

(from the end of Chapter 26)

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.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven: Trelawney's Second Prophecy

"Catch."

That was all the warning Harry gave Peter before he tossed him his wand. It seemed to be the only warning Peter needed, though, as he snatched the wand deftly out of the air with his hand—his left, Harry noted—and then pulled it close to him.

Harry halted and watched with a small grin, taking the opportunity to renew his warming charms. Peter stared at the ebony wand with the look that Harry imagined he would have if one of the other Marauders walked up, stuck out his hand, and offered to renew their friendship. His wrist trembled as he slowly held the wand up before him, pointed it at nothing in particular, and whispered, "*Lumos*."

Harry applauded as light began to glow at the tip of the wand and spread out in front of him, illuminating the snow that stretched around the edge of the Forbidden Forest, unbroken save for his tracks, Peter's, and a long, thin, sinuous trail that Harry thought he could live without knowing the source of. Peter pulled his wand back towards him. He was still staring.

Then he looked up and let out a short breath. "Where did you get this?" he whispered.

Harry shrugged. "McGonagall delivered it to me. You'd have to ask her." He grimaced and adjusted his scarf so that it wrapped more closely around his neck as a gust of chill wind nipped at his throat. Peter wore ragged clothes bundled on ragged clothes. Harry knew he was probably stealing them. At least he'd be able to use magic now, with his wand back. "I've had it for about three weeks. I'm sorry I couldn't come out and see you earlier to give it back, but Snape kept me on a tighter leash than I thought." The one good thing Harry could say about the restrictions Snape had negotiated with him was that he filled the time Harry had to spend in the castle with defensive magic training and brewing potions other than Wolfsbane. If Harry had been forced to do completely non-productive things during that time, like sleep, he would have fretted.

"Thank you," Peter whispered one more time, and slipped the wand into his coat pocket.

Harry hesitated, then asked. "I wanted to know how you were avoiding the Dementors for so long, and managing to survive."

Peter flashed something that could only be called a grin because it was on his face and used his teeth and lips. "I spend a lot of time as a rat, Harry. We don't get cold as easily, and I can always find plenty to eat."

"Oh, right," Harry muttered, feeling stupid. But then, he'd been feeling that way an awful lot these past three weeks. He suspected that he'd made a mistake, but asking Draco and Snape about it only produced vehement assurances that no, he hadn't. He had come here only partly to return Peter's wand.

Peter recognized the signs on his face, and made a soft snorting noise that Harry suspected no rat, ever, had made. "Ask the next question, Harry. I promise you, I don't bite." He bared his oversized front teeth again. "Unless you're Dumbledore."

Harry laughed, and used the laughter to ease his way into the next question. "Um—do you know what happened with Lily?"

Peter nodded slowly, his eyes fastened on him. "I've been—sniffing around a few places where Dumbledore neglected to close the wards," he said. "I wasn't a Marauder for nothing, you know. And I heard some things. But not the whole truth."

Harry let out a sharp breath. "Well. I used a justice ritual on her. A pureblood dance. It made her a Muggle."

"And your brother blames you," Peter surmised easily. He sighed. "I'm not surprised, really. Lily and Sirius got to him first, and for Merlin knows what reason, they've always wanted to fill his head with drivel. I suppose you told him the truth and he disbelieved you entirely, yes?"

Harry swallowed. Here was the crux of the mistake he suspected he had made. “Um.”

Peter stared hard at him, eyes beady in the faint light still glowing from inside his coat pocket. “*Harry*,” he said, sounding shocked.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I really did mean to,” he said. “Honest. But I thought he should get to have whatever family and innocence he has left, and—“

“You’re a fool,” said Peter bluntly. Harry blinked, but nodded. He could accept the insult without flinching. He certainly deserved it if he really had made the mistake he’d suspected he’d made. “Sirius isn’t fit to be anyone’s family. And Dumbledore is the one who’ll control him now. Lily can barely act without his control.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” said Harry, remembering the Muggle’s eyes, and then pushed the notion away. He didn’t like thinking about her. “The thing is, I don’t know how to tell Connor about the justice ritual without telling him about everything she did to make it necessary.”

“The phoenix web?” Peter asked.

Harry nodded. “Among other things.”

“And why would you want to keep them secret?”

“I don’t like anyone knowing about them,” said Harry flatly. “Everyone who knows about them does so either because they did them, or because they suffered something similar—like you—or because I couldn’t prevent them from learning about them.” He scowled, thinking of Snape, and how he’d kept prying details of his nightmares from Harry, details that Harry had never meant to give. “And I thought that Connor shouldn’t have to grow up so fast—“

“I was hoping you’d share my story with him,” said Peter, his voice rising slightly. “I was hoping to see him out here with you some night. I thought he was simply being stubborn, or Sirius had got to him first and convinced him to believe whatever he wanted. But now, to hear that you haven’t told him at all—“ He narrowed his eyes at Harry. “I’m disappointed in you, Harry.”

Harry took a deep breath and forced the screaming memories to retreat and leave his mind clear. That was one of the Occlumency techniques that Snape had taught him, one that let the memories swim under the surface of his thoughts, present, but not interfering with his emotions. He couldn’t hear the echo of the Muggle’s voice in Peter’s every time he said something like that. If he had failed, then he had failed, and that didn’t mean that he’d failed the intense training program the Muggle had set him, where his failure would mean his brother’s death.

“I’ll talk to him, then,” said Harry quietly. “I asked Draco and Snape about it, but they both said I didn’t have to.”

“You have to,” said Peter, almost violently. “Go to Dumbledore if you have to, if Connor won’t listen. Ask him what it would take to win your brother free.” He leaned back and stared hard at Harry. “Do you know one of the reasons that I agreed to become Sirius’s sacrifice in the first place, Harry?”

Harry blinked. “I thought Dumbledore persuaded you. Or compelled you. And that Sirius was going to break.”

Peter inclined his head. “There was some of all of that. But truly, I thought it would...win me their true friendship. I loved them. I could already see by our sixth year in Hogwarts that they didn’t love me in quite the same way.” His mouth twisted. “I was too small, or too fat, or not sympathetic enough, I suppose.”

Harry wondered how long it had taken him to recite those truths without flinching to himself.

“I thought,” Peter whispered, “that being a sacrifice would make them realize how much I was worth.”

He opened his hands and raised his voice again. “And it didn’t. They never came to see me in Azkaban. They never seemed to think of me again, except to describe me as an evil traitor.”

He looked directly into Harry’s eyes. “Sacrificing yourself like this isn’t the way to get your brother to love you, Harry.”

If he had punched Harry, he could not have stunned him more. Harry stood there, blinking, the mist of his breath steaming

before him, and could not think of anything to say.

“Go talk to him,” Peter whispered. “If you love him, but not only because of that. If you want him to love you. I should have refused Dumbledore. The others couldn’t have disliked me more than they did. And I would have had my freedom. I think you can have more than that. If you love your brother so fiercely, then there must be something good there to love.

“Go talk to him.”

Harry took a deep breath, nodded once, and then turned and walked back to school, hearing behind him the scamper of a rat’s paws on the snow.

“Connor.”

Connor turned around and tensed. Harry walked up to him, breathing as calmly as he could. He reminded himself that everyone else would be at dinner in the Great Hall still, or working furiously on homework due the next day, as it was Sunday evening. He’d tracked Connor to this remote corner of the school with the Marauder’s Map. He could speak with him without anyone else interfering.

Connor folded his arms. “I’m meeting Sirius,” he said, voice sharp as a slap. “Go away.”

“I can’t.” Harry shook his head. His hands were shaking, too. He clasped them behind his back to still that quiver. Nearly as strong as his fear of telling the truth was the nausea at the thought of what his failure could have cost Connor. Harry tried as hard as he could to ignore his training. It wouldn’t do either of them any good now.

Connor watched him in silence. His arms were still folded, his head tilted to one side, his hazel eyes narrowed with dislike. Harry realized abruptly that the pose was one he hadn’t seen his brother use before. He’d almost certainly copied it from Sirius.

“I have to tell you about the ritual I used on Mum,” said Harry. He could call her that, for the sake of repairing his relationship with his brother. He didn’t want to call her “the Muggle” and see Connor’s eyes widen in disgust. “It was a justice ritual, Connor, not a vengeance ritual, whatever they told you. I promise. It wouldn’t have worked if she hadn’t hurt me.”

“So Professor McGonagall has been trying to convince me,” said Connor, in a lazy drawl that sounded like Sirius...maybe. Harry hadn’t heard Sirius sound quite so contemptuous. *Maybe this is the voice that he uses when they’re alone and talking about Slytherins.* “But it’s not true. I know it can’t be true. Mum and Sirius already told me that it was a vengeance ritual.”

“I promise it was,” said Harry. “What do you want me to swear by? Merlin? Magic? My love for you? I’m prepared to swear by any and all of them.” He was, too. That would content some of the anxiety beating in his mind, in fact. A pureblood ritual was just the thing.

“I don’t want you to swear by anything,” said Connor, his voice unexpectedly raw. “Mum told me that you’d try an oath like that, to get me to listen. She said I couldn’t trust you, that it wasn’t possible for a Slytherin to keep his word. And Sirius agreed with her.”

Harry took a step back, uncertain, then rallied. “I don’t—“

“Have you seen her, Harry?” Connor whispered. “Have you *seen* her at all since you made her into a Muggle and took her magic away from her? She looks like a moth. She can barely move, barely lift her head from her pillow in the mornings. Sirius Apparated me to Godric’s Hollow to see her. If Dumbledore hadn’t sent a house elf to take care of her, she’d be entirely alone, since Dad ran away like the coward he is.” Connor’s voice scraped and hissed. “She has no interest in anything. She doesn’t want to eat. She sleeps all the time. Does that sound like you left her fucking *alive*?” Connor’s voice was rising now.

Harry winced. They were in the fifth floor corridor, but Connor could attract a prefect’s attention any moment. But he had promised Peter he would do this, and he did want Connor to understand, if he could.

“She hurt me, Connor,” said Harry in a rush, before he could change his mind.

Connor stared hard at him, then shook his head with a snort. “No, she didn’t,” he said. “I never saw a bruise on you, and you couldn’t have hidden that.”

“Not that way,” said Harry. “Mentally. I had something called a phoenix web on me. You can ask Hermione about it if you don’t believe me. She can confirm it exists. It bound my magic, and it forced me to think about serving you and loving you before anything else.”

Connor stared at him. Harry stared back, and waited for some reaction.

Then Connor shook his head again and said, “I don’t understand. You’ve always loved me anyway, Harry.” His voice was wistful. It changed before Harry could take advantage of it. “Or I *thought* you did. So if the web was forcing you to love people and not hurt them with your magic, then it was good. It must be.” He took a step forward. “Is that why you don’t love me any more, why you hurt Mum worse than killing her? Because you were only a good person because the web made you be?”

Harry clenched his hands. “No,” he said quietly. “It’s much more complicated than that, Connor. You don’t understand everything yet. I can tell you the full story—“

“She said you would do this, too,” Connor interrupted. “Mum, I mean. She said you would say that I didn’t understand everything, and that you had to tell me long stories to explain everything. I don’t believe it, Harry.” His face had entirely closed now. “She *said* so, and she wouldn’t lie. She loves me.”

Harry bit back an eruption of bile. He recognized his mother’s tactics, all too well. He *had* left things too long.

Connor turned away. Harry moved forward and gently took his brother’s arm.

Connor came around swinging. Harry rolled, and managed to make it look as though the blow had hurt him more than it did. As it was, he just grazed his cheek on Connor’s fist and his shoulder on the floor.

“What’s all this, then?”

Harry glanced up, blinking, as Percy Weasley came into the light of the torches. His face was flushed, as though he’d hurried down the corridor, and his eyes darted suspiciously between one of them and the other.

“Were you fighting, Connor?” he demanded. “Ten points from Gryffindor if you were fighting.”

“No, Percy,” said Connor, with a wide-eyed innocent look that Harry recognized from Sirius’s face long ago, before any of this had happened. “I promise. I was on my way to study, and he ambushed me.”

Harry met Percy’s eyes steadily as Percy turned and looked at him. He didn’t get a steady gaze in return. Percy glanced away at once, then flashed his Head Boy badge.

“I’m rather afraid I’m going to have to take you to see the Headmaster, Harry,” he said. “Can’t get away with keeping students from their studies.”

Harry nodded sharply, once. He didn’t know why Percy was here—probably watching over him at Dumbledore’s orders again, the way he had been last year—and he didn’t care. Peter had told him to try Dumbledore if all else failed, to try and get Connor away from Lily and Sirius.

“Let’s go, then,” he said, and set off firmly in the direction of the gargoyle, leaving Percy to stumble after him.

“My dear boys.” Harry marveled that the Headmaster could sound perfectly calm with Percy, red-faced and panting, and Harry, his body tingling with magic, in front of him. But he did sound that way, and he waved them to the two chairs that Harry recognized as having been there when he and Snape had visited. This time, there were no tricks with the height. They could sit in them comfortably, though Percy was mopping his face as though he had run too long a way and could not possibly be comfortable. “What can I do for you?”

“I caught Harry fighting with Connor in the corridors, sir,” said Percy, in that pompous tone. Harry wondered idly if it was unique to him, or if all Head Boys had it. “And since you told me—well, since Connor is so important, I thought it best to

bring him to you right away.”

“Of course, of course, Percy. That is the kind of initiative a Head Boy should take.” Dumbledore turned to Harry. “And what do you say, Harry? Were you fighting with your brother?”

Harry met Dumbledore’s eyes. The old man was calm and patient, damn it, and Harry could feel the dangerous boil of his own temper. He more often got hot anger than cold lately, it seemed. Snape said that was a sign of progress. Harry wondered if that was really what they should call it, but he could hardly dispute it; his own cold anger had frightened him, and Snape knew more than he did about Occlumency.

“I would like to speak to you in private, sir,” he said. “About my brother.”

Dumbledore waved a courteous hand at Percy. “Mr. Weasley has a share of responsibility in caring for the castle, too, Harry. I would say that he can hear anything you say to me.”

“About my mother, sir? And Sirius?”

Percy stood at once. “Oh, I could leave, Professor Dumbledore, if these are private family matters—“

“Yes,” said Dumbledore, his eyes on Harry. “Perhaps you should.” But he still sounded curious, intrigued, rather than upset. It frustrated Harry.

He closed his eyes and pictured one of the pools of quicksilver that Snape had taught to him, one of the fluid containers for his emotions during Occlumency. They worked far better than solid ones like the box, but they operated on the same principle. By the time Percy shut the door, Harry was calm again. He opened his eyes and made himself meet Dumbledore’s gaze without much expression.

“Now, Harry?” Dumbledore encouraged him gently. “You were saying?”

Harry let out a deep breath. “They’ve poisoned Connor’s mind,” he said. “They told him lies about the justice ritual. And I want him removed from them. They’re putting him in danger.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Your mother has a right to see her child, Harry. Since your father has vanished, and Connor does not have another guardian, she is his best protection, right now. And Sirius would never wish to kill or harm Connor as he did you.”

Harry blinked. “Why?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “When you heard about the—unpleasantness—in Sirius’s past, I told you, Harry. It is Dark magic that exacerbates the failing stability of his mind. You leak Dark magic. He does not like Severus, or Slytherins, for much the same reason. But Connor’s gift is Light. He and Sirius have done enough research to convince me of it. Connor is safe with Sirius as you would never be.”

Harry bit his lower lip. “Still, sir, Sirius is insane. I would like if it I could go to lessons with Connor.”

“As I would have been able to say if you had not interrupted me,” Dumbledore continued, “there is no longer his insanity to worry about—though I cannot speak of what his loathing for Dark magic might push him to do. I have made a device for him that confines his thoughts and leads them back into soothing patterns when they become too agitated. Before Christmas, I thought he could manage, but seeing what happened to your poor mother has become too much for him.”

Harry shook his head slowly. “So you could have cured him at any time?”

“This is not a cure,” said Dumbledore. “It is a prevention—much as Muggle crutches will prevent one from collapsing to the floor, but do not cure a broken leg by themselves. It took me some time to work out that it was needed, and why it was needed, and to make it. You can ask to see it for yourself if you like. It’s a large golden ornament that he wears on a chain around his neck.”

Now that Harry thought about it, he had seen such a chain around Sirius’s neck. But he hadn’t been around his godfather long enough to notice any true change in his behavior.

He debated for a moment whether he could leave it there, but then his thoughts returned to the bile that Connor had spewed in

the corridors. Yes, some of it had Sirius's mark, but more had his mother's.

"I don't think he should be around the Muggle, either," he said firmly. "She's dangerous."

"And who made her that way, Harry?" Dumbledore's gaze was level and absolutely clear.

Harry once again dipped some of his emotions in the quicksilver. "Please, Headmaster. I am asking you to remove him from her. You can take up guardianship of him yourself. I think it would suffice, since after all the Ministry does trust you—" he thought of Scrimgeour to calm himself this time—"and I know that you value him."

Dumbledore simply watched him, until Harry thought the man's face had frozen in that inscrutable expression. Then he said, "I will not deprive your mother of her only true son, Harry." Harry flinched despite himself, and the Headmaster continued speaking as if he had not noticed. "But if there was a way to reverse what was done to her, then I might agree, since I could give her a son back to replace the one she lost."

Harry wondered if he had plunged all his thoughts underwater, and not only the ones that had produced uncomfortable emotions. His vision swam as he said, "You know that the ritual cannot be reversed, sir."

"I was not thinking of that," said Dumbledore, and spread his hands. "I was thinking of putting you under the phoenix web again, making you what you were. If you agree to that, I will take over the training of Connor's compulsion gift from Sirius, and Lily will not see Connor again until she is more—herself, and ready to deal with him."

