for the winter solstice, the carved marble branch of an olive tree, token of peace and negotiation continued. It was traditional for the wizards who gave the gift to add some small charm to it, usually one that made the branch shimmer and look alive, in order to show off their power and remind the recipient of the advantages of allying with them.

Lucius had added the dazzling golden aura of a Charm that Harry knew quite well. He'd studied it in-depth in the histories of the First War, though he had never cast it or expected to see it cast. He raised his eyes slowly to Lucius's face.

Lucius confirmed it aloud for him, though he didn't need to. "Break the branch," he said, "and harm will come to me."

"What will break?" Harry asked, hearing his own voice as though down a long tunnel. That hadn't been unusual since he came to the Manor, but this time, the shock wasn't from what he had done to Lily. He looked down at the Charm, but couldn't tell just from looking. "Your arm, or your leg?"

Lucius bared his teeth in a very faint smile. Harry thought it was directed more against himself than Harry. "My neck."

Harry gently picked up the branch, and saw Lucius shudder along the connection that bound him to it. "You've given me a weapon against you in the case of treachery," he said, hearing the wonder in his voice.

Lucius snorted. "I would have not used that Charm otherwise, Potter."

Harry looked carefully at him. He wouldn't have trusted protestations of sorrow, of course, or simple apologies, and Lucius knew that. It seemed that when he decided to yield, he did not do it halfway.

Of course, he'd just stepped the truce-dance up. Harry would have to think of a gift that was a fit answer to this one, and that meant, properly, making himself just as vulnerable.

Harry put the branch back in the box, and then nodded. "And the second gift, Mr. Malfoy?"

Lucius gestured again, probably performing a nonverbal spell rather than doing wandless magic, and a second box rose from behind him. This one opened on the way to Harry, so that he could see a glass vial nestled within it. The vial contained a tiny amount of dark liquid. When he could see it closely, Harry realized it was blood.

He met Lucius's eyes. "And this?"

"Three drops of my blood," said Lucius. "I gave three drops to those trying to resurrect the Dark Lord, when they threatened Draco. They used it to determine my true intentions." He paused, and bowed his head slightly, in such a motion that his chin shielded his throat. "I thought it only appropriate," he added softly, "to give three drops of blood to the one who saved my son's life."

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Potter. Do you accept my apologies?"

Harry held himself back from the immediate answer he wanted to make. This was not about Draco or Narcissa, however large a part they might play in Lucius's decision to yield to him. He had to consider, rationally, logically, coolly, whether or not he trusted Lucius not to hurt him.

And he did, he realized, a little surprised. The branch secured his trust. So did the three drops of blood.

And so did the knowledge, clear in Lucius's eyes as they squinted against the headache Harry's magic was giving him, that

he could utterly destroy Lucius, branch or no branch, if Lucius ever betrayed him. He was stronger than Lucius was. The pureblood rituals were a way of acknowledging that power without coming to blows, and letting everyone preserve their pride. That was their oldest and most sacred purpose.

“I accept them,” said Harry quietly.

Lucius gave a small, feral smile. Harry gave back one he suspected resembled it a great deal. What he and Lucius had was nothing like the friendship Harry had with Draco, nor the perhaps-friendship, perhaps-parental bond he had with Narcissa, but it was an understanding nonetheless.

January 2nd, 1994

Harry Potter:

Have Severus bring you to school at once. I know he is there with you.

Your mother has been stripped of magic, and your father has left Godric’s Hollow without telling anyone where he has gone. Your brother is beside himself, and Sirius is not much better. Remus returns my letters to me unopened.

It is time that you and I talked.

Albus Dumbledore.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Five: I Have Been a Brother to Wolves

“Are you sure?”

Harry quirked his lips in a smile. Nervous as he was, he thought that Draco was having a worse time of it, with the way that he kept asking Harry if he was sure, if he was ready. “I’m sure. And you’ll be there for the start of term soon, so it’s not like we’re going to be separated for a long period of time.”

Draco frowned at him. “I just don’t understand why you won’t let me come with you right now, but you’ll let Snape.” He had moved slightly, as though to shield Harry with his body from the fireplace they were about to Floo through. They were in the antechamber that Snape had entered last week, and to hear Snape tell it, there was no change except that the frost on the windows was heavier.

“Because Dumbledore can’t manipulate him as easily,” said Harry, and waited serenely while Draco sputtered through his protest. When he’d finished, Harry went on. “You try, Draco, but you’re not quite as experienced at manipulation yet. And anyway, you’re learning the pureblood dances. Dumbledore won’t keep to them. He knows that he can’t challenge me on that ground, not with the ritual I performed on my mother. He’s going to try different tricks instead.”

“Like what?” Draco insisted, folding his arms.

Harry shrugged. “Emotional blackmail, I think. Probably also something legal, even though he can’t actually have the Ministry arrest me for turning my mother into a Muggle.”

“I want to hurt him,” said Draco.

“And *that* is why you can’t go yet,” said Harry gently. “I promise, Draco, we’ll see each other in a short time, and I’ll have Professor Snape with me. Don’t you trust him to take care of me?”

“Not in the same way,” said Draco, and stamped his foot, and turned his back so that he could stare into the fireplace and sulk. Then, abruptly, he lifted his head and turned around again. “I never did give you a Christmas gift!” he exclaimed.

“Then you can give it to me when you get back to school,” said Harry.

“And where’s *my* gift?” Draco was scowling at him.

“At school,” said Harry. “I wanted to give it to you in person.”

Draco smiled at him and might have said something else, but Snape swept into the room then, and nodded to Harry. “Since the Headmaster requested our presence so precipitously,” he said, “I feel it would not be wise to disappoint him.”

“Of course not, sir,” Harry agreed, and stepped forward. Snape was tense beside him. Harry wasn’t surprised. He was tense, too, in spite of all his reassurances to Draco about everything being fine.

But he wasn’t going to get much chance *not* to be tense. He would have to plunge ahead and do whatever he could to survive and win. It was the same mindset that had kept him alive through the battle at the end of the first year with Voldemort, when he was already writhing under the *Crucio* spell. It hurt, of course it hurt, but so? He was marching into war. That *always* hurt.

At least my mother trained me well to face my enemies, he thought, and then tried not to think about it, because he didn’t like thinking about the Muggle who had borne him if he could help it.

Snape took a pinch of Floo powder from the mantle, gripped Harry’s shoulder for a moment, and then tossed the powder into the flames. “Hogwarts!” he called out, as the fire turned green, and plunged in.

Harry stayed a moment to embrace Draco, who appeared abruptly nervy about letting him go, and tried to say something. But Harry didn’t stay long enough to hear what it was. He was afraid that it might break through the fragile shields that he was already building around himself.

“Mr. Potter, Severus. Please do come in.”

Harry lifted his head and stepped into the office with Snape just behind him, at his right shoulder. Dumbledore was no longer using his first name, then. Harry thought it a kind of honesty, setting up the battlefield ahead. He wouldn’t try for the grandfatherly persona any more.

Of course, his eyes fixed on Harry were bright with disgust and rage, and Harry knew that honesty was not the same thing as lying down and giving up.

“Sit down, Mr. Potter,” said Dumbledore sharply. He gestured to the two chairs in front of the desk.