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair. This was the keenest pincer that had yet gripped him.

He had said that he would never go under the phoenix web again.

But Connor was in danger.

But he had said that he was never going back under it.

But Connor was in danger.

But he had said that he needed his freedom.

But Lily might hurt Connor.

Harry thought he might have come close to crying then, except that he never wanted to cry in front of the Headmaster.

He made his decision.

He took a deep breath, ragged with the sound of sobs, and stood, and met Dumbledore's expectant eyes.

"Fuck you very much, sir," he said quietly, and walked out of the office.

"Oooh, yes, dear," said Professor Trelawney excitedly, as she peered into Lavender Brown's carefully arranged leaves from around the lake. "Yes, I think I see your future husband in here." She paused so that Brown's giggles could rush over her, and continued. "Yes, quite a handsome fellow he is... tall, and what is this? He is wearing a crown!" She turned and blinked at the class who crowded behind her, many of them half-asleep in the incense-soaked Tower room. It was an unusually warm day for early February, which didn't help the situation. "Who can tell me what a crown means?"

A few people desultorily flipped through their books, looking for the symbol. Harry caught Hermione's eyes and rolled his own. Hermione made the same gesture back. She was looking increasingly disgusted with Trelawney, and now and then her hand went up to toy with something around her neck, something that kept radiating incredibly powerful magic when Harry bothered to pay attention to it.

Ron and Connor were on the other side of the room. It looked like Ron was imitating Trelawney, and earning a snort of laughter from Harry's twin. When he saw Harry watching, he frowned.

Harry glanced away. He was beginning to hate this waste of a class. He had signed up for Divination so he could share

another class with Connor, but that had been in the warm camaraderie—of a sort—last year, when anything had seemed possible. Harry was becoming steadily convinced, however, that Trelawney would only ever say something useful by accident. He stayed in the class for those hints, now and then listening as she twittered over tea or leaves or bits of spun spiderweb.

And he could talk to Hermione, of course, he thought, as he leaned carefully nearer the Gryffindor witch, watching the professor from the corner of her eye. It was a mark of Hermione's disdain for the subject that she actually *would* talk instead of listening diligently and scribbling notes.

"Anything?"

"Nothing," Hermione whispered back, the way she did every class. This time, though, she hesitated, and drew the thing around her neck out of her robe. Harry blinked at it. It resembled nothing so much as a small silver hourglass dangling on the chain. It was polished to a bright sheen, but he saw nothing about it that should make it so powerful, unless—

"A Time-Turner?" he whispered.

"Of course," said Hermione, looking a little displeased that Harry had managed to guess what the thing was without her input. She shrugged in the next moment, though, and checked on Trelawney's position—the professor was now going on about Parvati Patil's luck on the next Tuesday when a full moon occurred—then whispered, "Professor McGonagall got it for me so I could attend more classes. I just have to be careful never to meet myself."

Harry nodded. "And you used it in the library to research the phoenix web, too?" he asked.

Now Hermione *did* look annoyed. "How did you know that?"

"You wouldn't have got it out unless it had something to do with what we were talking about, and we were talking about your research on the phoenix web," said Harry, with a shrug.

Hermione muttered something that sounded like, "Slytherins," but she went on before Harry could call her on it. "I tried, Harry," she said. "I found books that hinted at its existence, and told me where to look. But every single book I tried to find was gone. They're either in the hands of a Professor, or they're in the Restricted Section." She looked cross.

Harry sighed. He supposed he should have suspected that. *Dumbledore. Always an irritant.*

What he wanted Hermione to do would have been much easier with proof, but there was the chance that Connor would trust the word of his friend even without it. "Can you talk to Connor?" he whispered. "I tried to tell him what being under the phoenix web was like, and he didn't believe me that it was evil. I know we don't have the books, but you were in the meeting that day, and—"

"Mr. Potter!" Trelawney fluted at him. She was hovering right over him now, and staring down into the muddy, moldy, half-frozen leaves that Harry had laid on his table. "Let us see what your leaves say."

They say you're an old bat who should shut up and leave me alone, Harry thought in annoyance, but he restrained his temper. He looked once at Hermione, who nodded at him. Trelawney mistook the reason for the nod, and turned to Hermione.

"And what do your leaves say, dear?" she asked. "Or do you have an idea what Mr. Potter's leaves say?"

Hermione opened her mouth, a sharp look on her face, then glanced at Harry, sighed, and modulated her voice into a sickly sweet tone. "I'm sorry, Professor," she said. "I couldn't quite read this bit." She stabbed at a curling, wet brown corner off one leaf. "Do you think it's a sailing ship, or a cloud?"

Trelawney shifted over to look. Harry flashed a grateful smile at Hermione, who glared back at him.

One day, she really is going to lose it at her, Harry thought, as he leaned back and waited for the charade to end. *But not today.*

Harry left Divination early and by himself, as usual, but lingered near the bottom of the ladder to the Tower. He ought to be able to hear Hermione's and Connor's conversation from there. He knew that Hermione would start out in a reasonable tone,

but Connor's voice would probably escalate.

What he didn't realize was how *quickly* it would happen.

"—don't talk to me about my brother!" Connor yelled. "I *know* that he put you up to this. It's not true, it's not, and I don't want to hear anything about it again!" Then he added something else, something low-voiced and vicious that resulted in a loud gasp, and a whisper from Ron along the lines of, "You really shouldn't have said that, mate."

Hermione came down the ladder in the next few minutes. Harry didn't quite dare to speak to her. She gave him a dire look, shook her head, said, "*Him*," and stormed off up the corridor.

Harry sighed. He knew it wasn't the best time to go talk to his brother, but at least he knew where Connor was, and they would have an audience, in the form of Ron and Professor Trelawney. He didn't think Connor would hurt him too badly with them there. At least the subject was uppermost in his brother's mind right then.

He'd just put a hand on the bottom rung of the ladder when he heard a skittering noise down the hall. Harry spun, his magic rising around him. He squinted when he realized that he could see only a small rock, moving back and forth by itself, in the middle of the hall. It paused as if it saw him watching it, then turned and rolled down the corridor.

Harry drew his wand.

Something else skittered out from nothingness and joined the pebble. It was a spider, Harry thought, but then he saw the flash of the torches off metal and jewels, and snarled to himself. It was another artificial Dark creature, like the one that had attacked Draco.

He approached the thing with long strides.

The pebble stopped rocking, and the spider scuttled to meet him with a rush of air. Harry flung himself to the side, aimed his wand, and muttered, "*Petrificus Totalus*."

The spell didn't work, as he had thought it might not. The spider stood facing him, motionless for a moment, then flung out a loop of jeweled silk into the air. Harry watched it warily. Was it going to grab the ceiling, or the floor, or a torch sconce?

It did none of those things. It drifted in the air for a moment, then abruptly exploded into a cloud of silvery spores.

Harry covered his nose and mouth and ducked at once. He had heard about things like this. Breathing in the spores was *not* a good idea. He coughed anyway, and felt dizzy, which might have meant that some of them got in, but he retained his consciousness and his balance.

No more playing around, he thought, and spoke calmly. "*Reducto*."

The spider smashed apart. Harry walked over and carefully kicked at the pieces to make sure they wouldn't move anymore, then glanced around. He could see no sign of more spiders, nor of whoever had released this one.

He shook his head and walked back to the ladder, keeping an eye over his shoulder. He supposed he would have to tell Draco and Snape about this, though the attack was so small and seemed pointless. Was it a warning? Of what?

Harry quelled the temptation to run back to the dungeons to check on Draco. He would, as soon as he was done talking to his brother. Connor was still up in the Tower. Maybe Ron was arguing with him about whatever he'd said to Hermione, and that meant that Harry could catch him when he was feeling guilty.

He climbed until he reached the Divination classroom, and felt an odd stillness in the air even as he entered it. He felt a wind brush past him, and saw a silver flash near the wall that had him drawing his wand again.

What bothered him most, however, was the sight of Trelawney, her eyes rolled back in her head and her voice a chill, dead monotone, as she recited words at a stunned Connor and Ron.

"...*stand or fall*."

Then she collapsed.

Harry must have made a noise, because Ron turned around and saw him. He was dazed, shaking his head. Connor hurried forward to help Trelawney.

“I was going to talk to him...” Harry whispered, eyes on the downed teacher.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Ron, and grimaced as he began scratching at his shoulders. “She just went crazy and recited a load of drivel at us.”

“Did you not remember it?” Harry demanded. He didn’t think Trelawney was more than a fraud, really he didn’t, but if ever circumstances would pull a true prophecy from her, these were the circumstances. He checked for another sign of the silver flash, but couldn’t see it.

“Sorry, mate, no.” Ron shook his head. “I don’t—“

“Go away.”

Harry looked at Connor’s face and surprised a murderous expression there. Carefully, he raised his hands and backed towards the entrance of the classroom again.

Of course, he felt obligated to ask. “What was it, Connor? A prophecy? Was it meant for you?”

“I don’t have to tell you.” Connor’s face was flushed an ugly red. “And I don’t want to talk to you, Harry. *Go away.*”

Harry turned and left, quietly. He would continue his efforts to get on his brother’s good side and help him whether Connor wanted him to or not. This time, though, he would have the added curiosity of what exactly the prophecy might have said about his brother. Of course it would be about him, since he was the one who had heard it, and the Boy-Who-Lived.

That night, a new nightmare came hunting him.

Harry found himself on a flat dark plain, with shadows the only things that moved in the distance. He couldn’t see any buildings or trees. He stamped on the ground, and realized it was hard as iron. He shivered.

Then, abruptly, a dark, four-legged shape sprang into motion on the far side of the plain and rushed towards him.

Harry jumped out of the way just in time. He relaxed a bit in confusion, watching it as it ran. Was he seeing a werewolf? Or something else? He couldn’t make out anything other than the fact that the thing was four-legged, and fairly large.

He didn’t make out the much smaller creature that pursued the large one until it sprang and apparently locked teeth on the side of the large one’s neck.

The large thing screamed.

Harry screamed along with it. Pain that reminded him of *Crucio* wracked his body. He woke in a few instants, thrashing and tangled in his bedsheets, and all but blind. It took him a moment to realize that that didn’t come from the sheets, but from the blood pouring out of his scar and over his eyes.

Draco was there then, cradling his shoulders and attempting to soothe the pain. It was already gone, but Harry couldn’t find the voice or the breath to tell him so. He let Draco hold him and wipe the blood out of his eyes, and nodded when he thought he was all right to go to the hospital wing.

He remained silent even as Madam Pomfrey clucked and fussed over him, and Draco explained earnestly that he’d fallen and hit his head on his way back from the bathroom, because he was thinking about the images in his dream.

Though he didn’t know why his mind kept circling back to the idea—the shapes had been less than silhouettes, and he had no reason to think this was true, or even that the dream meant anything—he believed that the shapes he had seen were those of a rat and a dog.

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

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Gazing on Connor

If there is one thing I have learned, Albus thought, as he moved into the Great hall for breakfast, it is the importance of adaptability.

He took his seat at the head table and nodded to Sirius and Severus, the only ones already seated there. Sirius nodded back at him, a bright smile on his face. He smiled all the time since Albus had given him the golden bauble to hang around his neck. It really had been simpler than Albus had thought it would be to confine his thoughts and turn them back towards calmness. Because Sirius had not often let him look into his mind before, he had not known how many of those thoughts revolved around Dark magic. Having a central focus made them far easier to confine.

Severus scowled at him and turned away. Albus hid a sigh. He had behaved badly earlier in the year, he knew. Had he walked more carefully, he might have managed to retain Severus's loyalty—though an unusually large piece of it seemed to have been given to Harry Potter.

He knew why he hadn't walked more carefully. His emotions had blinded him, most especially his horror and dread of what Harry was becoming.

If I had thought about it, Albus decided, as the porridge appeared in his bowl and he began to eat, I would have realized what I had to do. Alas, thought was the furthest thing from my mind at that moment.

He *knew* how to survive. He *knew* that things changed, and he did have to change with them. Had he retained that lesson in the forefront of his mind, rather than the lessons imprinted by doing nothing about Tom Riddle while he was still a child, then he thought he would still have Harry as at least a tentative ally.

Things change, but must they be shoved along? Tom would freeze all things into changelessness, so very greatly does he fear death. And with Harry, or rather, with the vates he could become, all is change.

He lifted his head, eyes seeking Harry across the Hall. He was seated at the Slytherin table, of course.

Albus sighed to remember his utter surprise when the Hat had proclaimed Harry for Slytherin. It wasn't what he had expected, from Lily's account of the boy and what he observed when he visited Godric's Hollow, but that did not excuse his reactions. So much had been lost in that moment. If he had been faster, then he could have contained the damage. He could have invited Harry to his office and explained that no one would disdain him for belonging to the serpent House as long as he still acted with proper caution and courtesy and chivalry. Harry understood the ideals of sacrifice and lived them better than anyone else Albus had ever seen. He would have understood the idea of continuing with the sacrifice.

Albus could even have cast an auditory glamour charm, so that the Hat's shout would have sounded as Gryffindor instead of Slytherin. Then Harry could have gone into his proper House, and much disaster would have been averted.

But that would have required me to have some idea of what the Hat was going to shout, Albus thought, as he finished his porridge and turned to his pumpkin juice, and as we have already established, I did not.

There was a tone of self-deprecation to his thoughts, and he did not know why there should not be. He had made mistakes. He could admit it now, now that it was late February and the first flush of many rages was past—Harry's unbinding his magic, demanding Sirius's past, hurting Lily....

Now he would have to live in the changed world that had come about at least partly as the result of his mistakes, and adapt to what followed.

I must still be the balance, he thought, and his gaze went from Harry to Connor. The Gryffindor was chattering with his friends. Sirius's return to sanity had been good for him. He once again had an adult at the school whom he trusted unreservedly, and his friends somewhat helped to make up for the loss of his brother.

I must be the balance between frozen order and unbridled chaos. Only on the middle ground can life continue in the wizarding world much as it had been, without the reign of terror that Voldemort would bring about cruelly or Harry would bring about innocently.

There was still the chance that things could proceed as they always had. Albus was not defeated. His pieces moved on the

board yet. He could turn Harry back to his brother's side, and train Connor into the kind of leader who would swing the balance between order and chaos himself. Harry still bore part of the phoenix web. The longer he remained away from Connor, the more impatient it would get to bring him back to his brother's side.

That was the first possible path.

The second chance was that Harry would tear more and more free of Connor, and matters would continue to worsen. In that case, Albus knew, he would have to strike a truce with Harry—some bargain that would hold. He would have to ask the boy what he most wanted, and seal the matter, perhaps with a pureblood ritual. Albus dreaded matters coming to that pass, since he knew it would mean having to tell Lily that she really would never see her elder son again, but he was prepared to accept it now. In that case, nothing he did would make that much difference to Harry one way or another, until that fatal moment; this chance was the one that had the least impact on his plans.

That was the second possible path.

And in the third...

Albus narrowed his eyes, though he kept his face calm. The third was unpredictable, and he feared it would bring about the change and the chaos that he so feared. But he knew it also grew likelier the longer his patient, methodical plan to capture Peter again was delayed. At any moment, Peter might realize that Harry did not know the whole truth, or Harry might show it to him with a careless comment. And yet, the patient, methodical plan could not possibly be rushed.

If Harry learns the whole truth about the prophecy...

That was the third possible path, the one where Albus would have to do the most adaptation, the most pure survival, and the most careful guardianship. Should it come to pass, he would have to be Harry's ally, because there was no other choice with a wizard that powerful and that intensely violent at the mere mention of compulsion. Yet he would have to be prepared to turn against him at any moment, too, because if Harry went too far, Albus was the only one with the power and the commitment to hold him back.

And yet, the ironic edge to his thoughts, his constant companion in the last two months, pointed out, Harry would never have hated compulsion so much if you had not bound him. You have forged your own bane. You made him more like a vates by tying his magic.

Albus nodded, and put the regrets away. There was no room for them.

As Severus left to teach his first class and Minerva arrived to eat breakfast, as Sirius all but bounced out of the Hall while winking at Connor, as Harry stood and departed with the Malfoy heir in his wake, Albus sipped his pumpkin juice and reached out slowly, delicately. In his office, a Pensieve was glowing, and the memory it showed would be of a night twelve years ago when Albus had cast another phoenix web. From there, delicate, delicate threads of compulsion snaked out and towards Peter. Albus did not know exactly where he was hiding, nor how long it might take him to reconnect with the reordered phoenix web. He knew he was having some success; it was Peter who had suggested that Harry visit Albus, winning the Headmaster another chance to make an offer to Harry, and Peter had said that he wanted to visit with Connor, thus setting up a situation in which he could be seen as a great threat to the Boy-Who-Lived and the Ministry would agree to send more Dementors from Azkaban to capture him.

But Albus did not know when he would win, and the pressure to do something more than this was growing greater.

Albus put the regrets away again, and wondered what wizards did who had never learned that ability.

Harry wasn't surprised that Draco accompanied him to breakfast. The spider attack and the nightmare in early February had obviously frightened him. But since it was now a Sunday at the beginning of March, Harry felt a bit justified in turning around and confronting him.

"Draco," he said.

Draco looked at him. "What?"

"I'm going to the Owlery," Harry pointed out.

“Yes,” said Draco, and looked at him.

“You don’t need to accompany me there,” said Harry. “It’s the *Owlery*. People don’t lurk up there waiting to ambush other people. It would happen in the dungeons if it would happen anywhere at all.”

Of course, his internal history book promptly reminded him of some times during the First War against Voldemort and the war against Grindelwald when people had indeed been ambushed in Owleries. And Draco was shaking his head already. “You need someone with you at all times,” he said.