“I would prefer to remain standing, thank you,” said Harry. His voice emerged from his lips, perfectly practiced and cold. He felt Snape give a small tremor of surprise, but Dumbledore’s eyes only narrowed further.

“I would like us to be equals for this discussion, Mr. Potter,” he said.

“Then take your seat first.”

Snape drew breath as if to say something, but let it go into silence. Harry was sure Snape would have admonished him to be more careful, not to face the Headmaster so bluntly. Slytherin cunning was called for, he would have said, not Gryffindor rashness.

But Harry did not care. He *knew* he wasn’t up to the usual delicate, indirect way he and Dumbledore approached each other, not with the state his mind was in. Besides, delicate and indirect hadn’t worked in the past. They had set up a truce, and Dumbledore had begun at once to undermine it with things like his messages to the Ministry. Harry had countered in the same subtle way, and Dumbledore still had not *stopped*. More than anything else, Harry wanted him *stopped*.

He didn’t think for one moment he could actually persuade the Headmaster to stop interfering in his life. What he would do was refuse to play as many of the games as he could. This was a battle. He wouldn’t let Dumbledore pretend it wasn’t anymore. He would treat the Headmaster much as he would Lucius, save that he actually trusted Lucius more.

Dumbledore slowly sat down behind the desk. Harry at once made his way to the nearest chair. It was set just high enough from the floor that he would have to climb up onto it like a child and sit with his legs dangling.

Harry let his magic out in a brief, controlled snap. The chair shrank until it was more nearly suited to a thirteen-year-old’s height. He took his seat and met Dumbledore’s eyes. Yes, there was fear there, and uncertainty, and something that Harry

didn't think was *quite* seething hatred, but could become it very easily.

Good. If I'm unnerved, he should be, too.

"I have received word about what you have done," Dumbledore began, the words sharp as a slap. He'd obviously recognized at least some of the tactics Harry was using, and tried to adapt them to his own advantage.

"You told me that in the letter, Headmaster," said Harry. "However, your wording was interesting. You said that my mother had *been stripped* of her magic. Does that mean that you do not realize what in fact happened?" He kept his face innocent and unstrained, and felt Snape quiver in his own seat, this time with laughter. Harry felt his own rueful amusement, distantly. It seemed he could not quite stop being Slytherin altogether.

"I know that you called on a misplaced ritual to strip her of her magic," said Dumbledore. "A vengeance ritual."

"A justice ritual, Headmaster," said Harry. "I used the Potter reparations box, and put her magic within it. I would have lost *my* power instead, if I had called for the box and it really was only vengeance." He knew his voice rang with steel. He didn't care. Dumbledore was an idiot, if he really thought that he was going to make Harry doubt the ritual he had used, and which was the core of the fragile certainty that Harry knew passed for his mind right now.

"I am not speaking of its intention," said Dumbledore, leaning forward. "I am speaking of its effects. You know that you have deprived your mother of every chance of a normal life? I have seen her. She is a Muggle, with not the smallest bit of magic left to her. How do you think she will feel now, surrounded day in and day out by people who have powers she can never exercise again? The punishment was too harsh, Harry."

Harry steeled his heart. He could see the broken figure on the floor if he looked into his mind's eye. He was not looking into it. "I would never have expected you to say that Muggles didn't have normal lives, Headmaster. After all, you've spent your entire life preaching the virtues of protecting them, of regarding them as people just like wizards. 'Only our talents are different,' goes a quote from one of your most famous speeches. 'Our souls are the same.'" He could quote that speech flawlessly. He could quote the whole thing flawlessly, if Dumbledore asked for it. There were advantages to being made to study and memorize history books since he could read. "Lily Potter is not less than she ever was. How dare you say that she is?"

Snape was most definitely trying not to laugh now. Dumbledore leaned forward further, his face gone grave and disappointed. "For one who has been magical, Harry, the loss is still a severe blow," he said. "You must realize that."

"And what about the blows that she has given me, Headmaster?" Harry let his voice rise. *Let him think I'm on the verge of losing control.* Dumbledore should really watch his magic instead of the visible indicators of voice and face, and for the moment, his magic lay quiescent around him. "The way she trained me. The phoenix web. The way that she tried to put the phoenix web on me again, after making me believe that I might have a family and that she understood what she had done wrong." Snape jerked. Harry ignored him. Yes, he hadn't told either Snape or the Malfoys about what exactly Lily had done to make him so angry, but that was because he didn't have a reason to relive it with them. With Dumbledore, he did. The Headmaster's eyes were wide with shock. Harry laughed, and knew the sound was harsh, and did not care. "You should never have advised her to do that, Headmaster. Of course I resisted it. It was the one thing that could have made me angry enough to use the justice ritual. I am *never* going to be bound again. *Never.*"

The Headmaster looked old, and supremely tired. "Harry," he murmured. "Do you realize what will happen if your magic is not bound?"

Harry raised his eyebrows mockingly at him. "You think that I'll turn into the next Dark Lord?"

"I don't think it, Harry. I *know* it, given where your power comes from." Dumbledore seemed to age before his eyes. "Your mother must have told you about the talent that you possess to feed on the magic of other wizards. That is an inherently evil thing."

"What, like Parseltongue?" Harry asked. "I don't think so, Headmaster. I know the difference between Light and Dark magic now, since I've been under the phoenix web. I don't think that the ability to speak with snakes is Dark, and I don't believe that I'll go evil just because my magic is free."

Dumbledore shook his head. "You are still going to endanger other students, my dear boy. I cannot let you attend Hogwarts with your magic unchecked."

Harry ground his teeth. He had to admit, he hadn't seen that coming. But he thought he could still respond. "I am getting it checked," he said. "Professor Snape has graciously agreed to train me, and to stop my abilities from harming other wizards. He is a trained Occlumens. He can tell me when I am impinging on his thoughts and his magic. And he has served two Lords," he couldn't help adding. "He'll know what would happen to make me become one, and prevent that from happening."

He glanced at Snape for the first time since they had entered the office, and saw the watchful dark eyes fixed on his face. Snape nodded once. Harry was glad. Now it wouldn't really matter if his will faltered a bit, or if he felt like giving up on the path because it was too hard. Snape would be there, pushing him forward, and once Snape had decided something, he didn't yield.

"That is a problem," said Dumbledore, his voice barely a breath. "That Severus has served two Lords, I mean. If it were more widely-known...if it were confirmed that he still bears the Dark Mark, for example..."

Harry sat straight up and met Dumbledore's eyes. *He is threatening a person I care about.* His magic trembled, wanting to be unleashed, but this wasn't a problem that could be solved with magic.

Up the stakes. Since he only seems to understand how poisonous these blades are when they're pointed back against him, I'll just do that.

"That would be a shame," said Harry casually. "Since losing Professor Snape would make you lose Professor Black, too, and where would you find competent wizards to cover both positions?"

Dumbledore's face went white.

"I am *tired* of this," said Harry, his eyes fixed on Dumbledore's. "You must know by now that I won't give up. And yet you keep threatening to sack Professor Snape, as if that will make me bow. I'm *not going to bow*. Threaten my guardian, and I'll threaten the man you sent Peter to Azkaban for."

Dumbledore was shaking his head from side to side. Harry couldn't tell whether the shock and sorrow he wore now were real or feigned. "Harry, he is your godfather," he murmured.