“You trust me to be in Snape’s office and Divination class alone,” said Harry.

“I trust Snape,” said Draco, and leaned casually against the wall. “And I have people I’ve talked to who are in Divination and are keeping an eye on you.”

Harry blinked. “Who?”

Draco just smiled at him.

“I’m feeling a bit *crowded*,” said Harry, after wondering who it could be and coming up with nothing. “Please, Draco, I’d like some time alone to send this letter off.” He gestured with the small bundle, wrapped in silk, that he held.

“You’re sending it to my father,” said Draco. “I should be able to watch, I think.”

Harry rolled his eyes and set off again. It wasn’t worth arguing over. Besides, he didn’t have the time. He had hesitated in sending the next truce-gift to Lucius as it was, and now it would barely get there in time for Lucius to choose the next gift and reply by vernal equinox. And right after he sent the letter off, then he was going to slip away from Draco, whether his friend liked it or not, and find Connor.

He kept trying to convince his brother of the truth. Each time, it escalated into punches, and the last time, Connor had drawn his wand. Harry knew he could have pinned his brother in place and forced him to listen with magic, even sent the truth driving into his mind; Snape was teaching him Legilimency.

That was exactly why he broke the confrontations off when he did. He would not compel Connor, not in any way. His brother had to listen freely.

They arrived in the Owlery to a welcome of coos and hoots and shifting on perches. Harry held his arm up, and Hedwig stooped down to him before he could call for her. Harry blinked, then shrugged and attached the bundle carefully to her leg.

“Lucius Malfoy, at Malfoy Manor,” he told her, and fed her a bit of pastry he’d saved from breakfast.

Hedwig ate it delicately, slid a strand of his hair through her beak, and then rose and swooped through the window. Harry watched her go with narrowed eyes. When he concentrated, he thought he could see a binding that trailed her, or perhaps which she flew along, anchored to the Owlery’s stones.

“What was in that?” Draco asked, startling him out of his daze. Harry blinked and shook his head. A faint headache from returning so soon to normal sight plagued him. At least it was better than the headache from the nightmares—which had, admittedly, lessened since his dream about the rat and the dog, so that he dreamed only of the circle of closing shadows.

“A stone I enchanted so that your father could break my neck if he crushed it,” Harry answered, and turned towards the stairs.

Draco’s hand on his arm jerked him to a halt. Surprised, Harry turned and found Draco staring at him, wild-eyed and angry.

“What?” He packed an awful lot of emotion in that one word, Harry thought dryly. He would have to get Draco to show him how he had done it.

Harry shrugged, trying to remove the tight grip. It just got tighter. “He gave me a branch that could break his neck if I broke it,” said Harry. “I couldn’t respond in less than kind.”

“Yes, you *could*,” said Draco, looking as if he didn’t know whether to be angrier with Harry or Lucius.

“No, I really couldn’t,” Harry said, and lifted his chin to look Draco directly in the eye. “The truce doesn’t work that way, Draco. He knew how vulnerable he was making himself when he gave me the branch, but he also knew I would give him a vulnerability back.”

“What’s his next gift going to be?”

“I don’t know,” Harry answered calmly. “This is the part of the truce where the one who initiated it gets to choose the gift, and I just have to make an acceptable answer. I get to choose my own midsummer gift, though.”

Draco opened his mouth to say something else, but two things interrupted them at that moment: an owl gliding through the window and heading for Harry, and a cough from the doorway. Harry glanced past Draco’s shoulder and saw Ron waiting there, looking a bit red in the face.

Harry said, “Just a minute, Ron,” and took the letter from the owl’s leg. It was a snort note only, without the Ministry seal, which didn’t tell him who it was from until he’d opened it.

Dear Mr. Potter:

What you ask of me would be most unwise.

Rufus Scrimgeour.

Harry frowned and crumpled the paper in his fist. *It was unwise to ask Scrimgeour to try and arrange to have Lupin as Connor’s guardian? Why?*

But he knew the Auror was unlikely to give him answers with further pestering, if this was all he had sent, and Harry owed him too much to pester.

That left him with almost no choice, again. Dumbledore would have been more suitable than either Lily or Sirius, and Harry had the most realistic chance of getting the Ministry to agree to the Headmaster, but Dumbledore had named his price for the guardianship, and Harry *was not* going back under the phoenix web. James returned everyone’s letters unopened. Lupin was “unwise.” Snape had developed a hatred for Connor apparently almost as great as his hatred for Sirius, and Lily and Sirius would both fight the choice of McGonagall.

I suppose I don’t have any other choice but to ask her, though, Harry thought, dismally.

Ron coughed again.

“What do you *want*, Weasley?” Draco asked. “Come to Transfigure owl pellets into Galleons? Or perhaps this is the place that you do your laundry?” His gaze took in Ron’s worn robes with spectacular contempt.

Ron turned red, but spoke to Harry instead of Draco. “I have a message for you from Connor,” he said.

Harry stared blankly at him. “A message?”

“Too good to speak to his own brother, is he?” Draco asked with a sneer.

“Shut up, Malfoy, it’s not like that,” Ron snapped at him. “This is a pureblood thing.” He glanced uncomfortably at Harry. “I suggested that he try it, and, well, he said he’d think about it. Now he’s actually done it.” He came forward and placed a small scroll in Harry’s hand.

Harry glanced up at Ron as he unrolled the parchment. “You don’t want to tell me what the prophecy was, do you, Ron?” he asked, the same question he’d asked every time he saw the other boy since that day in Trelawney’s Tower. He’d overheard Ron and Connor discussing the prophecy in hushed tones, and knew the other boy had indeed remembered it.

Ron’s face turned even redder. “I’m not a snitch, Harry,” he said, with a kind of quiet dignity in his voice. “And I’m loyal to my friends.”

Harry sighed. He suspected he wasn’t going to get the truth out of Ron short of reading it from his mind or compelling him to say it. And both of those smacked of slavery to him.

He read the parchment, and blinked.

Meet me on the vernal equinox at sunset, in the Owlery. Do not approach me again before then. Connor Potter.

Harry let out a long, slow breath. Vernal equinox, when the winter turned to spring, and the day and night were exactly as long as each other. And sunset, a time of equal balance between dark and light.

This particular time and date had been used for reconciliation rituals almost since the beginning of pureblood culture.

Harry could feel himself smiling as he put the parchment in his pocket. “Tell him I’ll be there,” he told Ron, whom he now realized was fulfilling the formal role of messenger.

Ron nodded. “I’ll tell him.” He gave Harry a little bow, then turned and left.

Draco opened his mouth and said something sneering and disdainful about Connor or Ron or both, no doubt. Harry ignored him. His heart was beating, hard, with cautious hope.

He might be able to reconcile with his brother. He might.

At dinner the evening of the distasteful encounter with Weasley, Draco leaned back and scowled across the Great Hall at the chattering Gryffindor table.

Connor was the center of them, the prat. He wasn’t at all *subtle* about it, either, which made Draco think he was rather missing the point of power. His mother and father had taught him all about that—his father with explicit lessons, his mother by living it. A Malfoy didn’t just walk around proclaiming that he was powerful. It had no class, and it made other wizards more likely to put their backs up. Besides, it wouldn’t work with Slytherins, with Ravenclaws, even with some Hufflepuffs, particularly the cleverer ones like Smith.

But it worked with Gryffindors, and there was a certain raw strength in the way that Harry’s brother marshaled them. They knew he was having private lessons with Harry’s mutt of a godfather, and they knew that he had some special secret magical gift, and they knew that something terrible had happened to his mother. Add the lingering mystique of the Boy-Who-Lived, and that won him sympathy and admiration in almost equal amounts. It was a rare Gryffindor who managed to resist a combination of glorymongering and pity-slobbering.

Draco narrowed his eyes with dislike as he watched the Patil girl say something to Connor. Connor said something back, and the Patil girl burst into giggles. Connor leaned back and made another observation, looking hard at the Slytherin table, and *everyone* started laughing, except Granger, who was obviously trying hard to concentrate on her book.

Draco turned and looked at Harry, and shook his head. The twins were hardly comparable. Harry didn’t have to brag about his terrible tragic past or his power. He ate, he slept, he studied, he did homework, he walked around, he plotted an awful lot (at least according to his clock), and he made efforts to reconcile with prats who *obviously* didn’t deserve them.

And he turned heads.

Power rippled out from him slowly and subtly, lapping onto others, making them think and whisper and debate, and thus inspiring other people to think and whisper and debate. Slytherins floated nearer to Harry bob by bob, lured by the fact that he had this magic and *wouldn’t* use it to rule over them. Older students watched with narrowed eyes, and sometimes asked probing, testing questions that Harry answered with more honesty than he should have—except that the strength of his magic protected him. The Slytherins who had kept secrets from Harry last year were beginning to share them with him, forgetting that he hadn’t been raised perfectly pureblood and didn’t grasp many of the things that were instinctive to them.

Harry, the prat, continued not to notice.

Draco shook his head, and gave one more hard look at the Gryffindor table. There was the figurehead people actually paid attention to. Eating calmly beside Draco was the soldier who would actually change the world.

Granger looked up and met his gaze just then. Draco raised an eyebrow. She nodded back, confirming without words their deal that she would watch Harry in Divination class.

Sometimes, Draco mused, it was a good thing that Harry was so oblivious to emotional matters that concerned him. There were threats that he also didn't think to watch for, and this way other people could protect him without his peevish arguing.

Snape was in a foul enough mood to actually welcome teaching the third-year Gryffindors and Slytherins as they tumbled into class that second week of March. Anything was better than the fifth-year class and the Weasley twins.

They had varied the Eternal Repair Potion in a way that Snape *still* couldn't figure out, then used it to stick their classmates' cauldrons to the desks. No matter what spells Snape cast, the cauldrons remained stuck. The twins stood in front of him with wide, innocent eyes and hidden smirks no matter how many points he took from Gryffindor, so Snape had finally been forced to Vanish everyone's cauldron and threaten the students into obtaining new ones by next class. The twins had received two weeks' worth of detention, each, which Snape had deliberately scheduled to include times that he knew the Gryffindor Quidditch team was practicing.

The twins did not seem to care.

Snape didn't bother writing out the instructions for the Child's Game Potion. It was a simple antidote to several of the common hexes that children were always getting themselves hit with, for situations with accidental magic where *Finite Incantatem* wouldn't work predictably. He simply waved his wand, conjured the instructions, and barked, "You will turn in a sample of the potion at the end of class." That made everyone scramble for their cauldrons.

Snape caught a few betrayed looks from among the third-year Slytherins. He usually gave an introduction to the potion, at least, and explained what it did and why they were making it; unlike every Gryffindor but Granger, they actually listened. Snape ignored them. Life wouldn't hand them introductions to potions, nor would opponents on the battlefield stand still and patiently explain what every hex did. It was time they learned to stop leaning so heavily on him.

He was self-knowing enough to admit, as he stalked among the students, that part of his impatience came from the fifth-year class and part from the increasingly insistent flare of the Dark Mark on his left arm, so keen last night that he'd had to charm the limb immobile this morning. He was angry enough not to care.

"Like this, Neville," Harry was explaining as Snape circled them like a stalking werewolf. "The lavender petals have to go in before the beetle carapaces. Do you know why?"

Longbottom worried at his lip for a moment, and then his eyes lit up. "Because the petals make the potion smooth and ready to receive the carapaces?"

"Exactly," said Harry, so warmly that Longbottom flushed. Then he caught Snape's eye and paled.

Harry looked up, too. Snape scowled at him. Harry gazed calmly back, not at all intimidated. "Our potion isn't quite ready yet, sir," he said.

Snape noted to himself that he would have to find Harry a different partner than Longbottom soon. Longbottom had improved out of all recognition, and it was time that he, just like all the others, learned to stand on his own. Besides, Harry could more productively lend his knowledge among the other Slytherins. Crabbe was starting to slip badly enough that Snape soon wouldn't be able to bring himself to ignore it.

"I can see that, Potter," he said. "When do you think it will be ready?"

Harry turned his head to look at the directions on the board. "An hour from this point forward, sir," he said.

Snape sneered. "Then see that you brew it, Mr. Potter, instead of talking to me." He swept away. He could feel Harry's eyes on his back, *still* not intimidated. The boy had shown more tendency to argue with him this week about what Snape thought they should practice in their private lessons, as well as how often he should be allowed out of Hogwarts.

That will have to be corrected, Snape thought, even as he turned to vent his anger on a deserving target.

Connor Potter was partnered with Ron Weasley; they always worked together, unless Snape assigned one of them elsewhere. Currently, they were arguing in heated whispers about whether to add the lavender petals completely crushed, as the directions clearly called for, or in large shreds, because that took less time. Snape wondered what cruel whim of fate had sent him students unable to follow simple directions.

The Potter brat glanced up as Snape approached, and then narrowed his eyes and sneered. The look had Black stamped all over it. It was the same look he was always giving Harry whenever they passed in the corridors. Snape considered the brat a waste of time, beyond hope of redemption, and did not know why his ward continued to try and redeem him anyway, against Snape's explicit advice. That, combined with how much he resembled Black now, gave Snape all the excuse he needed to lay waste to the Potter brat's confidence.

"Mr. Potter," he said, and looked down into the potion. It was, of course, congealing, as neither Potter nor Weasley had thought to continue stirring it while they talked. "Pray tell me, do you intend to have the lumps in your potion large enough to injure whoever swallows it?"

Potter's glare intensified, but he said nothing. Instead, he lifted a hand to rub at his head. No, Snape thought, since he had become used to watching for the gesture with Harry, at his forehead.

A drop of blood welled from the heart-shaped scar, just behind his rubbing fingers.

Snape stared in fascination as the drop trickled down the scar and started to fall, and then moved a few precise steps backward.

The blood fell into the cauldron, and caused a prompt explosion of noxious fumes. Snape waited until Potter and Weasley had each got a good lungful before he caged the fumes in the air with a few sweeps of his wand and then Vanished them. He nodded to Granger.

"Accompany them to the hospital wing, Miss Granger. I will be spending time with students who are not so stupid as to disdain knowledge offered," Snape drawled, and moved back towards the Slytherin side of the room, feeling immensely better.

Of course, he did have to consider what it meant that Connor Potter was bleeding from a supposedly Voldemort-inflicted scar, much as Harry Potter was.

Nothing significant, I hope, he thought. If that brat is truly the savior of the wizarding world, then we might as well hand ourselves over to the Dark Lord right now.

Minerva had to admit, as she checked to make sure that the teacups were in place on the desk and that she was sitting in a straight, upright posture, that she was nervous. She had never done anything like this before.

Oh, there were some students she might have considered it for, but that was a different thing than actually doing it. And it was far different than doing it at the request of the student's brother.

A prompt knock sounded on the door, and Minerva let out her breath. "Come in," she called.

Connor peered around the door at her. Minerva eyed him. Harry was right. He did need someone to intervene. He might smile more brightly than ever, but his eyes were shadowed, and he looked as though he wasn't getting much sleep. He absently rubbed at his forehead and that famous scar as he shuffled across the room and slouched into the chair in front of her desk.

Minerva indicated the teacups on her desk. "Would you like some tea, Mr. Potter?"

He stared at her, then sat up in the chair. "Just tell me what this is about, please, Professor McGonagall," he said. "I thought we were going to discuss my Transfiguration project, not..." He trailed off and waited.

Minerva sighed and folded her hands in front of her. "I think that you need a different adult to look after you, Connor," she said, dropping the surname that might remind him of his family and distance him from her. "I know that Sirius and your mother are doing their best, but your mother is, obviously, deprived of magic and thus of much meaningful participation in our world. And Sirius is...unstable."

"He hasn't been for weeks!" Connor snapped.

"Yes, well." Minerva had once believed that it was impossible to think that Sirius Black really meant harm. That he didn't

mean harm was the whole trouble, of course; when something bad did happen as a result of his pranks, he only had to wink and grin and look a bit contrite, and he was excused. But now, she was not sure. “That does not mean I’m not concerned over your future, Connor.”

Connor’s eyes narrowed, and an odd expression came onto his face. Minerva would have said it was Slytherin, if she didn’t believe that the boy despised Slytherins with all his heart and would never look like one.

Willingly, she added in her head.

“You really think that Mum can’t take care of me without magic, Professor?” he asked.

“I think that she has trouble enough taking care of herself,” said Minerva quietly. When she had asked for more details about Lily Potter, Albus had willingly provided them, especially when she explained that she meant to comfort Connor Potter. He seemed to believe he was luring her back to his side. Minerva was letting him think that. “And I know that you are at a point in your magical education when you will need to keep learning even over the summer. And given who you are, Mr. Potter, you have...well, more threats than most to worry about.”

“Voldemort’s tried to kill me three times now,” said Connor. “I escaped each time. And Sirius is teaching me now, and Mum can still teach me, even if she can’t lift her wand and show me herself.” A spasm passed over his face, something Minerva thought was anger or grief or pain. “Harry made sure she couldn’t,” he whispered.

Minerva leaned forward. “I am offering to train you, Connor,” she said. “You could live at Hogwarts over the summer while you learned.”

Connor blinked at her for a moment.

Then he shook his head.

Minerva frowned. “Is something wrong, Mr. Potter?” She cursed herself for the slip the next moment, as the boy’s face became even more closed.

“You don’t trust Sirius or my mum,” he said softly. “And you didn’t suggest my father or Remus, even though you could have. And you didn’t suggest the Headmaster, who would be better at training me than anyone else, and maybe have some time during the summer, too.” He looked her straight in the eye. “Please tell me. Did Harry put you up to this?”

“Yes,” said Minerva, and then blinked, one hand rising to touch her mouth. She hadn’t meant to say that. It seemed extremely odd that she had.