"He doesn't deserve the title," Harry snarled, and was startled to hear himself say the words even as they passed his lips. He hadn't realized *this* kind of rage was under the surface, hot and boiling, so unlike the cold rage he'd used to enact the justice ritual. "He's helped Connor more than me this year. He doubted me last year. He's lied to me about everything important in his life. You made Peter into a sacrifice for him just like you made me into a sacrifice for Connor. I don't want to protect him anymore, Professor." He clenched his fingers in front of him. "I would prefer not to take this public, Headmaster, but I will if you force Professor Snape's past into the open. The moment everyone hears about the ex-Death Eater working at Hogwarts, everyone is going to hear about the insane Professor Black with a Dark talent and a fondness for trying to kill his godson working at Hogwarts—the one who was spared death or Azkaban because you persuaded someone else to go to prison in his stead." He paused delicately. "Indeed, some people already know." He was sure that that was what Starborn's letter had been referring to, when he had written that Harry should ask what had spared Sirius Azkaban.

Dumbledore remained silent for long moments. Harry met his eyes directly. He could feel the probing light of Legilimency, but it bounced straight off his Occlumency shields.

Behind those shields, Harry knew, he was terribly vulnerable. But he had come prepared for nearly everything that Dumbledore threw at him so far. He was going to continue to do so. He was going to continue to attend Hogwarts, and he was going to continue to have Snape as his guardian.

"Do you think anyone would believe you?" Dumbledore asked at last. His voice was emotionless.

"I'm sure that Rita Skeeter would be happy to," Harry said coldly. "She seems rather fascinated with me."

Dumbledore nodded, once, twice, and then said, "Very well, Harry. You may continue to attend Hogwarts, and Professor Snape may continue to work here." He turned and opened one of the boxes on a shelf behind him, pulling out a sheaf of papers. "However, I am afraid that he can no longer continue to be your guardian."

"No?" Harry asked through numb lips.

"No." Dumbledore spread the papers on his desk. "You see, with the Dark spell your parents were under gone—on both their

minds—there is no longer any reason to keep you from them. The Ministry agreed to give custody of you to Severus Snape for only as long as the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was investigating your parents. Now that the spell is gone, you can return to them.” He shot Harry a narrow-eyed glance, coupled with a bright smile. “Unless you can provide some reason that you should stay away from them, of course.”

Harry clenched his fists. *The bastard*. Oh, he could tell the Ministry the truth easily enough—but that would mean letting everyone know what his mother had done to him, dragging the whole mess up again. Harry wanted it done with. The ritual had been all the justice he intended to take. He wouldn't see his family vilified and crucified in front of the horrified and morbidly curious wizarding world. He was done with Lily. He would leave it up to James, Sirius, and Remus to confront him on their own terms. And he was Connor's brother now and forever. Connor didn't deserve to be in front of the media circus that would result.

“Harry,” Snape hissed. “They should know. I am willing to go to any lengths to stay as your guardian, and if that means telling the Ministry—“

Someone rapped smartly on the door of the office. Dumbledore smiled. “Ah,” he said. “That should be the Ministry representative I asked to join us, bringing the papers to transfer your guardianship back to your parents, Harry. You will have to choose, in a moment, between truth and lies. Choose well.” He sat back behind his desk and beamed as the door swung in.

Harry, frozen, saw Dumbledore's smile disappear in the same moment as a smooth voice said, “Terribly sorry for the delay, Albus, old boy. But I'm afraid there's been a bit of a problem with the paperwork.”

Harry turned, disbelieving, joyous, to see Rufus Scrimgeour standing in the doorway. His apologetic expression was nearly perfect, except for the light in his eyes, which were fixed on Dumbledore. He never acknowledged Harry as he limped forward and laid the handful of papers he held carefully on the Headmaster's desk. He didn't need to, Harry thought. He could see the essence of the Auror's plan from here.

Oh, beautifully done, sir, he thought, with the same admiration with which he'd read about Dark families' outmaneuvering each other in the past. *Oh, wonderfully done*.

He was absolutely sure, even before Dumbledore began to shift through the papers, that this was all perfectly legal. Scrimgeour wouldn't have it otherwise. He watched Dumbledore with patient earnestness as he looked through the pieces of parchment, and nodded when the Headmaster stared at him.

“Yes, Albus, I'm sorry,” he said, with oceans of regret in his voice. “But you know that we can't make an exception to the proper procedure even for you.” He managed to say that without any emphasis at all. Harry was beyond impressed. “All the forms have to be completed absolutely properly, and in triplicate. We received only one copy of each, and most of the vital information was missing.” Scrimgeour shrugged. “I'm sure it will be set right eventually. No doubt it was a mistake somewhere along the line. But, in the meantime, I'll have to ask you to complete the forms again.”

He paused, then drew a final sheet of parchment out of his cloak and laid it carefully, carefully, down in the center of the table. “And this,” he said. “It's the results of the exam that we had Lily Potter take, just to be absolutely sure that she'd returned to normal. I'm not sure what happened, Albus, really. Probably she was just having a bad day, the poor girl. It's not every day that one recovers from a Dark spell on one's mind. But until we can see some sign that she has her normal magic back, I'm afraid that we can't release young Harry here into her custody. She might have erratic power and hurt him, after all. And I'm sure none of us want the boy with a guardian who would hurt him.”

Dumbledore had been absolutely stopped. Harry wanted very, very badly to laugh, but he managed to lower his head and clap a hand over his mouth, making soft snorting noises instead. Scrimgeour gave him a mild glance, as much as to say that he didn't know what Harry found so funny in all this deadly serious business. Snape was leaning back in his chair, his eyes glinting as they fixed on Scrimgeour.

“I will insure that the forms are completed properly, Auror Scrimgeour,” said Dumbledore, and swept up all the papers. His stopping had lasted only a few moments, Harry saw. He would find a way past it. But at least he wasn't saying that Harry had to return to his parents right now; for that alone, Harry thought, he owed a debt to Scrimgeour.

“See that you do, Albus.” Scrimgeour wagged one finger. “There's nothing more important than properly completed paperwork, especially in a case like this.” He turned and moved towards the door, giving a final glance at Harry and Snape. “Are you coming?” he asked. “I would like to have one more interview with young Mr. Potter here, to insure that he's been treated right.”

“Of course,” Dumbledore had no choice but to say, though he watched Harry with fierce eyes.

Harry smiled amiably at him. So things hadn't been settled permanently, not yet, but he supposed he had been a fool to think they would be. At least he was able to walk out of the office without more vicious mental wounds, and with an idea of what tactics Dumbledore would try now. He would count it a victory.

“Of course, Auror Scrimgeour,” he said, and stood. Snape moved very close to his side. Harry was glad. He didn't entirely trust Dumbledore not to throw a curse at his back. Merlin, he didn't trust Dumbledore to do anything but try to control him and protect Sirius.

As they rode down the moving staircase, Harry looked up at Scrimgeour and said, “Thank you, sir.”

“He was mucking about in my Ministry,” Scrimgeour explained peacefully. “You don't muck about in my Ministry. You just don't.” He paused, and shook his head. “Besides, imagine trying to transfer custody of a child from one guardian to another when all the forms hadn't been properly completed. It's a terrible thing. Keeps me awake at nights.”