“Thank you,” said Connor, and then slipped out of his chair and made for the door.

Minerva called after him. “Please, Mr. Potter, tell me that you’ll consider it.”

Connor paused and glanced over his shoulder. His face had gone quiet, his eyes introspective. He looked more like Harry in that moment than Minerva had ever seen him look.

“I’m sorry, Professor,” he said quietly. “I can’t. My mother lost a son, and Sirius lost a godson. I can’t make up for Harry, but I don’t want to make them lose me, too.”

He shut the door gently behind him.

Remus forced himself to stop pacing. He had the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff third-years arriving for their Defense Against the Dark Arts class in five minutes. He couldn’t look worried to death.

But he also couldn’t stop himself from picking up the letter that lay on the desk and reading it again.

Dear Remus:

I have no reason to think that you’ll read this once you recognize my handwriting, but I wanted to reassure you that I did get your letter. And I’m responding to you where I didn’t respond to anyone else because I think you’ll understand. Sometimes

we Marauders take a long time to make up our minds. You and I were always the longest.

I'm safe. I'm at Lux Aeterna right now, just staring around me, and I'm thinking. It feels like years since I thought. It feels like sweeping cobwebs out of my mind. It feels like looking on the consequences and evaluating them. All of them.

And that's what I'm doing, Remus. Two and a half months of thinking, and I still can't make it all come straight in my mind. Of course, I have thirteen years of mistakes to think over and set to rights. Peter and Albus and the prophecy and giving up my position as an Auror and Connor and Harry and Lily.

Lily.

It probably doesn't shock you to know that I still love her, Remus. You were always good with things like that. And I always felt like I could talk to you about anything.

But not this time. Not everything. This is something I have to work out on my own, if I'm ever going to be the father—and the husband—I should have been. If I'm ever going to be the man I should have been, I think on the bad days.

Enough of this self-indulgent whining! Keep my boys safe if you can, Remus, and watch over Sirius. I did read one of his letters, and I know that his mind is safer now than it's been in a year, thank Merlin and thank Dumbledore (even though I can't stop thinking awful things about him, either).

I'll be there, if I can, at the end of the year.

*Mischief managed,
James.*

Remus let out a sharp breath, and then really did fold the letter and put it away again when the students came into the room. He would need all his concentration to deal with this class. Today was their first practical lesson, after months of theory; Quirrell and Lockhart had left the class in such a shameful state that Remus had felt compelled to start with that first.

Besides, any teacher, Remus was fervently convinced, would need all his or her concentration to deal with having Hermione Granger and Zacharias Smith in the same class.

He met their gazes with a calm smile as they settled into their seats, did a mental tally of the roll—everyone was there—and asked, “What was the last thing you remember me telling you about Dark creatures?”

Zacharias's and Hermione's hands were in the air at once, but Hermione's was marginally faster. Remus nodded at her. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“That some of the Dark creatures feed on the fear they cause,” Hermione said. She didn't only imitate his words, but also the intonation with which he'd delivered them. Remus wondered if she realized she did that with all her professors. Hearing Severus's deliberate pauses and slicing tones filtered through her voice was really quite startling. “Dementors, for example,” she added, and that was more her own voice.

“Very good, Miss Granger,” Remus said, with a nod. “Five points to Gryffindor.”

“But you also said that we were going to face a creature that caused fear today,” Zacharias cut in, using all his trained pureblood poise to try and make himself look taller than Hermione. “And I don't think that you would bring a Dementor into the school, Professor. Is it a boggart?”

“Five points to Hufflepuff,” said Remus. He sighed as he noted Hermione glaring at Zacharias, and Zacharias glaring right back. *At least we will be practicing magic in a moment, and they will need to be using spells, so they can't compete with each other at the questions.* “Yes, indeed, Mr. Smith.” He turned and walked back to the edge of the desk, gesturing with his wand to float out the heavy trunk he'd brought from his rooms. The trunk bucked as he set it down. More than one student flinched.

“A boggart will take the form of what you most fear,” he informed his class. Everyone was paying attention now, he noted, and none of them looked ready to interrupt. “That is why they are considered Dark creatures; they pull emotions from their victims' minds, and, as Miss Granger noted, they do feed on them. The incantation to defeat a boggart is *Riddikulus*. It draws on laughter, an opposing emotion to the fear that boggarts try to invoke, and it requires the caster to use force of will, to resist the compulsion trying to overtake his or her freedom. And, of course, once others begin laughing, a boggart is done for.” He measured the class with his eyes, looking past both the most eager—Hermione—and the most nervous—Neville. Finally, he

nodded to Justin. “Mr. Finch-Fletchley. If you will come forward?”

Justin stood with a small swallow and came forward, his wand held out. “What was the spell, Professor?” he asked.

“*Riddikulus*,” Remus supplied with a smile.

Justin repeated it to himself a few times, then nodded. “I’m ready, Professor,” he said.

Remus cast *Alohomora* on the trunk, and stepped out of the way as the boggart burst free, a confused shape for a moment as it tried to pick out fears from the minds of the people around it. Then it focused on Justin, and abruptly became an enormous dog, with serrated teeth so long they overedged its jaw. Remus blinked, and hoped that Justin never faced Sirius in his Animagus form.

The boggart strode forward, snarling. Justin shivered and seemed to have trouble getting his wand up. His face had gone pasty white.

“Something that amuses you!” Remus called, ready to wave his wand and banish the thing if the challenge proved to be too much for Justin.

But Justin caught his breath, waved his wand, and shouted, “*Riddikulus!*” In the next moment, a baby bonnet appeared on the dog’s head, and a tiny kitten was sitting on its neck, mewing and swatting at the dog’s mouth to get its attention. The hound whirled about, seemingly confused, and the kitten clung on, hissing and spitting.

The class burst into laughter, and Remus nodded. “Well done, Mr. Finch-Fletchley!” He flicked his eyes to the person immediately behind him. “Mr. Potter?”

Connor stood up and came forward. Remus had to admit to some curiosity as to what form his boggart would take.

The hound burst apart into a cloud of smoke, and then rushed forward together into a smaller shape.

Remus felt his heart tighten painfully. Connor’s boggart was Harry.

Connor was staring at his brother, or the form of his brother, with sick terror in his eyes. The boggart-Harry pushed his glasses up on his nose and took a step forward, aiming his wand at Connor and wearing a smile that Remus sincerely hoped did not come from real-life experience.

Connor aimed his wand, with difficulty, and managed to whisper, “*Riddikulus*.”

It took him a few more tries, but the boggart-Harry finally tripped, broke his glasses, and started groping around blindly. The class laughed again—at least, most of them did. Remus noted that there was a nervous edge to the sound, and that Hermione was scowling as though her face would burst. Zacharias leaned back in his chair, gaze flicking around, coolly evaluating his classmates’ reaction.

At least in that they are matched, Remus thought, heart heavy, as he motioned Connor back and Ron forward. *Since Harry’s boggart, after all, was Connor lying dead because of his failure.*

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Twenty-Nine: A Visit From Dobby

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He knew something was poking him, but he didn’t immediately know what it was. It felt like a long, narrow finger, and the eyes peering down at him from above looked like house elf eyes. But why would they be? House elves never came and woke students in the middle of the night, and it was the middle of the night now. In the morning, Harry had to receive Lucius’s vernal equinox gift. At sunset, he had to face his brother. He wanted to get all the rest he could before then.

But then he realized the house elf was Dobby, and the fogs of sleep cleared from his mind. He sat up, keeping his voice low. “What’s the matter, Dobby? Did something happen to Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy?”

Dobby shook his head so hard his ears flopped. His eyes were enormous, and seemed to glow, Harry thought. “No, Dobby came for Harry Potter sir,” he said. “Harry Potter sir must get up.”

“Did something happen to Draco, then?” Harry asked, as he reached for his glasses. He managed to slip them on and listen to the noises behind the curtains at the same time. He could hear nothing but the familiar breathing of his roommates. Draco sounded deeply asleep.

“No,” Dobby whispered, and then gestured. Harry looked. Fawkes sat on the end of his bed, not asleep as usual, but watching him with bright, grave eyes. He inclined his head slightly when Harry stared back at him, and crooned.

“Harry Potter must come walk with Dobby and Fawkes,” Dobby translated. “We have something to show you.”

Puzzled but obedient, Harry nodded. “Let me get a cloak on. If we’re going outside, then I’ll need it.”

Dobby said nothing to contradict that, so Harry ghosted around his bed and to his trunk. He listened intently to the breathing around him as he got the cloak out and slung it around his shoulders. Greg, Vince, Blaise, and Draco seemed convinced that nothing was happening.

Harry winced when he thought of what Draco and Snape would say about this outing, but it wasn’t as though he would be unsafe with Fawkes. He was sure one of them would have said something about the phoenix accompanying him as an approved guardian, if only they had thought of it.

Thus having satisfied his conscience, Harry turned around. He assumed they would walk out of the room, but Dobby firmly grasped his hand.

“Harry Potter sir must hold tight,” he said.

Harry had barely nodded when they appeared to leap sideways into the air and stand still at the same time. Or perhaps everything *else* had moved around them, Harry thought, impossible as that was. He used the thought to keep his dinner down. His brains and his stomach violently sloshed against the insides of their respective containers. He blinked when he was able to see again, and stared around at the place that Dobby had brought him, probably by house elf Apparition.

It was familiar, but he still couldn’t get a grasp on it until Fawkes burst into being above them and illuminated it with his flames. Then Harry recognized the clearing where he had once bargained with centaurs for Draco’s life. He stamped his feet and shivered. It was colder now than it had been when he made that bargain, and slushy snow still huddled sullenly in the shelter of the bare trees, spring tomorrow or not. The ground felt like iron, like nothing alive.

“Harry Potter must be seeing,” said Dobby in his squeaky voice. “And this is the best place to see.” He looked expectantly at Harry.

“What do you want me to see?” Harry looked around again. There were the large stones the centaurs had used to form their impromptu gallows for Draco, and the path that dipped over the crest of the hill with the gallows on it and then continued on. He saw no waiting centaur, no impossible tree, nothing that he thought a house elf and a phoenix might have taken him out of Hogwarts to show him.

Fawkes crooned, and Dobby ready translated. “Harry Potter sir is to see what he saw in the journey with Fawkes.”

The flames? Harry thought, but he realized the truth in a moment.

The nets.

He thought back to what he’d felt during the journey with Fawkes, and immediately his emotions about the Muggle tried to rear up and attack him. Harry breathed calmly, and subdued them with his Occlumency. He reached back with pure memory instead, thinking of the emotions pinned between glass panels like the butterfly collection the Muggle had described having once. He had always had a good memory, letting him retain information about spells and history and Connor’s enemies and pureblood dances.

When he felt sure that he was as raw, as open to seeing another world behind the wizarding world, he glanced up.

He stared. He had not expected to see so many different webs. They were the gold of the phoenix web in places—and Harry felt the shattered remnants of the one in his mind stir briefly, as though feeling the kinship—but a great, intricate pattern at the center of all them shone a subtle, heartbreaking silver, and there were spiky patterns of dark green that made Harry want to hiss. He thought those probably bound magical snakes. He turned around slowly, and watched the webs soar around him. It

was like standing in the center of a snowflake, if snowflakes shone like rainbows and with more colors than had appeared in any rainbow.

“What are they?” he whispered.

Fawkes crooned, and Dobby spoke in a subdued tone. “What Harry Potter saw once before. The nets that bind us.”

Harry turned, squinting hard at Dobby, and saw the net that circled around him, a bright ice-blue. It ran away towards Malfoy Manor in the distance. He cocked his head. “They bind the house elves into service?”

“Yes,” Dobby hissed, and for a moment, he looked feral, almost frightening. Harry thought about the magic of house elves, who could Apparate even in areas, like Hogwarts, that human wizards could not, and who didn’t need wands, and wondered if this was what the wizards who bound them had seen. But Dobby calmed in a moment and peered mournfully at Harry. “And worse than service. They make elves like the service.” He clapped his hand over his mouth then and wailed through his fingers, something about being a bad elf.

Harry nodded grimly. *Genius, really. It means they won’t try to lift the web themselves.* He turned back to the maze of nets again and waved a hand. “And these?”

“Different magical creatures,” said Dobby, and pointed to the silver web. “The unicorns.”

“Unicorns?” Harry echoed blankly. “What did they ever do to wizards?” He could understand the nets being used on dangerous creatures like giants or dragons, and of course house elves lived among wizards and made their lives easier, but binding unicorns seemed pointless.

“They were too beautiful,” said Dobby.

Harry ground his teeth. “And this one?” he said, squinting at a dim blue web he could barely see, the color of the sky at sunset.

“Centaur,” said Dobby. “To prevent them from showing themselves to Muggles, to prevent them from harming wizards, to prevent them from using much of their own magic.” He shrugged apologetically. “Dobby only knows some of the effects. Dobby is sorry. He is not studied in history.”

“Do all house elves know about this?” Harry felt a little sick. So easily this could have been set to rights in the past, perhaps, by any powerful wizard, if only they had thought to ask the house elves. He wondered if Dumbledore knew, and if he would really leave the webs in place if he knew.

Well, he used one on me. Probably, the answer is yes.

“Yes,” said Dobby. “Elves were the first ones bound, Harry Potter sir.” For the first time, Harry noticed how the elf gave a little jerk when he added the title. In a human, Harry would have called it a flinch of disgust. “Elves can see the other webs. Elves know what they do.”

“But you can’t rebel,” Harry surmised.

“Only bad elves rebel,” said Dobby, and then put a hand over his mouth again and gave Harry an appealing look from wide eyes.

Harry took a deep breath to calm himself down. “And you want me to unbind the webs and set you free?” he asked.

“It is not that simple, Harry Potter sir,” Dobby squeaked.

Of course not, Harry thought, and waited for the reason. *I think I would die of shock if anything in my life were ever simple.*

“Harry Potter sir can be a *vates*,” said Dobby simply. “Prophet, singer, poet, seer.” His words were hushed with reverence, and had the sound, Harry thought, of a litany, a chant, a mantra. “Harry Potter can see ways for us out of the webs. And he can do it while respecting free will.” He waited, eyeing Harry expectantly.

Harry grasped the truth soon enough. “I have to set you free without trampling the free will of anyone else,” he said. “And that includes the wizards who benefit from having you bound and wouldn’t want you to go free.”

Dobby bobbed his head, and one of his ears hit him in the eye. “Now Harry Potter sir sees,” he said, and clapped his hands.

Fawkes flew to Harry’s shoulder and settled, his body a warm presence near Harry’s right cheek. Harry stroked his back, neck to tail, without really thinking about it. He was thinking fiercely on what they had told him instead.

I have the ability to compel other people. It might be easy to charm or enchant other wizards into releasing the magical creatures. But then I would never forgive myself. And most of the wizards aren’t the ones who set the webs. And I have no idea what releasing the webs would do. Would the house elves turn on them—

Us, Harry. I benefit from this too. It’s not like I’ve never eaten food that house elves cook, and I depend on them to clean my room and my clothes and my sheets.

Harry sighed. *I bet it really is simpler, being Dark. You just do whatever you want to do without thinking of the consequences to others, and if someone complains, then you compel them again. Or you could be a Light Lord and think you were doing good, and not care about what others thought, because obviously they aren’t seeing clearly if they disagree with you. You’re good.*

No wonder that Starborn said so many Light and Dark Lords went insane or gave up on this. How am I going to do it?

To take his mind off the seeming impossibility of his task, he asked Dobby, “What made you think that I might be a *vates*? My brother found some information in a book about goblins that made it sound as though he were one.” Only it didn’t sound much like it, now that Harry thought it over. Could a *vates* ever use compulsion, much less as naturally and freely as Connor did? If the goblins were bound as well—and Harry suspected they were—then would they really only follow a wizard, or would they be compelled to do so by the nets they wore and nothing else?

“Connor Potter sir is not a *vates*,” said Dobby. If a house elf could snarl, Harry thought, Dobby would be doing so. “Connor Potter sir is a compeller, and happy to be so. A *vates* can never compel. He cannot compel wizards. He cannot compel house elves. He cannot compel centaurs. He cannot compel phoenixes.”

Harry shook his head. “Then I can’t be one, either. I can compel people, and I’ve done it.”

“But Harry Potter sir is sorry,” said Dobby promptly. “And Harry Potter sir did not mean to. And Harry Potter sir is watching out, now, and watching how his will impacts on other people.”

Harry blinked. It was true that he was training with Snape to try and find the limits of his odd compulsion, so that he could bind that part of his magic without binding the magic itself, but he had not thought that would qualify him for Dobby’s title, even so. “And is being sorry enough?” he asked quietly. “Surely other wizards would be sorry, if they knew about this.”

Fawkes went off into a long, complicated series of chirps and trills. Dobby waited until the phoenix had finished before he tried to translate. “The *vates* cannot be compelled, either. Dobby and Fawkes could not tell Harry Potter sir what he was and what it meant until he began to learn it for himself, for fear of shoving him down the wrong path. To force the *vates* to make a choice before his time is to destroy the *vates*. But now you have seen the nets, and Fawkes has felt your horror at them. And a *vates* must hate compulsion with all his soul.” Dobby nodded at him, as though to say that that part was self-evident. Harry nodded back, though he was less confident on that score. On the bad days, he still wanted the reassuring security of his phoenix web, for all that he knew he would fight anyone who tried to cast it on him again, because it would make things so much simpler. “Many other wizards have said they would be a *vates*. But they stumbled on the path, and decided to use compulsion to achieve their ends, or they liked compulsion enough that they could not give it up.” Dobby hesitated, then added reluctantly, “Or the magical creatures pushed them too hard, and they ended up choosing to act as *vates* out of a sense of duty and obligation. The *vates* must choose, always. He must make decisions. He must not flinch from choices. And he must *be* free will.”

Harry let out a shaky breath. “Is Dumbledore a *vates*?” he asked. “My m—the Muggle who bore me once said that he made the decisions that no one else could make, the hard decisions of sacrifice and war.”

“Dumbledore could have been a *vates*,” Dobby said. “But he compelled others, and told himself it was well.”

So I won’t be able to lie to myself, either, if I do this, Harry thought. I will have to be absolutely honest. I will have to know when I might make excuses for my shortcomings, when I’m doing things just because they’re easy and not because they’re right, when I’m protesting too much and taking too much blame on myself. I’ll have to read myself out loud to myself all the time, with never a lapse.

It sounded, Harry had to admit to himself, really fucking terrifying.

And I can't do it, he realized with a sigh. I still lie to myself about plenty of things. Draco and Snape say so, all the time, and I suppose they would know better than I would.

He explained that to Dobby, who nodded as he listened. Under the light of phoenix fire, Harry found himself thinking, the house elf looked neither silly nor stupid. There was a light of his own in his eyes, one that Harry thought would go out when he finished his explanation. But Dobby only grinned up at him.

"A *vates* is not being," he said. "A *vates* is not a *vates* only once, and then never again. A *vates* chooses again and again every day of his life, and makes some wrong choices, but always comes back to the right path."

"It's a thorny path," Harry muttered.

Fawkes crooned at him.

"Fawkes says that there are roses among the thorns." Dobby had his hands clasped in front of him. "Fawkes says that Harry Potter sir must not choose to help elves and phoenixes and others out of duty, but only because he wants to. And it must be a choice. Harry Potter is not all of a *vates* right now. He may be in the future." He made a gesture at Harry. "But first he must stop lying, as he said, and he must be free of his own webs."

Surprised, Harry touched his temple. "Do you mean the phoenix web?"

"And others," said Dobby, pointing insistently at Harry.

Startled, Harry looked down. He hadn't noticed the webs cutting through his own body, seeming to run in and out of, and tangle with, the ones in the Forbidden Forest beyond. He didn't recognize them. They were a deep, sullen red, not a color the phoenix web had achieved even in the fullness of its power. He rested a hand on one, and felt a faint sensation of heat, but nothing else. "What are they?" he asked.

"Barriers that Harry Potter sir has put on himself," Dobby said, sounding sad. "Barriers that he has not chosen, barriers that he has not thought about. Barriers of fear." He met Harry's eyes. "Barriers that Harry Potter has reinforced with his magic, because he cannot bear the thought of certain things being true."

Harry closed his eyes and turned his head away. It was true that there were things he did not want to think about. But to hear that he had used his magic on himself, and that he hadn't even been aware of it...

It stunned him.

He took a deep breath, and asked another question that had been drifting in the back of his head since Dobby began to explain what a *vates* was. "Does this have to be the most important thing in the world to me, once I begin to do it?"

"Not *has to*," said Dobby. "Never *must*, or *has to*, or *compelled to be*. Only want and will."

Harry nodded. "But a *vates* concentrating on other duties wouldn't be one that you wanted as your unbinder," he said.

Dobby shook his head.

Harry sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Then I don't see how I can be. You know how much of my focus goes to my brother. He's the most important thing in the world to me, Dobby. I would care more about him than others. I would sacrifice some of the magical creatures for his safety and happiness." He wondered if this was being honest with himself. *Honesty often involves a good deal of ugliness*, he thought, memories of the incident with the Muggle once again filling his mind. "I love him too much. I'm sorry. I don't think I would make a very good *vates*."

He offered a weak smile and opened his eyes. He almost thought Dobby would be gone in his disappointment, and Fawkes, too. But the phoenix remained, a warm, content presence on his shoulder, and Dobby still stared at him intently.

"Becoming," said Dobby. "Harry Potter sir can become the *vates*, even if he is not that right now. He can change. Unless he thinks that he will never change?"

Harry shuddered. "After everything that's happened since first year, I can't say that," he muttered. "But are you sure that you want to wait around for me to, possibly, become the unbinder that you need so much? You could be wasting a lot of time on me, when someone else would be a better candidate."

"There are no better candidates," said Dobby imperiously. "Harry Potter sir is the best since Dumbledore failed us." He gave a brief shudder of his own and pulled on his ears. "And the D-Dark Lord was never an option."

Harry tilted his head. "Is it only powerful wizards? Wouldn't someone like Connor serve you just as well, if it weren't for his liking compulsion so much?"

"Powerful wizards," said Dobby.

"But we're the ones who can compel others most easily," said Harry.

Fawkes gave a twist of his neck and a bubbling trill that ran up and down the scale. Dobby gave Harry a smile as he translated. "Fawkes knows this. We all know this. The power that makes Harry Potter sir able to be *vates* is what makes him dangerous. And it keeps him safe from others. Others cannot compel Harry Potter."

"They can try," muttered Harry, thinking about Dumbledore, and Tom Riddle's possession. Then he lapsed into thought again, while Dobby and Fawkes watched him expectantly.

If he took this gauntlet up, so much would have to change. He would have to think about other people as more important than Connor was. There were some people he would have to fight against instead of forgive, he knew, and he didn't like the thought of that. He had no idea in the world how to free magical creatures without trampling on the free will of wizards, and no idea how to persuade or coax wizards along without trampling on the free will of magical creatures. And what would happen if, say, giants or Dementors caused something harmful to happen when they were freed? On the other and, could he really justify freeing only some of the magical creatures, the ones that might be harmless to wizards?

My life's never been simple, granted, but this would be the most complex thing I've ever done. And...I can't do it right now. My life is still Connor. He's still the important one.

"I can't do it right now," he said. Fawkes gave a prompt, impatient chirp, and Dobby translated as promptly.

"Harry Potter sir can wait. But Harry Potter sir had not thought about the webs since his night in the fire, had not looked for them. Dobby and Fawkes wanted to make sure Harry Potter sir did not forget."

Harry nodded. "I don't see how I can forget, now," he said. Fawkes uttered another croon that Dobby didn't translate, probably because he figured there was no need for it.

"Harry Potter sir is welcome to ask Dobby questions at any time," said Dobby, and bowed slightly. "Dobby's webs are weaker than others, because Dobby was born in an odd way, and then one of his old masters was odd and tried to free him. So Dobby can answer questions, and come from his masters at times to answer them."

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said. He was trying to figure out when he might be ready to ask more questions. He had the pushing feeling that he should try to ask them immediately, that it was important that the magical creatures be freed at once, but if he did that, then he was not being a *vates*. Dobby had said he could not feel it as a duty. It had to be a decision.

But then how am I ever going to do it? Duty and sacrifice are the ways I think of things.

He let Dobby Apparate him back to his bed, and nodded to return his farewell. It wasn't far from dawn, at least from the glimpse he'd got of the sky, and that meant it wasn't worth it to try and return to sleep. He lay with his arms folded behind his head instead, and Fawkes asleep near the edge of the pillow.

He kept trying to imagine the wizarding world without house elves, and couldn't do it. Then he tried to imagine it with predatory or feral house elves instead of tame ones, and couldn't do it. Maybe that was yet another part of the problem: if he wanted hope for the future, he would have to learn what it looked like first. Right now, his mind was a blank.

Harry put the thoughts away when he heard the other boys stirring. He had other obligations to attend to today, and the first of them was waiting for the sweep of a great horned owl's wings across the Slytherin table.

Halfway through breakfast, Harry became aware that he wasn't the only one awaiting the appearance of Lucius's owl. Pansy and Millicent murmured together as they often did, but paused and waited expectantly whenever the shadow of a post owl crossed the plates. Blaise jumped now and then, as though he'd let his attention wander from the windows to his food for too long. Draco just appeared tense and unhappy.

"Your father will choose the perfect gift," Harry reassured him, and Draco simply looked at him.

"I know, Harry," he said. "That's the problem."

Finally, when the suspense had built almost to breaking point, Julius came through the window. Then he took his time circling. Harry heard mutters of agitation from around him; even some of the older Slytherins had risen to their feet and craned their necks towards him, which made Harry wonder when they'd taken an interest in the things a lowly third-year did.

Julius finally hurtled down to land precisely in front of Harry. His eyes fixed him and wouldn't let him move. The leg he thrust out with the bundle attached to it almost scraped the back of Harry's hand with his claws.

Harry inclined his head, losing the sensation of being a mouse, and retrieved the bundle without looking away from Julius. The owl continued to stare hard at him for the next moment. Then he rose and gathered speed and power, traveling from the far end of the Hall to the windows as though someone had thrown him from a slingshot.

The bundle was slender enough, and long enough, that Harry wondered if it contained a wand. But he wouldn't find out until he unwrapped it, so he did.

A blade tumbled to the table, making a dull thump as it landed. Harry picked it up, careful not to touch the edge, or the green jewel in the hilt. It was a knife—a skinning knife, about ten inches long. Harry studied the edge with intent care, catching a subtle glimmer now and then, as though the maker had put diamonds among the steel. Then he examined the jewel.

It was in the shape of a hangman's noose.

Harry had the inkling, then, of what this was. He didn't quite dare to look at Draco's pale face. Instead, he took Lucius's neatly folded letter from the bundle. It was far longer than the note he'd sent with the last vernal gift.

Mr. Potter:

When one powerful wizard allies with another, it is often to repair mistakes made in the past between the two of them, or between their two families. The Malfoy family has no especial quarrel with the Potter family, though we have always despised them. I suspect you may be wondering why I began this truce-dance.

I began this dance to ally with you, Harry Potter, not your family. As time passes by, and I observe what has become of your coward father, your weak brother, your Mudblood of a mother, I am more sure than ever that I have made the right decision.

What I cannot understand is why you have taken so little justice from your family in return for the way they have treated you. Depriving the woman who bore you of magic hardly counts. Under the old laws, you could have demanded her death, and the death of everyone else in your family, as recompense. They bound you, a powerful wizard. The stronger the magic of the wronged, the more justice he is entitled to. And you are the most powerful wizard now living.

Harry narrowed his eyes. He was sure that wasn't true. Dumbledore could still overmatch him, and Voldemort's power was a fearful and awesome thing. He wondered if Lucius was simply trying to flatter him, and, if so, why he thought Harry would be susceptible to that particular brand of flattery.

This knife is a way to insure that you may take justice from your family. When you give it a name, it will listen to you. When you command the knife by name to take those who should have loved you and did not from you, it will sever the bonds that tie you to your family, whether they are of affection, magic, or blood. From that moment forward, you are free. You may use this blade to stop yourself from loving your weakling of a brother, your coward of a father, your Mudblood of a mother. You may use it to cut yourself from their family, and then no force in the wizarding world, including the Ministry, will be able to claim that you legally belong to them. And you may use it to sever whatever bonds and limits living around them has put your magic within.

Merry first day of spring, Mr. Potter. I eagerly await your response, and to see what you what will do with your newfound

freedom.

Lucius Malfoy.

Draco was leaning over his shoulder, reading the letter. His hand tightened convulsively on Harry's elbow. Then he pulled back and stared at him with his mouth open.

"Your father is a bastard, Draco," said Harry conversationally.

"You could be free, Harry," Draco whispered. "And he gave you a priceless gift. I know what that knife is. It's been in the Malfoy family for centuries. We used it to cut ourselves free from marriage alliances that didn't work out, when the families we'd married into turned against us. I know that it works. I've heard the stories. *Think*, Harry! You could be free. This is the greatest gift that he could have given you." Draco's face shone like the moon.

Harry glared at the knife. It shone dully at him. Harry wondered if it was aware even now, unnamed. It felt as though it were watching him.

"I'm never going to use it," said Harry, and swept the knife and the letter off the table and into his robe pockets, not caring that he almost cut his hand with the edge. "I don't want—that's *obscene*, Draco, that something exists which can cut those ties."

And you want to do it. Part of you wants to do it.

Harry acknowledged that, and stepped over the acknowledgment. Just because he wanted to use it did not mean he would. He was very certain on that point. The knife was obscene, and his desire to use it was obscene. One couldn't just sever love like that.

Or perhaps he could, but that didn't mean he *should*.

"But, Harry—" Draco whined, following him.

Harry shut his ears. He was not going to listen. He had a reconciliation with his brother to look forward to.

Step, and step, and step, and then Harry completed the climb to the Owlery. He stood there for a moment, listening to the rustle of the birds and the ruffle of feathers. He looked through the window, and nodded to see the sun just touching the horizon.

Sunset, in a sky so deep a blue it looked almost green.

On the vernal equinox.

He'd kept his word, and not sought Connor out during the weeks between the delivery of his message and the time of their meeting. It remained to be seen if Connor would keep his side of the bargain.

"Hello, Harry," said Connor's voice from behind him, calm and controlled.

Harry took a deep breath and turned to face his brother. "Hello, Connor."

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

Chapter Thirty: Choose, Harry

Harry wondered for a long moment if he should begin the conversation, or let his brother speak. Connor seemed content to wait and let him decide, his face turned a gentle gold by the light of sunset through the window.

Harry didn't know what his brother's main purpose in coming here was, though—reconciliation, or something else. Given that Connor didn't know the dances, he thought it might be something else. In the end, he waited. *Let him be in control of the situation*, he thought, his eyes watching the way Connor's gaze darted at and then flickered away from him. *I think he needs the confidence.*

Connor finally let out a deep breath and met Harry's eyes.

"I was really angry about what you did to Mum," he began.

Shaking in his voice, but past tense. Harry cocked his head. *Does that mean he has moved closer to forgiving me, after all?*

"I didn't know what you meant about a ritual." Connor managed to make his voice apologetic and defensive, both at once. "So I looked it up, and I talked with Ron about pureblood dances." He wrinkled his nose. "He told me that you could do things I never knew you could do. I don't like most of them. But he also told me that what happened to Mum was right. She couldn't have lost her magic unless she did something really awful to you."

Connor folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "So tell me what she did to you, Harry. I'm waiting."

Harry let out his breath by degrees. *Thank Merlin. It seems he's willing to listen instead of punching me this time.*

"She trained me from the time I was a child, from right after Voldemort's attack, to watch over you and guard you," Harry began. He'd had time to think over how he would say this, since all his attempts to explain before had failed, and was confident that this speech would make the most sense to Connor. "But my magic frightened her. When I was four, she had Dumbledore cast a phoenix web on me."

"She told me about it," said Connor. "But it was just to keep you from hurting other people."

"No," said Harry, as gently as he could. "It was more than that. It was to keep me loving you, to consider your welfare before my own, to *make* me love you and care for you in ways that I wouldn't have if not for it."

Connor shook his head. "But you've *always* done that, Harry. You've always protected me. Remember the troll and the Lestranges in first year? Why did that make you want to take Mum's magic away?"

Eyes looking away from me, Harry noted. *I think that he does have some inkling of the truth, after all, but doesn't want to confront it.*

"I only wanted to protect you so much because of the web, Connor," he said. "And my training. Mum told me I could never have a life of my own. I always had to put you first."

Connor stared at him. Then he asked, as if testing it, "No friends of your own?"

Harry shrugged. "I think she mentioned once that I could share your friends. I was certainly to make myself agreeable to them, since they would be your friends and important to you, and fulfill your needs for companionship. But she never envisioned me having friends that were only mine and not yours." He wondered, for the first time, if that would have been a bad thing about his going into Gryffindor. *Would* he have managed to make friends on his own? He had no idea, since being in the same House as Connor would have meant being far more constantly in his shadow, under his influence, and compared constantly (and probably unfavorably) with him in the eyes of the other Gryffindors.

"No getting married?" Connor asked.

Harry shook his head. "How could I do that? If a wizard gets married, he should love his spouse as he loves nobody else. And I would be loving you, watching over you, protecting you. I should protect your spouse and your children, too. I wouldn't have time for a lover or a family."

"What about a life after the War?" Connor whispered.

"I mostly didn't expect to survive the War," said Harry. "After it, if I did, then I would be engaged in getting you whatever you wanted. If you wanted to be Minister, I would support you. If you wanted to have a quiet life completely separated from the world—after all, I don't know if the Boy-Who-Lived would ever get any private time after his defeat of Voldemort—then I would create wards that completely cut you off from everyone else, stronger than the wards on Godric's Hollow. If you wanted a life as a star Quidditch player, I'd arrange that, too."

Connor kicked at the stones of the floor, scowling. "But I would want to become a star Quidditch player on my own," he said.

Harry nodded. “And if that was what you wanted, then I would stay out of the way, and only make sure that you got to practices on time and did other things that wouldn’t jeopardize your chances.”

Connor put his hands in his robe pockets. “I still don’t see why any of this leads to your taking magic from Mum.”

“If it weren’t for Tom Riddle, I wouldn’t have,” Harry admitted, noting with a frown how Connor flinched at the name. *Tom Riddle was only a fragment of Voldemort. If he flinches from the memory, then how can he face the whole?* “He tore up my mind. He released the phoenix web. And then Sylarana died last year, in the Chamber—“ His voice wavered, and he looked away from Connor. “And she was so entwined with my web that she shredded it when she died. I had to rebuild my mind. That’s why I spent so much time with the Malfoys last summer. I still have the phoenix web now, or part of it, but I can see around it, and I know that I don’t ever want to go back under it again.”

“Mum pretended to reconcile with me, and then cast the phoenix web on me again. I couldn’t take that. I stripped her of her magic. That way, she can never cast the spell again.”

There was a long silence. Harry listened to the wind blow around the stones of the Owlery, and fought the sadness that came with reliving the loss of Sylarana. How ridiculous *was* he, to want to mourn when he was on the verge of reconciling with his brother, the one person he loved most in life?