Someone knocked on the door of Snape's office that night. Harry paused and looked up at Snape, who only shook his head back. He wasn't expecting a visitor, then. Harry palmed his wand and strode cautiously forward. He supposed it might only be Draco, whom he'd seen at the Feast that night but had to leave because Draco had left all his homework until the last moment, but it was better to be safe.

When he opened the door, he blinked. Remus stood there, shivering slightly, as though he'd been caught in a heavy rain. The amber eyes he turned to Harry's face shone with desperation.

“What do you want, werewolf?” Snape snapped from behind Harry. A glance back showed that his wand was most *definitely* pointing at Remus, and he looked inclined to hex first and ask questions later.

“I want my memories back,” said Remus softly.

“I know the ritual that you did to Lily,” Remus explained, for the third time, at Snape's insistence. “My father told me about it. And I know that it can't be wrong.” He clenched his hands in front of him. They were shaking. “Harry,” he said, “I have to know, now. I thought it would be better never to know, to just leave Lily as the good woman I imagined her to be. And now I found out that it—*isn't*. I can't stand knowing that she did something wrong, and no details about what it was. Please, please, let me past the barrier. Let me see. Let me *know*.”

“It's not that simple, Lupin,” Snape began, his lip curled. He'd let Remus in to sit on a sofa Transfigured from a bookshelf, which Harry knew was generous by Snape's standards, but refused to take a seat of his own. He'd been pacing around the room during the three explanations. Now he whirled, robes flying behind him as he stabbed his wand at Remus again. “You know that an *Obliviate* is Dark magic by at least one standard. It clamps down on your free will, and prevents you from looking at one set of memories you should have access to. The safest way is to have Dumbledore remove it, and you know that he will not.”

“There's another way,” said Remus. “And I would never have suggested this if I didn't think it would work.” He turned and faced Harry, who sat on a Transfigured chair across from him. “Harry,” he said quietly. “I felt you, in my mind, that night we went running in the Forbidden Forest—“

“*What?*” Snape said, in a voice that promised death and pain if he wasn't told about this immediately. Harry ignored him, because this was more important.

“And when you released your magic at the Quidditch game,” Remus went on, undaunted. “I know what you are.” He took a deep breath, and let it out again. He seemed to grow larger as he did so. Harry saw his eyes blaze amber, and the air around him stirred with the smell of musk. The sudden wild atmosphere to the room made Harry's nerves tingle. “*Vates*,” Remus breathed.

Harry nodded slowly. After the ride with Fawkes, he could hardly deny it. But— “I don't know everything about what that word means, Remus,” he said. “I could still hurt you.”

“I know what it means,” Remus whispered. “Not everything, but what it means for *me*. The unbinder, Harry, someone who opens. You couldn’t touch my mind and free me from the *Obliviate* if I were an ordinary human. But the werewolf in me knows you.” He smiled faintly. “Even if it doesn’t like you very much.”

“Wait a minute—“ Snape began.

Harry stood up. His magic swirled around him, and he brought it forward so that it pointed at Remus. “You know that I’m going to have to enter your mind?” he asked, and Remus nodded.

“*Wait* a minute—“ Snape said again.

“Good,” said Harry. “Just checking.” And he leaned forward and opened his eyes and his magic in the way that he had just after he’d ridden with Fawkes.

An absolute maze of webs sprang into being around him, worked through the stones of Hogwarts and into the very earth. Harry could see the bindings on the house elves if he looked, probably the most prominent ones, and a net spread over the Forbidden Forest, and the icy, curling blue strands that reached out from Hogwarts’s grounds towards Azkaban and tied the Dementors to their duty.

But, at the moment, he was only interested in one set of them. He focused his mind on Remus, and saw the man as a shimmering form, surrounding two webs. One was small and red, and held back a specific set of memories in which Harry saw his own face.

He tensed himself, and reached out to that web.

Immediately, the other one attacked him. It was old, and dark, and wound into every part of Remus’s being—body for the transformation, mind for the bestial rage that was a werewolf in the killing mood, emotions for the way it heightened all of them, spirit for the pall it cast over Remus’s life, and magic for the way it made Remus able to pass the curse on to others. It fell on Harry like a crushing weight, heavy and black, snarling in his ear and drooling liquid so warm it might have been blood.

Harry held himself firm. The werewolf was recognizing him even as it tried to keep him out. It itself was a magical creature, and in the grip of a human mind or one calmed by Wolfsbane, it had to listen to the rumors of power Harry carried with him—that and his hatred of compulsion, Harry suspected. Only when it went absolutely mad with fury during the transformation was it free of the need to listen. Harry knew, then, why he hadn’t been able to make Fenrir Greyback recognize him.

“*I hate you.*”

Harry’s hair stood on end, and he swallowed several times before he could reply. It was unnerving to realize that the disease had a voice. “I know,” he said. “It doesn’t matter. I want to take off the *Obliviate*. I want to free a part of you that’s been tied up. That should lessen your hatred of me, shouldn’t it?”

“*You like him,*” said the disease.

“Who?” Harry asked, at a loss.

“*The one I ride.*” The web flexed its claws, and Harry dimly heard Remus cry out. The wolf was trying to wake. “*My victim. Mine. I hate him, too.*”

Harry shuddered, and because he was in Remus’s mind, a storm of memories flitted past his eyes. He realized fully what it meant when Remus had said he was a werewolf, not a wolf. This wasn’t a wild creature Harry could speak with as he had with the Runespoors or centaurs, not even a Dark creature open to bargaining, as the Dementors were. This was a Dark creature who lived to compel others. It hated Remus, and it was alive in him, and it would torment him until he was dead, for no better reason than the pleasure of making him obey its will.

Harry felt his own hatred of compulsion rise in response. He bared his teeth. “Someday,” he promised, “I am going to destroy you.”

“*Can’t. Won’t.*” The disease laughed at him, a sound that Harry felt like fever in every fiber of his being. “*Too weak of will. And I hate you. I catch and torture what I hate. Always.*” Harry had the sensation of teeth snapping past his ear. “*You, and the other one in here, the one my steed calls Severus. I’ll have him yet.*”

Later, Harry considered that perhaps he ought to have reacted to the threat more rationally. But he hated it when people threatened those he loved. He didn't understand why his enemies kept doing it.

He reached out and pulled Remus's *Obliviate* apart.

Remus's mind bucked, twisting, trying to shatter in the face of the suddenly released memories and the disease's pushing. Harry wrapped his magic around it and held on. He kept breathing gusts of free will across it, wanting Remus to do as *he* wanted, not as Dumbledore or the werewolf in him wanted. Harry bent all his will to that task, feeling himself slip to the ground. He heard Snape yelling "*Ennervate!*" but he didn't respond to the pull back to his own body. He *had* to do this. He hated webs so much. He wanted the one web he thought he could remove at the time gone.

If I have this power for a reason, this is the reason, he thought, and shoved, and shoved hard, at the pressures threatening to break Remus's mind apart. Where they wouldn't yield, or Remus couldn't respond fast enough to deal with them, Harry took them on himself.

He felt his shields give way, felt the webs of his mind unraveling, and hung on there, too. He had to stay sane, because Draco and Snape wanted him sane, and because the justice ritual had been right. He didn't have anyone's *permission* to go insane, including his own, because, at the moment, that would mean the same thing as doubting the ritual.

The storm at last finished. Harry opened his eyes and found himself lying on the floor in Snape's office. He looked up, blinking, turning towards Remus, but Snape's face got in the way first.

"If you *ever* do that again," Snape hissed, one hand clutching at Harry's shoulder, "then I am going to kill you, discover magic that will allow me to resurrect the dead, and use it to bring you back to life so that I can kill you *again*."

"Remus's werewolf threatened you," said Harry, still trying to sit up. "It shouldn't have done that." His head was aching ferociously, and he couldn't see more than a few feet. He could make out that the Transfigured couch was empty, though. "Where's Remus?" he added.

"The beast ran out of here," said Snape in disgust. "He said something about finding Black."

Harry felt his eyes widen as he remembered what Remus had told him about being suddenly released from the *Obliviate*. *I know that there would be no going back once I learned what they did to you. And it would be because of me, not them. They may have done unforgivable things, but I would do unforgivable things, too, in my anger.*

And...

I'm not rational when I'm in a rage, Harry. I've been tempted to bite people before.

This soon after the full moon, and with the rage and the werewolf rising up in him, Remus might even bite Sirius, and succeed in giving him the curse.

"Oh, *Merlin*," Harry said, and managed to stand and turn towards the door. "We've got to stop him."

"Why?" Snape asked, curling his fingers in his collar. "I would much rather stay here and listen to you tell me the stories of your trips to the Forbidden Forest."

"He's going to make Sirius a werewolf!" Harry yelled, trying to twist out of Snape's grasp. It was hard when his head and mind still trembled with pain, and even his magic felt exhausted.

"Why didn't you say so?" Snape let him go and strode towards the door. "I want to watch."

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Six: Lady Lioness

She had most often believed in the past that if she wanted something done right, she would have to do it herself.

Or get Albus Dumbledore to do it. But since he had grown so untrustworthy of late, Minerva had once more become used to relying on herself.

And one of the things she had to do, which no one else seemed willing to do, was tell Connor Potter exactly what had happened to his mother. Albus had told her at once when he received Lily's letter, which was good of him. Of course, he probably wanted her to use the information to manipulate Connor against his brother in some unimaginable and obscure way. Minerva had decided to counteract that by using the information in as straightforward a manner as possible.

She rapped on the door to Sirius Black's office on the second floor, and then repeated the motion when no one answered. Sirius had brought Connor in just a few hours ago on his flying motorbike. Minerva had asked one of the house elves to watch over the room for her, and knew they were in here.

At last, slowly, Sirius opened the door. Minerva bit back a curse. His eyes were...

She shook her head and stepped past him. She knew why his eyes were like that, and since the memories asking would bring up were even more painful, she would not ask. "I came to talk to Connor," she said softly.

Sirius nodded and motioned a hand over his shoulder. Minerva turned and saw the Boy-Who-Lived in a chair beneath one of the Gryffindor Quidditch banners that Sirius kept hung all over the room, his head buried in his hands.

Minerva approached him as calmly as she could. She had seen Connor when he was in a temper, especially when he was in a temper about something his brother had done. He needed serene adults around him, adults who could tell him the truth and make sure he understood it while retaining an undertone of stern sympathy. Had she had the choice, Minerva would not have left him alone with Sirius so long, but he was far closer to the boy than she was. She had wanted to give them *some* privacy.

"Mr. Potter," she said, taking a chair across from him. He hadn't stirred when she stood over him. Perhaps this would encourage him to open up to her more. "I want to speak with you about your mother."

Connor dropped his hands from his face at that and looked up at her, and Minerva bit back on more obscenities, which was something she normally never had to do once in a day, never mind twice. Connor's eyes looked like holes in his face, as though someone had scooped all the soul out of them and left dim hazel tunnels into his skull.

"I already know," said Connor flatly. "She talked to me, and Sirius talked to me." He drew in a ragged breath, and then barked like Sirius in dog form. "Harry stole her magic! He stole her magic, and left her a *Muggle*! How could he have *done* that! He hates her, that's obvious, and I hate him!"

Minerva's eyes widened, and she turned to stare at Sirius. Even if Lily hadn't recognized the pureblood ritual—and Minerva considered it one of the unmistakable ones—then why hadn't Sirius, who had certainly been raised in a pureblood household and might even have seen that ritual in action, told him the truth?

Sirius hunched and avoided her gaze.

"I hate him, I hate him, I hate him!" Connor was repeating passionately when Minerva looked at him again. His eyes had brightened, but only to fill with the emotion that he was describing, something Minerva thought no child so young should feel. "I want him dead. I don't want him near me. Can you arrange things so that we don't have Potions or Transfiguration with the Slytherins any more?" He looked up, seeking sympathy in Minerva's eyes. "Because Sirius was right all along, and that's all he is, really, just a dirty, nasty, slimy, sneaking—"

The door to the office burst open then, and in came Remus Lupin.

But it was a Remus Lupin horribly changed. Minerva didn't think she'd seen him look worse since the sole transformation she'd witnessed for herself when he was a student here. His face was flushed with too much color, and his hands choked the air in front of him. The deep, wild smell that accompanied him made Minerva's nose twitch as if she were already in cat form.

And he aimed straight at Sirius and knocked him to the floor, his jaws—Minerva couldn't think of them as part of a human mouth any more—snapping at his face.

Connor was screaming. Minerva rose and aimed her wand, casting coolly.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*"

The spell hit Remus and simply faded. Minerva hissed. She forgot, not having fought them often, that werewolves were

resistant to many kinds of magic, and immune to some of them.

But that was only supposed to be in animal form.

Swift as despair came the next thought: *Does that mean that he could pass on the curse to Sirius if he bit him now?*

Minerva would not allow that to happen. It would mean a fate worse than death for one of her Gryffindors, and death or life in Azkaban for the other, and she had already lost enough of them during the holidays.

She gathered up more of her power and poured it smoothly into the next spell she used, one that the witches of the McGonagall family had passed down among themselves since Calypso invented it. It had been one of the techniques that the Light Lady had used to control herself.

“*Catena cordis!*”

It worked, as she had hoped it would. Werewolves had been around long enough to develop more immunity to general spells than specialized ones. Just as Remus opened his mouth and lunged at Sirius’s face, he gasped. Then he fell awkwardly to the side, his arms and legs moving as though he struggled against a net. Minerva watched him in pity. The effect of the spell wasn’t pleasant, as all the emotions in the victim’s heart abruptly jerked sideways, chained and kept from becoming true emotions. He would have to think rationally. He wouldn’t have a choice.

Minerva decided that she could do worse than use the spell on the others in the room, and had just lifted her wand to do so, when the door banged the rest of the way open and Harry and Severus lunged in. Harry was gasping, panting, his face flushed as though with fever. Severus was looking at Remus, and the expression he wore was undeniably disappointed.

Minerva opened her mouth to ask what was going on, and then Connor took the matter at least partly out of her hands.

“I hate you, Harry!”

Harry winced and closed his eyes, turning his head so that his chin rested on his shoulder. He supposed he should have expected his twin’s declaration, but it still hurt.