Then Connor said, “But, Harry, I don’t think that what she did to you deserved the loss of her magic.”

Harry looked back at him. His brother’s eyes were earnest, shining, and his words came slowly, as though he were stepping over the thoughts that he needed to think like scattered sticks.

“Don’t you see?” Connor asked, with a sharp gesture. “She was trying to make you a better person. She was trying to make you a *Gryffindor*. She was trying to make sure that you knew how to love other people, that you knew what courage and duty and sacrifice were like, that you could protect me until I was ready to protect myself.”

“Yes,” Harry acknowledged unwillingly.

“So you must have misunderstood,” Connor said. “You thought she’d done something really wrong, and the ritual believed you and took her magic. But she hadn’t, so that means that she deserves her magic back!” His eyes were brilliant, and he surged forward to grip Harry’s arm. “We can have a *family* again! We’ll get Dad to come back and stop being such a git, and then—“

Harry stepped gently backwards. It was a small motion, but enough to quell the smile on Connor’s face. “No?” he whispered.

“No,” Harry repeated. “The justice ritual doesn’t work like that, Connor. She must have done something *really* wrong, objectively wrong, for me to use it and have it work. If I’d only believed that it was wrong, and used the ritual anyway, it would have eaten up my magic. I know that she’s wrong. I know that she hurt me. It doesn’t matter what she thought she was trying to do. I can’t give her her magic back, and I don’t want to. I want to stay away from her.”

“You *don’t understand*,” said Connor, his voice sharp with disappointment and anger. “Mum told me about this. She said that she regretted what she’d done. She knew you would be angry, but she had the best of intentions. She wants you back, Harry. She wants us all to be a family again, the way we were at Christmas—“

“When she was ignoring me?” Harry asked. “When Dad was ignoring me?”

“They were doing that because *you* cast a spell.” The red of fury was mounting in Connor’s cheeks.

“Yes, I know,” said Harry, “and now she wants her magic back, which can’t happen. She doesn’t really want me in the family, Connor. She wants someone who can be controlled. She wants the person she made me into.”

“But that *is* you, Harry,” said Connor. “You *do* protect me, and you *do* love me, and does it really matter if the web broke? The other things are still part of you. You can protect me even better if you give Mum her magic back. Then she can guard me during the times when she’s there and you’re not.”

“I do still love you,” said Harry. “I do still want to protect you. But it matters to me how she tried to get me to do that, Connor. It matters very much.”

“*Why?*”

Harry wondered if he could explain it. As he had told Snape and Draco, it was still hard. He could imagine Draco in this situation, and the howls of outrage that he would release at Lucius Malfoy if he'd put a phoenix web on his son. He could imagine Connor in that situation; the very *idea* caused a hot anger at the Muggle to build up. He could even imagine Hermione in this situation, though since her parents were Muggles they'd probably have been beating her instead, and how he would make sure that they understood what happened when a powerful wizard got angry in the defense of his friends. But put himself in the same situation, and his anger diminished. He'd survived, after all. It was the training, if not the phoenix web, that had made him into this person that Draco claimed to be friends with, that Snape had become guardian to, that Lucius Malfoy had chosen to truce-dance with, that the Bulstrodes and the Parkinsons had bound themselves to. Could he really complain about that? Did he have the right? Would any of them have looked at him twice if he were ordinary? Would anyone care at all?

Harry did not believe so.

But Connor was waiting for an explanation.

Harry used the arguments that Snape and Draco had used with him. "Because she didn't have my true consent to do that," he said. "Choice is important, Connor. She started training me so young that I never had the chance to really say yes. And then Dumbledore put the phoenix web on me when I was four. So my mind was changed and twisted and warped. Would *you* like having your mind changed and twisted and warped?" He thought he might win the argument by appealing to Connor's empathy, which Harry knew he had. He had watched Connor rescue butterflies from drowning in the small pond behind their house. He had watched the way that Connor kept offering compassion to Sirius when Harry himself was incapable of doing so. Even Connor's love for their mother was a sign of it.

Connor blinked. "Of course not," he said. "But I'm me now, and I'm thirteen. And you're you, and you grew up with the phoenix web. Why can't things just go back to the way they were?"

"They can't, Connor," said Harry, despite his own longing to have his simple, clear, happy life back. "I'm sorry."

Connor turned abruptly away from him and stared out the window. Harry watched his back. He wanted so badly to say something to make things better. He didn't know what he could say, though. He didn't really believe in the things that Snape and Draco would have said. Neither could he tolerate going back under the web.

It will have to be his move, Harry thought, and waited.

Connor turned back around at last, and faced him. Harry met his eyes.

"I saw Mum when the ritual was done," Connor began. "I've never seen such an awful sight.

"She was lying in the middle of the floor. She raised her head when she saw Dad and me, and started crying." Connor drew in a sharp, nervous breath. "She tried to *Accio* one of the cloths on the far side of the kitchen. She couldn't. All her magic was gone.

"Dad rushed to her, and demanded to know what had happened. She whispered something about a box and her magic, and you. I saw Dad's face freeze. I didn't know then that he would leave. I knew that he remembered you, and he thought the ritual meant something bad."

Connor took a single step forward, eyes never leaving Harry's. Harry didn't think he'd blinked since beginning his litany. Harry went on listening. He had to know what had happened. Besides, Connor probably hadn't told anyone else this. He needed a chance to purge the poison, to pour out the sorrowful tale into willing ears.

"Dad carried her to bed. She couldn't walk. Her whole body had been raided." Connor raised his voice. "No, *raped*. You raped her, Harry."

Harry held himself still. He knew that couldn't be true. The ritual was the foundation of his sanity. He trusted it to be right.

So it didn't matter that the words went home like scythes. He could still listen to this. Connor needed him to listen to this.

"She cried for the first day," Connor whispered. "And then Dad left. He left on Christmas evening, and I still have no idea where he went. Sirius was there, and he took care of Mum and me.

“She raged for the second day. She wanted her magic back. It was the most horrible thing I’ve ever *seen*, Harry.

“She got a letter from Dumbledore on the third day, promising he’d talk to you. She cried again after that.

“But then...”

Connor took another step forward. Harry became aware that they were standing less than a foot apart. Connor’s eyes were very deep, the hazel more intense than Harry had ever seen it, swarming with flakes of gold and green.

“Then,” Connor whispered, “she changed her mind. She said that she wanted to have you back. That’s what she wanted, more than her magic or Dad or a happy family Christmas. She wanted *you*. She wanted the son who’d hurt her. She has the greatest capacity to forgive that I’ve ever known, Harry.”

Connor lifted his head. He was shaking lightly. “I’m afraid of you,” he said. “I’m afraid of your magic, and the way you tore Mum apart, and the way you trample on all the lives around you. But I promised Mum that I’d talk to you, and that I’d try to get you back for her. *Will* you come back?”

Harry felt as though he were falling through space. The world around him was too large, too endless. He knew that he could give Connor back the family he’d dreamed of. The broken remains of the phoenix web pulsed in his head, urging him to give in. Everything could be back to normal. He’d wanted that, when he had spoken with Lily about his dream of a happy family.

And what about Draco? And Snape? And Remus? And Peter? And the purebloods? And all the magical creatures?

Harry shook his head. “I’m sorry, Connor,” he whispered. “I can’t. The ritual is forever. I can’t give her back her magic, and I can’t give her back the son she had. I don’t trust her, and I think that she sent you mainly because she wants everything the same as it was, not because she really loves me. She’s afraid of me, too.”

Connor’s breath hitched. He closed his eyes. Harry wondered if he felt like he was falling through space as well.

Then he opened his eyes, and his gaze was incredibly direct, clamping on Harry’s eyes like iron bands.

“I promised that I would get you back for her,” said Connor. “I would talk to you and give you the chance. But since you’re refusing, then I can’t trust that you’ll ever see sense. So.” He took another breath, this one seeming to penetrate more deeply into his chest. “*Come back with me, Harry.*”

Harry felt his brother’s compulsion leap and coil in his head, far smoother than it had been last year, when he first felt it. It neatly dodged most of the Occlumency shields that he raised before it, aiming for the phoenix web. Once it joined with that, Harry knew, it could probably convince him.

He lunged backwards, pulling with all his will to remain free, to destroy the tendril of compulsion in his head, the desire to obey Connor’s order.

The phoenix web shredded, broke apart, dissolved, and was gone.

Harry gasped. The gasp traveled through him, expanding like a cloud in new directions, finding new spaces and filling them up with new, soft fog and mist.

This wasn’t the sudden sundering that had marked the end of his ability to trust his mother, nor yet the sensation of triumph and wings that he had encountered when the gray Dementor freed his magic. Instead, the world swung around, and around, and then Harry realized he stood atop the Owlery, and saw in a thousand directions.

His sight sparkled with clarity. He had never really *seen* before, he thought in wonder. He was seeing now.

He could see how the stones fit together, how they blended at the edges into strength, how they rested on each other in sturdiness, how they clung together to resist the blast of the wind. He could see the tracks that owls would probably take when they flew out the window, and, if he concentrated, he could see the bindings that ran from owls to wizards, and the other way, too.

He saw how beautiful those small and ordinary things were, and he was filled with wonder.

He turned and looked at his brother.

Memories suffocated him, blowing up in his head like thick, choking fog.

He remembered how Hermione had looked when she stamped out of Trelawney's Tower on the day Trelawney had given the prophecy. His brother had spoken sharply to her then, said *something* that Hermione found unforgivable, and they hadn't yet made up. Hermione was waiting, bristling, offended, for Connor to make the first move, and since he had given the insult, he really should have. But he hadn't.

Was that the act of a compassionate, gentle, giving person who only wanted the best for everybody?

No.

He remembered the way that Connor had attacked him last year, when he had thought that Harry was the next Dark Lord, and he was discovering his own compulsion gift and his fear of it. Was that the act of a war leader, courageously facing his enemy the best way he knew how, on a battlefield that would match them equally?

No. It was the act of a frightened child.

He remembered the way that Connor had offered him the Marauder's Map that summer and suggested that Harry could let his magic work on it, or create copies of it, so as to use up the power that raced restlessly around him. Was that the act of someone completely irredeemable?

No. It was the act of a brother who was concerned for me, and for the safety of other people in the house, too, since my parents didn't even remember me to defend themselves against.

He remembered the way that Connor had woken up at his bedside after the events of last year, after spending Merlin knew how many hours there, and told him about his possession by Tom Riddle. Was that the act of a coward who would never know courage in his life, who had been placed in Gryffindor House solely because of arrogant rashness?

No. It was the act of someone who knew he was wrong, and was brave enough to confess the mistake to me.

So many things I didn't know, Harry thought in wonder, and had the feeling that he was truly seeing his brother for the first time, not making excuses for him, not forgetting the things he had done that were worthy of praise, able to evaluate and judge. Had the phoenix web that bound him to brotherly duty really bound that much of himself up, all his critical faculties where Connor was concerned, all his *thoughts*? It seemed so, and yet Harry could hardly believe it. It seemed so obvious, now that he was looking. Now that he was *seeing*.

He became aware that Connor was staring at him. He wondered if he was waiting for some reaction to his compulsion, or if he simply didn't know what had happened. Harry had no idea how much time had passed since his eyes had opened.

He isn't perfect. He isn't unforgivable. He's nowhere near ready to become the Boy-Who-Lived, the leader we need, or at least the leader that people will expect him to be. He's human. The Muggle and Dumbledore did us both a disservice with the phoenix web. I could have helped teach him better, if they hadn't been so worried that I would turn on him or try to take his place.

But it takes more than power to be the Boy-Who-Lived. I think it takes more than power to be anything important.

Harry took a step forward, and Connor backed away, fast enough to bump his shoulders hard on the wall of the Owlery. His voice had turned hoarse when he raised a shaking hand between them.

"Don't come near me," he whispered.

Of course, Harry thought, after a moment of regarding him curiously. *He's still afraid of me. He believes the lies the Muggle told him, and who knows what Sirius has been teaching him, alone in the Shrieking Shack?*

"You'll have to stop the private lessons with Sirius, you know," he told Connor. "I think he's been teaching you a lot of nonsense. Slytherins aren't *evil*."

"Voldemort came from that House!" said Connor.

Harry shrugged. "And Dumbledore came from Gryffindor, and he was the one who bound me with the phoenix web. You

can't just assign everyone to Houses and have them be good and evil that way, Connor. It would be too simple. And if it's one thing the world isn't, it's *simple*."

He waited for a moment. Acknowledging that yesterday, or even last night, when Dobby and Fawkes had shown him the webs in the wizarding world, would have sent him into a panic. He wanted the simple. The easy. The clear. His early life had been so clear, with the path of duty laid out before him.

But instead, he felt a wild gush of glee, and began to laugh. If things were complicated, then that meant he had more things to do, more possibilities spreading out around him, more problems for his magic to tackle. There was Connor, and the *vates*, and Sirius, and his family, and the tension between Slytherin and Gryffindor, and figuring out how to live now that the phoenix web was gone, and defeating Voldemort, and maybe doing things like making more friends and getting married himself someday, and the alliances with the purebloods, and reconciling with his father if he could, and deciding what to do about the werewolf in Remus, and, and, and...

The Owlery burst into brightness around him as his magic began to dance, creating several small and mad golden vortices that spun in on each other, collided, vanished in a spangle of sparks, and then came back into being again. Harry held out a hand flat, and heard himself laugh as some of the golden light formed into a winged shape that might have been a Snidget or a really tiny phoenix. He threw it out the window of the Owlery.

The sun had fully set by now, though traces of gold and green still lingered behind it. The light that rose from Harry's creation flooded the grounds and made Hogwarts look as if day had come again. Harry heard a song begin, and felt a wind rush past him and swirl out the window. The scent of roses was in his nose, and the taste of honey on his tongue. He laughed, and the sound briefly became visible as notes that sparkled and popped like bubbles. He did not think he had ever been so purely happy in his life.

He had been wrong about so many things, and caused so much harm by encouraging Connor to persist in his blindness. And he had been right about so many things, and he was going to have the chance to make up for his mistakes. He had been wrong about what being free and living in a complicated world would feel like, too.

It felt *wonderful*.

The golden light lofted higher, and higher still. Now it appeared as a round lump, like a lamp, in the middle of trceries stretching to the horizon that it renewed again and again. The song had grown stronger and stronger, and by now, it was a deep and booming voice singing cheerfully over Hogwarts.

Ron told me to hang up signs announcing what I intend, Harry thought, dizzy more from the exaltation than the magic, *but why? I think this is a much better message.*

I choose to be free. I choose to live. I choose to repair what mistakes I can, and try to learn when I can't repair them any more. And oh, I haven't stopped lying to myself and I might never do that, and learning to love Connor for the right reasons is going to take an awful lot of work, and I'm nervous and I so might fall down and fail.

I don't care. This is wonderful, being free and facing the fear. Dumbledore really ought to try it sometime.

And because he knew that, he turned his gaze on the webs that Dobby had shown him in his own body, the sullen red ones that burned like coals. Harry reached down and felt the same faint sensation of heat. He knew that he could break them, if he wanted to. It had never been a matter of power that kept them there, but his own will. He hadn't wanted to face what he had bound.

Snape's cautions echoed in his head, and Harry knew he didn't want to rush into this the way that he had rushed into shattering Remus's *Obliviate*. Therefore, he carefully unbound the largest web, rather as though he were unwrapping a gift.

Darkness rushed at him. Harry understood a great deal, in that moment. He *did* have the ability to eat other wizards' magic. He didn't know if he would ever have hurt his parents and his brother when he was a child, but he might have. The phoenix web had tied it at first, and then Harry had, because the thought horrified him so much. He suspected the red web had originated the moment he heard about the possible power at Christmas, or perhaps the time that he stole a bit of Dumbledore's magic while protecting Draco.

Well, yes, but hiding doesn't solve anything, he thought, with a mad happiness that reminded him of Gryffindors, and jumped on the ability as it tried to spread out around him and eat Connor's magic.

The darkness fought him. It was rather like riding a writhing snake, perhaps a basilisk, and *that* brought up memories that were just so distracting, and Harry had to fight his own tendency to think about Sylarana so that he could corral the damn thing. But he fought them. He let the memories pass through his head, and he endured beneath them.

I am the wizard, not you, he thought at his magic, as he threw bits of his own being around it—not webs, but reins. *I don't want you to run wild and eat other people's magic, and so you won't.*

The darkness roared and hissed and plunged. Harry was unimpressed. Just because he could eat magic didn't mean that he *should*, or that he was *going to*.

That was the lesson that Dumbledore and the Muggle never learned about me, he thought, sadly, as he bridled the damn ability and wrapped it around him. It was his. He would do what he wanted with it, not the other way around. *They thought I might eat their magic. They didn't trust me to have control, so they tied me.*

It made him regret, for a moment, all those years that he could have been growing, wrapped in his own magic, learning to control it, but then he sighed and gave up the regret. Time was never going to turn backwards. What he could do now was learn to grow within his magic, and make up for the time he'd lost. That was the past, and this was the future, and he was going to *live*.

And he was going to make sure that he saw his brother the way he really was. No one could afford the way that he'd used to see him. Connor couldn't become the Boy-Who-Lived that way, and they couldn't be normal, loving brothers that way.

Oh, Harry knew he would still make more excuses for Connor than were natural or necessary, and he knew he would probably feel some guilt, at some point when he wasn't thrumming with magic, at the way he had made excuses in the past. But he knew about it now. The phoenix web was gone, and now he could at least acknowledge the mistakes as mistakes.

He looked at Connor, and sighed when he saw his brother's horror-stricken gaze. Harry took a step closer, and held out a hand.

"Connor," he whispered.