What hurt even more was Connor’s awkward punch to his jaw a moment later. Harry wouldn’t have believed his brother could cross the room that fast, nor that he wouldn’t have heard him coming. He supposed his own emotional pain had distracted him.

He rolled with the blow—one thing he had learned in his long training with the Muggle who had given birth to him was how to fall—and lunged back to his feet, only to find Snape’s wand pointed at his brother, and McGonagall’s wand pointed at Snape, and Connor’s wand pointed at him.

“You hurt our *mother!*” Connor had obviously been crying not too long ago, but now his eyes were dry with rage like a desert sun. “How could you *do* that? How could you take her *magic* away?” He steadied his wand with his left hand as it began to shake. “Maybe you’d like it if I did that to you, so that you can pay for it?”

Harry felt the remnants of his sanity begin to slip again. He scrambled after them and grasped them all, holding them firmly in place. No, he would not allow himself to doubt the justice ritual. He *could* not.

“Shut up, Mr. Potter.”

Harry went cold all over. He had never heard Snape sound so hateful. He turned slowly to look at his guardian again, and saw that Snape’s face had closed down. What Harry recognized was the same look he had given Sirius on the Quidditch Pitch. They had a Death Eater in the room with them.

“No, don’t,” he whispered. “Sir. Please.”

“He practically *killed* our mother!” Connor howled back at Snape, not at all intimidated. “She told me so herself. I saw her. He didn’t, he ran away, he was too cowardly to stay, but—“

Harry stared at him with horrified sickness rising up in his belly. Of course. He should have anticipated that this would

happen. He had left Connor alone with Lily and Sirius, at least, and maybe James, for too long a period of time. Of course they would make his brother believe what they wanted him to believe, and that Harry had taken away her magic as the result of Dark spells, or perhaps the obscene feeding ability that Lily had talked about.

Snape's hand came down on his shoulder just as the room started to swirl, and Snape's low voice said into his ear, "I will not have you fainting. Do you understand? You *will* not."

That sternness gave Harry an anchor to cling to, and he took it, straightening his shoulders and nodding shortly at Snape. By the time he turned back, McGonagall had found her breath and was speaking to Connor.

"Mr. Potter," she said, "your mother lost her magic to a ritual, and not a spell."

"A Dark magic ritual," said Connor, undaunted. Harry tried to meet his brother's eyes, and could not. The loathing there was too deep. It made him dizzy and short of breath when he attempted to look into it. "I *know* it. Sirius and Mum told me all about it. He made her into a Muggle just because he wanted to eat her magic. He's a Dark Lord, too." Connor took a step forward. "He has to be stopped before he eats anyone else's magic."

Snape began to say softly, "*Adsulto*—"

Harry, recognizing the incantation for the heart attack spell, snapped, "*Protego!*" and stuck a shield in front of Connor that should repel the spell. Of course, that effort sent him to his knees. He really shouldn't have mucked about in Remus's head quite so much, he thought woefully. Then perhaps he would have more strength to devote to the effort of keeping both his brother and Snape alive.

Connor was glaring, and Harry felt a slithering force across his mind that he recognized as the compulsion gift. He managed to bounce it off, barely.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Remus was whispering.

And then McGonagall's voice cut over everyone, saying, very firmly, "*Silencio.*"

Harry gratefully let the spell take his voice. He wasn't sure what would emerge, at the moment, if he tried to speak. He crouched on the floor and concentrated on getting his perception of the world back.

Of course, without the surety of affection from his brother that he had based so much of that world on, it was a harder task than he had expected. And by now his head really hurt.

Minerva caught her own breath and scowled at the wizards sprawled or standing around the office.

That's better, she thought. *Not one of them has the sense that Merlin had when he advised Arthur against bedding Morgana. Wizards! If I want something done right, then I have to do it myself.*

"Now," she said, when she was sure that she would manage to sound calm and not as if she wanted to bite all their heads off, "I'm going to release you from the spell, one at a time. I've already heard Connor's side of the story." She glanced once at Sirius, but he shook his head and turned away from her. Minerva restrained a growl. That one had been the bravest and most reckless of her Gryffindors, once upon a time, living as though untouched by any dark shadow. She had learned since that he was touched, of course, but she still found it hard to believe that *all* of his courage had been a façade. She released Remus instead.

He sat up slowly. His eyes still glowed, and the undeniable wild smell still plagued the air around him, but he was calm. He had no choice but to be, under the *Catena* spell. He looked at her once, and then away.

"Well?" Minerva demanded.

Remus sighed. "I gained some of my courage back, and asked Harry to free me from the *Obliviate*," he said.

"Why him?" Minerva checked on Harry. The boy really did look bad—pale as the Bloody Baron's blood, with one hand on his head as though it were about to split apart. "Why not Severus?"

“Because,” said Remus, looking at her as though *she* were the one who had gone mad and tried to pass on lycanthropy, “Harry is the *vates*, and he could enter my mind because I’m a werewolf.”

Minerva blinked a few times, and then shook her head. Of course she had suspected that something like that must be true, especially with the books that Severus had been lending her, but she had not thought there was any way that the boy could come to his power so soon.

She looked sharply once again at Harry. *And it does look as though he’s paid the price.*

“And then what happened?” she demanded, to keep from getting angry at the thought of the poor boy suffering *again*.

“I came here,” said Remus. His eyes briefly sparked, and then subsided again. He looked mildly confused. Minerva thought the confusion really belonged to the wolf inside him, who would not understand why it could not summon the rage to attack. “I thought Sirius would probably be in this room, and he was. Or maybe I was following his scent. I don’t—I don’t really know. I was too lost to the wolf. I only knew that I wanted to punish him for what he had done to Harry.” He glared at Sirius. “After all, he was the only one of Harry’s family actually at Hogwarts.”

“James has gone somewhere,” Minerva remembered, from what Albus had shown her in Lily’s letter, “and Lily is still at Godric’s Hollow.”

“*Is she?*”

Minerva narrowed her eyes. “If it’s necessary, Remus,” she said coolly, “I will have you swear an Unbreakable Vow to me, that you will not attack or harm Lily Potter in any way.”

Remus stared at her, and said nothing.

Minerva shook her head again. *What a mess you have created, Albus.* It was too bad that Albus was too powerful to take vengeance against, and that they needed him as leader of the Light side. Perhaps there were other ways to do it than straightforward magical assault, or exposing Albus’s crimes against Harry and letting the boy suffer again along with him.

Then Minerva remembered the object she’d stolen from Albus’s office the last time she’d been there, and relaxed. *There are smaller ways. They’re slower, but they’re more guaranteed to work, too.*

“I don’t want you harming her, Remus.”

Harry. He’d broken through the *Silencio*—Minerva wasn’t surprised, not really—and had crawled over to Remus, one hand out as though to stroke the werewolf’s cheek. Remus turned his head and gently nuzzled the boy’s hand. Harry stared up at him with wide green eyes. Minerva thought those eyes had seen too much. She wished she could pick Harry up and put him in a place where he wouldn’t have to experience pain ever again, but almost seventy years in the world had taught her that only death was like that.

Remus watched him for a long moment, then nodded. “If you’re sure, Harry,” he said. “But *only* if you’re sure.”

“Yes,” said Harry. His voice was weary, but utterly determined, in the way that Minerva had felt herself when facing Voldemort in battle. “It’s all done, between me and her. That’s the end. You know what that ritual means. I know what it cost her, and what it cost me. I never want to hear about it costing anyone else anything.”

Minerva couldn’t help it. She turned and looked at Connor and Sirius.

She knew from the looks on their faces that it was too late for that—not to mention whatever the ritual had done to James and Lily’s relationship. Sirius blamed Harry, in the odd way that he had lately of blaming his godson for everything. Connor blamed Harry, because he thought it was Dark magic that had left his mother a Muggle.

Minerva sighed. She did not know how to fix this. Even if Remus refrained from attacking Sirius or Lily in the future, the other two had heard him declare an intention to do so. They would probably never trust him again. Remus, as much as Harry, had just left half his family behind.

It is good that he has chosen Harry, at least, she thought, as she released Connor from the *Silencio*. *If he had not, the poor boy would have no one among those he has known from childhood with him.*

“Mr. Potter,” she said, drawing Connor’s intense gaze from his twin to her. “I will have your word here and now that you won’t attack your brother—in the corridors, on the Quidditch Pitch, in class, on the grounds, or anywhere else.”

Connor tilted his head back. His eyes flashed Gryffindor stubbornness and pride at her. They were traits that Minerva had loved and cursed in equal measure since the Hat had shouted out the name of her House for her. At the moment, she had more reason than usual to curse them.

“No,” he said. “He has to pay for what he did to our mother. And no one else is punishing him—the furious betrayal in his voice made her wince—“so I have to. I’ll attack him as often as I can.”

“Mr. Potter,” said Minerva, with a heavy heart. *He will not understand. But if it comes to a choice between his not understanding and further suffering for Harry, I know which I will choose.* “For every attack on your brother, you should know that *you*, in turn, will suffer a punishment. For the first one, you will have a week’s worth of detention with—“ she almost said *Professor Snape*, but then remembered the glances he had given the boy and decided that wasn’t a good idea—“ Argus Filch. For the next one, you will not play in the Quidditch game against Hufflepuff. For the third one, you will not play in the Quidditch game against Ravenclaw, either. For the fourth one, you will be removed from the Quidditch team for next year as well.” She paused. Connor was staring at her in absolute betrayal and disbelief. “Do you understand?” she added softly.

“But, Professor,” Connor spluttered, “if you do that, then we have no chance at winning the Quidditch Cup!”

Minerva thought of the way that Severus would taunt her about that. It was astonishing how little the memory stung, beside the thought of Harry suffering, and not even defending himself against, his brother’s attacks. “I know,” she said.

Connor’s eyes widened, and she saw comprehension flood them after all. Of course, he lowered his head in the next moment and muttered, “Everyone cares more about him than me. I don’t understand.”

Minerva restrained herself from exasperation. The Boy-Who-Lived really was a boy, a child, and she would not yell at him, no matter how much she wanted to. She would explain instead.

“Mr. Potter,” she said, and waited until his gaze was fixed sullenly on her again, “I want to tell you about the ritual that your brother used on your mother. It was an ancient one, and it could not have happened unless your mother had wronged Harry—so wronged him that she deserved to have her magic taken away.”

Connor blinked. Then he looked at Harry. “I don’t believe you,” he said, his voice harsh, “but I’ll listen if you can *really* tell me what she did to you.”

Minerva faced Harry. Connor’s response made her cautiously hopeful. Perhaps the boy could be rescued from Sirius’s and his mother’s influence, after all, and if it meant not having to either protect Harry from his brother’s attacks or assign the punishments she’d promised Connor...

She was surprised, therefore, when Harry lifted his head and shook it, lips pressed tightly together.

Harry had already made his decision—long before he entered the room, actually, but in concrete fashion ever since he’d realized what he’d done, leaving Connor alone with Lily and Sirius for days.

He’s already had his family ripped apart. I can’t prevent that. I can’t do anything to give him his father back, or his brother, or Remus. But I can let him have Mum and Sirius. They’ve already chosen to be heroes. I can confirm that.

Giving up his brother’s regard hurt him like a branding with a red-hot iron in the center of his chest, but what did it matter? It was only another sacrifice, after all. It wasn’t like he wasn’t used to making them.

He felt Snape’s hand tighten on his shoulder from behind. He felt Remus staring at him. He felt McGonagall’s eyes narrow in disapproval. None of that mattered. He had suffered worse when his brother first looked at him with hatred. He could ease past this best if he knew that Connor was also on the way to healing.

Lily had said that she wanted him to preserve Connor’s innocence for as long as possible. Harry was doing so. Later, when he was ready to hear it—when his heart wasn’t torn into tiny shreds by the loss of his mother’s magic and the betrayal of his brother—then perhaps Harry could tell him the truth. But, for now, it would be like hurling himself against a wall while

simultaneously tearing open Connor's wounds again, and again, and again, and again.

Harry had suffered enough of that himself in the last year. He would not let it happen to his twin.

Of course, he would not lie, either, but he could see what conclusions Connor was drawing from his silence, and he let him draw them. The victorious light in Connor's eyes grew brighter. Harry breathed a little easier. Anything, *anything*, was better than the defeat and despair he'd seen there.

"I'll keep your punishments in mind, Professor," Connor told McGonagall casually, and then went over to kneel beside Sirius, ignoring both Harry and Remus completely.

McGonagall tried to say something, but Harry didn't hear what it was. He'd done what he had to, and his body was demanding that he go to sleep. He yawned and did, not even hearing whether or not McGonagall released Snape from the silencing spell. He would have to hope she did. Snape was capable of releasing himself, of course, but if he did, then his anger was probably also severe enough to make him use wandless, nonverbal magic against Sirius and Connor.

"Drink."

Harry blinked, but didn't have much choice, as the cup of pumpkin juice was practically shoved in his face when he awakened. He took it from Snape's hands and downed it, then looked around. He was on the Transfigured couch in Snape's quarters. He could feel the potions in the juice working, one to ease the pain in his head, another to ease his drowsiness. Harry yawned anyway, and sat up, continuing to sip at the juice.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Nearly midnight." Snape prowled around in front of him and stood there, watching him drink. Harry realized his face was blank—utterly so. His eyes held no smoldering hatred, no sarcasm, no anger. If Harry absolutely had to find words to describe his expression, or lack of it, he would have said that Snape looked serious.

Harry swallowed. "Won't Draco be worried about me?" he asked.

"He would be," Snape agreed, "but I have spoken to him, and he knows where you are. He said something about your giving him a Christmas gift tomorrow?"

Harry smiled slightly. "Yes."

Snape nodded. "But that is tomorrow, and this is tonight." He sat down on the chair that Harry had taken earlier, when he was freeing Remus from the *Obliviate*. "Harry. We must talk."

Harry tilted his head. "About what?" He could guess some of the subjects, but he had not expected Snape to address them this early or in quite this way.

"Your rushing into Lupin's head without any warning or preparation would be a good start," said Snape. He would have said Remus's name with a curl of his lip ordinarily, or the words themselves with dry sarcasm. He didn't. Harry felt his heart begin to pound, and shifted defensively backwards. "Why?" Snape asked.