Connor stood where he was, trembling, and then Harry saw a dark patch on his trousers, where he'd let his bladder go in his fright. And then he turned and ran away.

Harry sighed. *This will still take some work.*

He looked out the window, to where the light he had created and the sunset alike were fading, and couldn't help smiling. *And I'm ready to do it.*

Calmly, he made his way down the Owlery steps.

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

Chapter Thirty-One: Aftershocks

Percy Weasley lay on his bed and stared out the window of Gryffindor Tower. He supposed he should think he was lucky. Most people would think he was lucky. He was Head Boy, entitled to help the professors lord it over the other students. He was one of the best students in the school, and got his high marks with a minimum of effort. He was a pureblood wizard, and would have a job in the Ministry immediately after he left school, assuming his NEWTS were high enough—which, of course, they would be.

He had Albus Dumbledore's trust.

Percy buried his head in his pillow. That last was the heaviest burden he had to carry, like some great and fragile ball of glass. He always thought he could drop it, and it would shatter the way that his own peaceful life had shattered the summer before his sixth year, when he received his first owl from Dumbledore.

His mother had been so proud of him, getting private post from Dumbledore.

Percy did not think she would be proud of him now, given the decision he had almost, almost, almost made.

Light abruptly flared overhead, and at the same moment, Percy felt a mad itching in his shoulder blades. He sat up, scratching furiously beneath his robes, while his eyes followed the burst of gold, which renewed itself again and again, over the Forest.

He knew what it meant. Percy had felt that itching more than most of the Weasleys, and knew the different forms it took. Near Dumbledore, the itch was deep, almost savage, extending right to the bone. Near Harry, the itch was light, tickling, like the feet of many tiny spiders running over his skin. And this was Harry's power, a magic that curled like a wind and whispered what would happen if a wizard just reached out and grasped that wind.

Percy knew he never could. And he knew, too, that Dumbledore would probably want to speak to him about this display. It was part of the duty he had almost, almost, almost made up his mind to take, and Percy didn't think the Headmaster would be able to see all of it from his office window.

So he watched, and watched, and watched, and finally the gold stopped renewing itself and the sky was calm and dark again. Percy kept on looking, just to make sure it wouldn't come back, and then stood up heavily. He opened his door and walked down the stairs to the Gryffindor common room, ignoring the speculative stares and chatter of the younger years.

He had an obligation to perform. He had duties they didn't. Once, when he was a prefect waiting to become Head Boy, that would have made him grin in excitement. He knew things that most people didn't know.

Now, the weight of all the accumulated knowledge he had that other people didn't just made his head ache. One nice thing about going to Dumbledore's office was that he actually got to dump some of it, and then his head would feel clear for a while—

Until the next time the impossible decision crept up on him.

Hermione was in the middle of her Arithmancy homework when she began sneezing. She put the book down and pushed it out of the way of the dangerous droplets, intending to return to work the moment this odd attack stopped, but she kept on sneezing. She sat back on her bed and pulled out a cloth from the box of them she kept on the floor, a gift from her parents. They were always concerned that she keep things clean, and Hermione didn't have the heart to tell them that cleaning charms were more common at Hogwarts than handkerchiefs.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" The violence of her sneezing had caught Lavender's attention. She turned around with that expression of vague good will on her face that Hermione reminded herself she was lucky to get from the other girls at all. She certainly hadn't when she attended Muggle school. "Did you swallow something the wrong way?"

That's coughing, honestly, Hermione thought, but the sneezes kept her from delivering the lecture she'd like to. She wiped again and again at her nose, and finally it calmed. Hermione carefully folded the cloth and put it away, and then performed a *Scourgify* on the bed just in case. She'd read in *Hogwarts, A History* how all the students had once regularly become sick in the winters, until the professors began to teach cleaning charms in the younger years. Hermione liked to keep things safe.

Except that I don't think it's really safe, now.

She thought herself stupid for not remembering when she'd had a sudden attack of sneezing like that earlier—when Harry had unleashed his magic. She promptly scrambled up and marched towards the door.

"Where are you going?" Lavender and Parvati chorused.

Hermione ignored them as she wrenched open the door and bounded down the stairs to the common room. She didn't much care for either Lavender or Parvati. They giggled all the time. They thought too much about boys as romantic partners and not study partners. And, most of all, they thought Professor Trelawney was brilliant. Hermione would have been ashamed of herself if she'd needed any more signs to recognize them as idiots.

She reached the common room and looked around eagerly. Conversations swirled among the chairs and couches, but no one was moving towards the portrait hole. They looked as though they wanted someone to tell them what had happened, instead of finding it out for themselves.

Hermione put her nose in the air. She couldn't stand that kind of apathy. As Professor McGonagall always said, how was anyone going to learn if they didn't want to?

She stalked across the common room towards the portrait hole, but heard rushing footsteps on the stairs from the boys' room and turned to wait. Ron was running to catch up with her, his face red from the effort. Hermione nodded sharply at him and opened the portrait. She didn't think as highly of him as she had last year, but she supposed someone had to stand beside Connor and try to keep the precious idiot from falling and hurting himself.

Ron had an almost frightened expression on his face. Hermione shook her head. "What's the matter?" she asked.

"Connor and Harry were having a meeting tonight," said Ron tightly. "First day of spring, y'know."

No, Hermione thought, *I don't know*. She was vastly annoyed every time some casual pureblood reference made her remember that she was Muggleborn. Of course, that wouldn't stop her for long. She intended to have every nuance and ritual of pureblood culture mastered by fifth year, just in case some of it showed up on the OWLS. Then she could move on to learning every spell she might possibly need for the NEWTS. True, she would have only two years' preparation that way, but Hermione was confident that most of her spell skills were already up to OWL level.

"And?" she asked, as Ron turned towards the Owlery. Hermione followed him willingly. She only knew that the explosion of magic had been powerful, and close. She hadn't yet learned to pinpoint its direction. That was another thing she would learn, she had promised herself, and made a mental note now to add it to her private scroll of such things.

"Connor said that he wanted to reconcile with Harry," said Ron, increasing his stride as they passed a few empty classrooms and finally came to the bottom of the Owlery steps. "He wanted to use a pureblood ritual to do it. But the explosion of magic isn't part of the pureblood ritual. So—"

"Surely you're not afraid that Harry hurt Connor?" Hermione couldn't believe that. Harry was devoted to his brother—so devoted that Hermione wanted to smack him sometimes, because there was *no way* that anyone deserved that kind of devotion when he was being as much of a prat as Connor could be. And other people felt the same way. Hadn't Draco Bloody Malfoy actually approached her and asked her to watch over Harry while he was in Divination, because Malfoy was afraid that Harry wouldn't defend himself against his brother?

"Maybe," said Ron. "Maybe he did it without meaning to. You don't know how strong Harry is, Hermione."

"I do too!" said Hermione indignantly. "I felt it!"

"Well, powerful wizards—" Ron began, in that lecturing tone Hermione hated. She didn't know why he had a right to lecture *her*. She knew a lot more than he did.

Ron didn't get a chance to finish as Connor abruptly hurtled down the Owlery steps and almost hit them. Ron grabbed their friend's elbows and steadied him, and Connor burst into hysterical sobs.

"He tried to kill me," he whispered. "I really think he would have killed me."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. Something smelled foul. She glanced down and saw the dark stain on Connor's trousers, and gave Ron a commanding look.

Luckily, Ron could understand her without words sometimes. He pulled Connor in the direction of Gryffindor Tower, talking too softly for Hermione to make out after a few steps. "Look, mate, you've had a terrible shock, and..."

Hermione pulled out her wand and waited. Now that she was thinking about it, she could feel the magic descending the steps after Connor, Harry's steps as unhurried as the steps of a prowling dragon. Maybe that was what had panicked him.

Harry came around the last turn of the stairs. He seemed mildly startled to see Hermione's wand pointed at him, but after a few moments he smiled and shook his head. Hermione, meanwhile, was fighting hard not to squint.

There wasn't really a visible aura of magic around Harry; she just felt as though there should have been. There was a shimmer of air around him that her eyes found it hard to focus on, and his eyes shone more vividly and richly than she had ever seen them shining before, even from behind his glasses. And he looked more *relaxed* than Hermione remembered seeing him, too.

"Are you going to hex me?" Harry asked.

"No," said Hermione, lowering her wand and blinking. *I wonder what causes that effect around him? I don't remember*

seeing it around the Headmaster, but maybe he controls it better. I'll have to find out. “But Connor said that you’d tried to kill him, so I thought I’d best be ready.”

Harry’s face darkened, and then he said something that made Hermione sure he must be someone else Polyjuiced into Harry. “Connor’s a prat, sometimes,” he said.

“Who are you, and what have you done with Harry Potter?” Hermione demanded, pointing her wand at him. “Are you Draco Malfoy?”

Harry gave her a small smile and shook his head again. “No, Hermione,” he said, and that reassured her a bit, because Malfoy only called her “Granger,” and then with a twist in his voice that made it obvious that he was fighting hard not to say “Mudblood.” “Just Harry finally seeing the truth.”

Hermione blinked, and felt a wash of pure wonder overcome her.

“You’ll have to tell me what that’s like,” she said, putting her wand back in her sleeve. “I don’t think I can learn it from books.”

“It’s *brilliant*,” said Harry, his voice soft as starlight.

Hermione nodded. “But *how* brilliant?”

Harry laughed. Hermione decided that she could stand not getting the answers to a few questions, since she was hearing that laugh.

Albus stared out the window of his office as the last of Harry’s light-show died. He continued watching for long moments before he finally moved over and allowed himself to take his seat.

For the first time in years, he felt *old*. Not merely weary of battle, not wondering where he would find the strength to fight, but actively aged, and almost ready to think of death as something other than the rest he would take when the wizarding world was finally, absolutely, safe.

He sat behind his desk for a moment and stared at the far side of the office, at Fawkes’s empty perch and some of the silver instruments that wouldn’t see use for a long time, if ever. He felt, he concluded, as he had the day he realized Fawkes wasn’t coming back to him.

One of the three possible pathways for the future had just vanished into smoke. Harry would not fall back under the phoenix web. He would not make everything be as it had been, the safe and secure and predictable future that Albus had envisioned from the moment he heard the prophecy. He would tear further and further away from Connor and the problem would worsen, or...

Or he would hear the prophecy, someday, and realize what it could mean, and become an equal and an ally. Albus did not dare let him be anything other than an ally, not when Harry had that much power, but he knew this was a wizard whom he had bound, conditioned, and encouraged to stay bound and conditioned. Harry was sure to demand a heavy sacrifice of him before he agreed to aid the war effort in one of the two ways that they would have to have him.

Regret struck through him, keener than a lightning bolt, sharper than the thorns of the path he’d once tried—and failed—to walk.

For the first time since the beginning of the First War with Voldemort, since he realized what young Tom Riddle had become, Albus found himself unable to put the regret aside. He wished things could have gone differently, with a sourness that tainted the back of his throat. Even knowing that things could not have gone differently, that what was done was done, he still wished for it.

He pushed the thoughts out of his head when he heard a knock on the door. That would be young Percy Weasley, one of the few Albus still thought he could trust to watch out for the wizarding world before themselves. Albus knew he had to look calm, contained, and regal. Otherwise, Percy might start doubting and falter. He was still unsure that this course really was the *best* one, however much he wanted to help the Headmaster. He needed a strong leader.

They all do, Albus thought. They will be watching me in the wake of this, trying to see if I am frightened of Harry, if I am making frantic overtures to him. They will all be watching—the Ministry, the students, the professors, those impossible purebloods who seem to think that a child can lead them.

I must give them a show.

The regret was drowned. The thorns were pulled free from his flesh and thrown away. Regrets or not, he had a path to follow.

Albus lifted his head and put on his best smile. “Come in, Mr. Weasley.”

Luna didn’t know why everyone around her was chattering about the blast of magic. It was perfectly *obvious* that the blast of magic was Harry’s, and that he was fighting a Wrackspurt. Wrackspurts had an interest in him. He’d been possessed by one last year, and had done some awful things under its influence. So, if he was fighting now, another one was trying to possess him.

I should make a necklace for him, Luna thought, and reached down to the basket beside her chair. She kept feathers in there, and small scraps of parchment, and stems from quills, and bits of broken inkwells, and Knuts no one else wanted, and many other treasures that people discarded without noticing the lingering magic in them. She sorted carefully through her treasures now, and found an empty piece of string and some small green scraps of parchment. She nodded. Those would be good. Wrackspurts were scared of small green scraps of parchment.

“Hey, Loony, what you doin’?”

Luna glanced up. It was poor Gorgon, a fifth-year student with a speech impediment. That was the only reason he could have for mispronouncing her name each and every time. “Making a necklace,” she said, and held up the string so that he could see. “There are Wrackspurts up in the Owlery.”

Gorgon snorted and opened his mouth to say something else, but Jones, who always followed him around, shook his shoulder roughly. “Mate,” he whispered. “That explosion came from up in the Owlery.”

Gorgon paled dramatically, but it still took him a moment to work out the implications. Luna frowned lightly as she strung the parchment scraps along the thread, the movements so familiar she could do it by feel. She didn’t understand why Gorgon *acted* stupid when he wasn’t. He couldn’t be stupid, or he wouldn’t be in Ravenclaw.

“So that means that Potter—“ began Gorgon.

“Yeah,” said Jones. “He’s more powerful than ever, mate, and Loony—I mean Luna—here is his friend.” He jerked his head at Luna.

They both stared at her. Luna didn’t know why. Her fingers kept making the necklace while she stared back, calmly. People were always looking at her. She was used to it. She would have gone mad long ago, if she wasn’t.

Gorgon licked his lips and swallowed. “You’ll—you’ll tell Potter that we didn’t mean you any harm?” he asked. “That we were just playing?”

“When did you ever intend me harm?” said Luna, and knotted the end of the necklace. She considered the string for a moment, and decided that it could use a few of the swallow feathers she’d found lying beside the lake. She stooped down and got them from her basket.

“Right, right,” said Jones, driving an elbow into Gorgon’s ribs. Luna thought he was trying to get Gorgon to shut up, and nodded. *That’s probably the best course. Then he won’t say inane things.* “Just tell Potter that we’ve seen the error of our ways and we wish him the very *best* of luck, all right?”

Luna shrugged at him. “All right. But Harry won’t have the best of luck if I can’t get these swallow feathers on the necklace just the way I want them.”

“Right, right.” Jones dragged Gorgon away, and left her alone. Luna looked around, and noted that most of the people in the Ravenclaw common room were trying not to look at her, and failing. She shrugged, and carefully finished the necklace for Harry.

I wonder if they'll be afraid of him? she thought for the first time as she admired the finished necklace.

Then she frowned and shook her head. *How could anyone be afraid of him? He's not going to hurt people. I don't understand why so many people don't see that.*

Of course, most people refused to admit that Heliopaths and Wrackspurts were real, too. Luna supposed that some of that was fear of what the Ministry would do to them if they admitted it, but some of it could be the same reason they were afraid of Harry—they thought something might happen if they drew their attention.

People are very strange, Luna thought, as she put down the necklace and picked up the book on Arithmancy she'd been reading again. *So few of them see the world for what it is.*

Remus jolted out of a doze as the magic swept the castle. He could *smell* it, which was more than he'd been able to do in a long time. He dazedly lifted his head from the pile of second-year essays and blinked at nothing.

The wolf inside him snarled and muttered its hate. By that alone, Remus suspected the magic came from Harry and not Albus. The wolf approved of Albus, for the same reason it approved of Sirius: it could sense kindred in them.

Remus ignored it as he sniffed, and his nose reported to him what the wolf wouldn't. This magic was joyous, fresh, and smelled like green shoots pushing up through mud—like the beginning of spring, in fact. Remus felt his body twitch. He wished he could transform into a beast that wouldn't kill people and run through the castle, exercising his elation through his muscles.

He stood and rapidly made his way to the door of his office, shutting the wolf up when it protested. It was not yet the night of the full moon, and he had more control when he was further away from it. He locked the wolf behind a door he'd learned about long ago, and stepped out into the hallway.

He saw Sirius, hastening away from him towards the top of the school, and called out, "Sirius! Wait!" Surely, if anything could reconcile them, it was this, Remus thought. The air smelled like spring. It *breathed* possibility. Surely Sirius would realize that any magic that felt like this couldn't possibly be Dark?

Sirius turned around, and Remus recoiled. Sirius's face was a mixture of desperation and fear.

"What do you *want*, Lupin?" Sirius snarled, the sound of a dog in the back of his voice. The wolf whined in appreciation, and Remus shut it up again. "I have to go find Connor. I think Harry must have done something awful to him. They were having a meeting tonight, you know. The vernal equinox. A reconciliation meeting. I'd been training Connor hard for it."

Remus felt his eyes widen. "Sirius—you didn't advise Connor to use *compulsion* on Harry, did you?"

Sirius glanced sullenly away from him.

Remus strode forward and grabbed his old friend's shoulders, shaking him slightly. He could, if he concentrated, forget that the last time he'd been this close to Sirius, he'd been trying to kill him. "Sirius, *wake up*. Harry isn't going to be a slave, not ever again. I would think that you would welcome that and cheer him on. You were enslaved by your family's expectations for so long, until you ran away and hid with James at Lux Aeterna. Why won't you feel grateful that he managed to escape, and even younger than you did?"

"You don't understand anything, Lupin." Sirius's voice didn't sound like him, low and chill and dusty. He wrenched himself free from Remus's hands. "You don't understand anything of what I have to do, what Albus has asked me to do, what it means that—" He cut himself off, and hurried up the hallway again.

Remus watched him go, actually limping slightly, as though he favored his left side. Around his neck, the golden chain of the ornament Dumbledore had given him clinked and shone.