"I wanted him free," Harry replied. "I was sure I could do it." And he had been sure, a rush of dazzling confidence overcoming him. Of course, there was more to it. "And I thought that Remus might change his mind at any moment and decide to stay hidden behind the barriers," he added.

"If he had changed his mind, then that was surely his choice," said Snape. "And I believe that he would have changed it back soon enough. There was no excuse for what you did, Harry. None."

Harry winced. "Did I hurt him?" he whispered. Remus hadn't seemed that hurt, especially since McGonagall had calmed him before he bit Sirius, but it was possible that Harry had caused mental wounds.

"No," said Snape. "But, quite apart from that, you could have hurt yourself."

Harry looked down at his hands, and said nothing.

“You have been reckless,” said Snape softly. “Journeys into the Forbidden Forest. How many, Harry?”

“Just two, really,” Harry muttered. “One with Remus and Sirius on a full moon night at the end of October, and one when Connor was in danger from Fenrir Greyback.”

Snape closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “And then there is the fact that you went to Godric’s Hollow for Christmas,” he said, “and released your parents from *Fugitivus Animus*, despite knowing that you could have put yourself in danger by doing so.”

Harry looked up. “I didn’t mean to release Dad.”

Snape pinched his lips shut, as though he would say something about James Potter, but refrained. Harry was glad; it was the first sign he’d seen of the normal Snape since the conversation began. “Nevertheless, he was released,” said Snape slowly. “Minerva assured me of that. And he has left Godric’s Hollow, and gone Merlin knows where.”

“Do you think he’s in danger, too?” Harry asked.

“I don’t *care*.” Snape leaned forward abruptly, and the growl was back, twisting in cold anger under his voice. This time, though, Harry had the distinct impression that Snape really was angry with *him*. “The point is, what if he had decided to do something to hurt you before you could get to the Malfoys? Or if he is hunting you even now? You have insured only that Lily could not hurt you.”

“She was the only one I was angry enough at,” said Harry.

“Because she used the phoenix web,” Snape surmised.

Harry nodded. “Yes.”

“You did not tell us about that,” said Snape, his voice softer than darkness.

Harry looked away. “I didn’t think that I could relive it.”

“You managed in the Headmaster’s office.”

Harry gave his head a quick shake. “What’s the point of listing all of these times I was in danger at me?”

“Because I think you have little to no care for your own *life*,” Snape hissed, and reached out to catch one of Harry’s wrists. “Or your own sanity, given the way you answered Dumbledore’s summons the day it came, or how you stepped into the werewolf’s head. Nor do you explain things that badly need to be explained.” His free hand swiped across Harry’s forehead, and came away covered with blood. Harry started guiltily.

“Draco mentioned something about nightmares,” Snape said, staring hard at him, “and blood coming from your scar. Somehow, you had neglected to mention them to me. It is good that he did, or I would have panicked when you began bleeding and I could not wake you.”

Harry swallowed. It was true that he’d had the dream of the two dark figures writhing in torment again, and the circle of shadows closing in. But he had kept them from Snape because...

“I didn’t want you to worry,” he whispered.

“I *choose* to worry,” Snape snapped. “And I worry when I see you continuing a self-destructive course that you have pursued for *months*, long before you confronted that woman who was pleased to call herself your mother.”

“You told me once that I could not treat you as a child, nor coddle you. But you must have restrictions, Harry. You will hurt other wizards as well as yourself if you do not. I consider it a miracle that you turned to a ritual to deal with Lily, and not rage that could have destroyed everyone in the house.”

“It was a near thing,” Harry whispered.

Snape nodded grimly. “I am going to allow you to choose the restrictions,” he said, “so that you can live with them. But there

are going to be restrictions, Harry. I promise you that.”

Harry met his eyes, and let out a slow breath. “Would you start teaching me Occlumency again, sir?”

The tight lines around Snape’s eyes relaxed the slightest bit. “That would be a start.”

Harry sighed, and prepared himself for a relatively long series of negotiations. He didn’t mind as much as he pretended, though he still didn’t completely understand why Snape was so worried about him, as he had managed to survive, and he had trained to make his death, when it came, mean something.

But beneath the incomprehension was a glimmer of warmth.

This is more proof, I think, that he really does feel the affection he says he does.

Draco tore the wrapping away from his present and let out a crow. “Harry! Where did you *find* one?” He turned the book around in his hands, delightedly, and then flipped open to a random page. He grinned at Harry in the next moment. “This dance says that you’re never supposed to have your elbows on the table while eating,” he said, prodding at Harry’s right elbow.

“I just found it,” said Harry vaguely, drawing his elbows back and watching Draco in amusement. The truth was that he’d combined a Transfiguration spell with his wandless magic one day in early December, just before Lucius Malfoy’s visit, and managed to create what he wanted: a book of pureblood rituals and dances, drawn from his own memory, that would enhance Draco’s training in them. But Draco was watching him like a hawk that morning, and seemed to take any evidence of wandless magic as evidence of exhaustion. Harry was not going to get into an argument by mentioning how he’d created the book. He infinitely preferred a happy, cheerful Draco.

“It’s *wonderful*,” said Draco, and admired the book’s white leather cover for a moment more before he turned and pushed Harry’s own present to him across the table. “Go on, open it!”

Laughing, Harry opened it—and gasped. He lifted the round object gently out, blinking. It was a clock, rather like the family clock that had hung in Godric’s Hollow, with hands for his parents, Connor, him, Sirius, and Remus. However, this one had four hands, and thus four names, on it.

Draco, Harry, Snape, Narcissa.

In place of times, the clock displayed titles for TRAINING, SLEEPING, EATING, WRITING, STUDYING, IN DANGER, HAVING FUN, IN CLASS, MAKING POTIONS, and, Harry was simultaneously pleased and disturbed to note, PLOTTING. Snape’s hand was firmly lodged under the last one. Narcissa was writing something, probably a letter.

Draco’s hand was under HAVING FUN, and as Harry watched, his own hand shifted from EATING to that one, as well.

Harry swallowed several times, and then raised his eyes to Draco’s face. “Thank you,” he said softly.

Draco smiled at him. “You’re welcome.” He paused in the midst of saying something else as an owl skimmed overhead and landed on the table, brushing crumbs of breakfast out of the way as it offered its leg to Harry. Harry looked with a frown at Draco, but Draco only shook his head, shrugging. He didn’t know what it was.

Harry unrolled the long, slender package, surprised to note that it was a wand made of some polished dark wood, probably ebony. The note that came with it was brief and to the point.

Mr. Potter:

This wand belonged to a friend of yours who has been too long without it, in a gray and dreary place. Please see that it is returned to him. A certain weaver of webs has had it for twelve years.

There was no signature, but Harry didn’t need one. He saw the handwriting on his Transfiguration homework all the time.

He looked up the head table, and met McGonagall’s gaze. The professor saluted him with her goblet.

Harry gently placed Peter's wand back in the package and nodded to her. He avoided Dumbledore's gaze, and his brother's, because he wanted to enjoy, just for one moment, this feeling of warmth and alliance, without having it spoiled.

"Now you *have* to tell me what that was," Draco said.

Harry blinked and looked at the family clock, then smiled slightly. His hand was pointing firmly at PLOTTING.

~*~*~*~*~*