Remus found that he was no longer quite as joyful as he had been.

Draco had planned many fine speeches for when Harry got back to the dungeons.

One of them would definitely start with *Did you think I'd be fooled for long?* That one was because of the illusion of himself that Harry had created to follow Draco down to dinner and then back to the dungeons before it dissolved. The illusion couldn't do much more than smile and nod and make small talk like "Really?" and "You don't say!" but that had been enough to convince Draco, who was in a talkative mood, that it was Harry. Of course, then he turned around and Harry was dissipating into small motes of light. Draco had panicked for a minute until he realized that Harry had done it so that he could attend the meeting with Connor in private.

So that meant he thought of a second speech starting with *I'm really angry with you*, and containing many terms that sounded like insults but were, in fact, absolutely and utterly true. He would make Harry look at the floor in *shame* before he was done. One didn't *fool* a Malfoy like that.

The third speech consisted of *I've been to see Professor Snape about your little stunt at dinner, you know*. Then he could pause and watch the expression on Harry's face.

And there was his favorite so far, *Harry? I was so worried about you*. Let Harry's guilt bring him low, Draco thought, as he kicked viciously at the side of the bed. Then he would spend some time extracting promises from Harry, including never, ever, ever to create illusions of himself again, while Harry was vulnerable and prone to giving them.

But that was before the explosion of magic sprang from atop the Owlery, and Draco fell back on the bed, overwhelmed by the scent of roses that had filled his nostrils and half-drugged him. When he had partially regained consciousness, he rolled over, sat up with one elbow leaning on the bed, and stared at the door.

There were many good points to being a Malfoy. At the moment, Draco couldn't decide whether his bloody sensitivity to magic was one of them or not. At least being overwhelmed by the scent of roses was better than being overwhelmed by a headache, he supposed.

The door of their room opened, and Harry came in. He carefully shut the door before he turned and met Draco's eyes.

Draco found himself utterly arrested by the expression on Harry's face. He had *never* seen him shine like that, his eyes the green of affection in Draco's bottle, his mouth moving in a free and open smile that had decision and wisdom and knowledge behind it, the lines of tension in his cheeks and forehead almost gone.

"Hi, Draco," said Harry quietly.

"What happened?" Draco whispered, the only words he could manage.

"Connor tried to compel me," said Harry. "And when I resisted it, that took care of the rest of the phoenix web." He hesitated, then stepped forward. "And it might, um, possibly have made me decide that I don't see the world the same way anymore, and that some things could be more important than my brother."

Draco couldn't breathe. For the first time since they'd been Sorted, he thought, he had the sensation that Harry was thinking solely about *him*, and not Connor.

Well, it's only fair, he tried to think. *I've spent so much time and emotion worrying about him, it's only right that he start returning it. Go on, Draco, tell him that you haven't forgiven him for his little stunt yet. Make him beg for your forgiveness.*

It was what his mother would have done, or his father. But neither Narcissa nor Lucius was here right now.

"Forgive me?" Harry asked, with a small, nervous smile, as though he were actually worried that Draco wouldn't.

And someone—*certainly* not Draco, who had more poise than that—was saying in a half-broken voice, "There is nothing I wouldn't forgive you for right now," and leaning forward to hug Harry. And Harry was hugging him back, his mind, Draco knew, for once not rushing off to think of his brother.

It had been a long time coming.

Snape judged the moment less by the magic he felt sweeping through the school and more by the pain in his Dark Mark.

One moment he was sitting in utter agony before the fire, attempting to mark essays that wouldn't mark themselves, his teeth clenched as he fought the temptation to cast a numbing spell on his arm. He didn't want to. It would be like admitting weakness.

Then the pain was gone, like a beast wounded and sent running, and Snape sat in the absence of agony, blinking.

And then he felt the magic sweeping, and heard it singing.

He stood coolly and laid his quill down atop the essays. He made his way to the door of his private rooms. He was not shaking. He was not fumbling to open the door with hands that would barely obey him. He was not afraid that Harry might have called his magic in such extreme power because he had somehow got into another werewolf attack in the Forbidden Forest, or into other danger.

This is ridiculous, Snape thought savagely, and clamped down on the racing thoughts. He made himself take five deep breaths before he opened the door and stepped into the dungeon corridors. He turned calmly in the direction of the Slytherin common room, and his strides had always covered great amounts of ground; he didn't need to worry that he was almost running now.

He was in time to see Harry and Granger come along the corridor towards the common room, and to hide around the corner to watch them. Granger was leading, bent towards Harry, obscuring his face. Snape fought to temptation to hex her bushy hair off, just so that he could see what expression his ward wore.

Then Granger waved to Harry and started back towards the stairs out of the dungeons, and Snape saw Harry's face.

He felt a breath go deep into his lungs and then pass out of them again, leaving him drained.

Harry was all right. He was more than all right.

His face wore a smile that had no touch of strain or stress. He was humming beneath his breath as he leaned near the stone wall and whispered the password that would let him into the common room. And, more to the point, the magic around him leaped and danced, creating faint images of golden and silver light that dissipated almost before Snape could see what they were. If Harry had been upset, his magic would have been snarling around him, and Snape, with the way that Lucius had taught him to sense power, would have a headache.

Snape stepped backwards and returned slowly to his rooms. He could have gone in after Harry and scolded him, certainly, but he found that he didn't particularly want to. He would wait for Harry to come to him and explain what had happened, and take action only if his ward tried to evade him or lie.

Snape didn't think that would happen. Not this time.

He sat down in front of the essays again, brightened the fire, and smiled with vicious glee. There, in the very first sentence of the next essay, was a glaring grammatical error.

Snape marked it with a flourish.

"Millicent! Millicent, did you feel that?" Pansy was practically babbling, and she'd fallen off the bed to the floor.

Millicent glanced calmly up from her Transfiguration book. "Of course I did, Pansy," she drawled. "I'm neither a stone nor a Mudblood." The air was surging with the scent of a thunderstorm brewing, and Millicent wasn't surprised. Harry was a hell of a powerful wizard, and it smelled as though he'd finally realized it.

Pansy picked herself up and scowled at her. "Sometimes I don't like you very much, Millicent," she said. "What was it?"

"Harry," said Millicent, with a shrug, and turned back to her book.

She could feel Pansy's eyes on the side of her face. She refused to turn around. Pansy wasn't that annoying, most of the time, but sometimes she could be. And Millicent had long ago sensed just what Harry could do, and had her guesses confirmed by her father, whom she trusted more than anyone in the world.

Adalrico trusted her back, and once Starborn had arranged the meeting between him and Harry last summer, he'd told his daughter what Millicent had already suspected: they had someone new to follow, a third option between absolute Dark and absolute Light.

Millicent was no stranger to power, either magical or political. She was her father's magical heir, and he had taught her all sorts of things from the time she was six years old and he realized it. Millicent had realized it earlier. She realized lots of things earlier. She was sometimes amazed at how long it took people to catch up.

Harry had finally caught up, it seemed.

Well, good, Millicent thought, as she turned another page in her Transfiguration book. *Maybe that way, we can finally start getting some things done.*

She wasn't Slytherin enough to conceal her smile.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Thirty-Two: Mastering Himself

"Legilimens."

Harry stood as still as he could, and let down as many of his carefully trained defenses as he could. It was harder than he had thought it would be. As Snape had said would happen, his Occlumency shields were now part of the normal arrangement of his mind, and it took some work to move them, as it once would have taken work to shift the webs.

He had to know the truth, though, and he had to know it before he went to confront Dumbledore.

Snape looked long and carefully into Harry's mind, and then stepped back. The expression on his face was so inward that Harry waited for a moment before he asked.

"It's gone, isn't it?"

Snape shook his head, then said, "Yes, it is. I cannot see a trace of the phoenix web anywhere in your thoughts."

Harry closed his eyes in relief. "Thank you, sir."

"But your mind," Snape whispered. "Your mind, Harry. It's been arranged in webs for so long that I did not think it knew any other way to grow. It may have taken its cue from the phoenix web, but it had made the shape its own. And now it is changing shape." Harry opened his eyes to see his guardian looking at him as if he had done this on purpose, just to spite him.

"What is it?" Harry asked, half-wondering if he wanted to know. But he had promised himself. No more hiding—at least once he knew he was hiding—no more flinching from the hard choices. He had to know everything he could if he was going to work out the compromise he wanted to propose to Dumbledore, much less become the *vates* and stay allied with the purebloods and everything else he had to do.

"Your mind is becoming a forest," Snape whispered. "The webs are changing into canopies of leaves, the intersecting strands into vines, the sturdier places where you tucked your magic into trees."

Harry blinked, then laughed softly. "But that's a good thing, sir. I'd much rather have that as a symbol of life."

Snape eyed him. Then he seemed to realize that he was showing confusion in front of someone else, and that simply would not do. He straightened, and the expression vanished behind a wooden mask. "If you spend more than an hour in the Headmaster's office, Potter, I am coming in after you," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Harry happily, and stepped out of Snape's office. Draco was waiting for him. He seemed to consider it only fair that Harry was bringing him along this time, instead of Snape. Harry hadn't enlightened him to the real reason yet, but he did now as they turned in the direction of the Headmaster's office.

"I'd like you to watch, Draco, please," he said. "I know that I have to make a bargain, an alliance, with the Headmaster—"

“You could kill him,” Draco suggested, his tone a bit too bloodthirsty for Harry’s tastes. Harry rolled his eyes, and wondered which of his parents Draco had got this from.

“Maybe,” he said. “But I don’t want to.”

“Why not?” Draco halted and frowned at him. Since Harry kept walking, that didn’t work very well. Draco muttered under his breath and caught up with him a few strides later. “He hurt you. He betrayed you. He kept trying to get that damn web on you even when you didn’t want it.”

Harry shrugged. “And he’s too powerful to kill, and he controls Connor a good deal more than I do right now. I still care about my brother, Draco. I just don’t care about him *only*. I need to talk to Dumbledore. And that is the reason I need you there. If it seems at any point like I’m willing to sacrifice too much, give up things that you don’t think I should, interfere.”

“Oh, you can *count* on me for that,” Draco said.

Harry gave him a small smile. “I know.”

“Harry, come in,” said Dumbledore as the door to his office opened. His voice was patient, calm, serene. Harry could tell it wasn’t full of his usual grandfatherly good nature, though. He sounded as though he had no emotions at all, behind the serenity.

Harry nodded to the Headmaster and once again made for the left-hand chair, but Draco got in front of him and took it first. Harry gave him a curious glance only until he realized that the left-hand chair was slightly closer to Dumbledore’s desk, and thus Dumbledore’s wand. Rolling his eyes, Harry sat down in the right-hand chair instead. *I know he cares about me, but there are times when he takes the protectiveness a bit too far.*

“Headmaster,” he said. “I came to talk to you about my magic and my brother.”

“So you said in the note you sent me, Harry.” Dumbledore inclined his head, his beard draping across most of the desk. “What I am unsure about is why you waited a week to talk to me.”

“I thought I needed the time,” said Harry. “I had to come up with a plan. I wanted to gain some control of my magic before I saw you again, in case I accidentally ate part of it.” He watched Dumbledore wince with a malicious pleasure that was entirely new to him—well, all right, almost new. “And I wanted to do some reading.”

“What is your plan, Harry?” Dumbledore might have been discussing the weather at the raising of Stonehenge. In fact, Harry thought, he probably would have showed more animation in a discussion of that. Some wizards argued that ancient weather patterns were the most important clues to ancient magic.

“To teach my brother,” said Harry. “I ought to have done it before, but I didn’t know how badly he needed it. Now I know. He’s utterly incompetent in most of the things he ought to know, Headmaster. He had to have a friend instruct him in pureblood rituals, and then he still misused them—“

“Purebloods are not the whole of the wizarding world, Harry.”

“But they’re part of it,” said Harry, “and I won’t see them left behind.” He nodded at Draco. “In some cases, they’ve been more welcoming to me, more understanding, than my own family.”

Dumbledore contrived to look unmoved as he said, “Still, Harry, that is mostly because of your power. And power isn’t everything.”

“No,” Harry agreed, because Draco was trying to say something unfortunate. “Learning is. And Connor has only learned how to use the compulsion ability, and then not in appropriate places. He tried to compel me in the Owlery, Headmaster.” He paused, then decided to ask. Even if it were true, it was in the past now. “Did you tell him to do that, sir?”

Dumbledore’s face had gone white. In the next moment, it went back to being free of all expression. “No, Harry, I did not,” he said. “I suspect that was Sirius’s idea. He has been spending almost all his time on the weekends with Connor and Lily, and he seems very dedicated to the idea of renewing your bonds of family.”

Harry nodded. “Then that is part of my bargain. I will teach my brother the things he ought to know and hasn’t learned—the pureblood rituals, history, how to control his power, how to duel, how to *survive*. In return, I want him taken away from Sirius.”

“You know that Connor will not like this,” said Dumbledore. “The boy adores your godfather.”

“I know that,” said Harry. “But he’s not learning anything useful from Sirius, Headmaster, only how to get his way and how to hate. And the Boy-Who-Lived will need to love the whole of the wizarding world, won’t he?”

Dumbledore actually *jumped*. Harry wondered why. But the Headmaster nodded briskly a moment later. “Yes, he will,” he murmured. “If you feel that he is learning only hate, Harry, then I will remove him from Sirius’s tutelage. Sirius had assured me that he was no longer teaching the boy to hate Slytherins or even Dark magic. He had said he was showing him the ethics of compulsion, when it may be used and when not. It sounds as though he lied to me.” His voice had turned old, and infinitely sad.

Harry drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair for a moment. In some ways, this felt like betraying his brother. On the other hand, after what had happened in the Owlery, he was not much more inclined to show mercy to Connor than Snape and Draco had been to him at Malfoy Manor. If Connor had not torn the phoenix web and introduced him to the wonders of clear sight, which distracted him from his anger, Harry might have reacted to the compulsion violently enough to hurt him.

“Headmaster, do you know about the second prophecy?”

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. “What second prophecy?”

Harry stared searchingly at him, blocking the attempt to Legilimize him instinctively. He couldn’t tell if Dumbledore was sincere, because almost any emotion could be hidden behind that twinkling façade, but he seemed to be. Harry decided he would have to explain further, despite the tight hold Draco had on his arm.

“Professor Trelawney gave what sounded like a true prophecy early in February, Headmaster,” he said. “I only heard the last three words, *stand or fall*. Ron and Connor heard the whole of it, but Connor won’t tell me and Ron won’t tell me, either, out of loyalty to his friend. I thought Connor had probably come and told you.”

“No,” said Dumbledore quietly. He sat in silence for some time. Harry waited. Draco shot him a small glare. Harry ignored him. He had done what he thought was necessary, and it hadn’t been a sacrifice. He had thought that Dumbledore really did know all the things he asked about.

At last, the Headmaster looked up and nodded. “You may teach Connor, Harry, and I will inform him that his private lessons with Sirius are to cease.” Dumbledore paused for a long moment, then added, “You surprise me with your willingness to enter into this. I thought that you would despise him after what happened, turn against him.”

Harry smiled. He knew it wasn’t a pleasant smile. “You trained me too well for that,” he said. “I love him, sir. I always will. But I refuse to simply be a mindless weapon for him, turned against his enemies on his whims. I want to teach him how to recognize his own strengths, and to know the things that any wizard can learn. He *is* the Boy-Who-Lived, but if Voldemort returned tomorrow and Connor needed to defeat him, we would all be doomed. So I think it best that he learn how to defend himself—which he was supposed to be doing by now, anyway, if my mother’s original plan had held true.”

“He has defeated Voldemort three times,” Dumbledore pointed out.

Harry sighed. “*Twice*, sir. My magic destroyed Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets. I *Obliviated* Connor, because my magic would have done something more permanent to him otherwise, and let him think that he did it.”

Draco pinched his arm. Harry glared at him. “What?” he whispered. “I would think you would be smug that I told him that.”

“I am,” Draco whispered. “Now tell everyone else.”

Harry shook his head and turned away from Draco’s further pinches, back to Dumbledore. Dumbledore once again looked old, and he was looking out his window as though wanting a glimpse of a wizarding world that had vanished long ago. Harry felt a spasm of pity as he watched him.

At last Dumbledore turned back, and said, “If this is the bargain you wish to make, Harry—teaching Connor in exchange for

Sirius teaching him no longer—then I am inclined to grant it. But there is still the matter of what to do about your power.” His eyes traced something invisible in the air, probably the outline of Harry’s aura. That was on Harry’s list to learn how to do, at least partially because he wanted to teach Connor how to do it.

“I know, sir,” said Harry. “Professor Snape is helping me learn to see the edges of my compulsion and my ability to eat other wizards’ magic, so that I’ll know at once if I ever start exercising them.”

“And what do you intend to do other than that?” Dumbledore was suddenly back to the stern old man Harry had seen him become on occasion, hardened in the matters of war, and his eyes *pierced* as they bore into Harry’s.

“I intend to attend Hogwarts,” said Harry calmly, “and teach my brother, and have more friends than my mother’s plans would allow me to have. I have magic, Headmaster, and I even know more things than the average student might be expected to know. But I don’t have other skills that the simplest child of four or five has. I want to build them. I want to learn how to live without my brother’s shadow. And there are some things only time will teach me.” He smiled slightly at the Headmaster’s stunned expression. “Did you think I would run right out and become a war-leader, sir?” he asked.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Dumbledore murmured.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t *want* to,” he said. “I know there are some things I won’t have a choice about because of the sheer strength of my magic, or because of the people I want to protect and free.” He thought again about the webs that Dobby and Fawkes had shown him, and grimaced. He would choose to walk the *vates* path when he was ready, yes, but in other ways, there hadn’t been a choice from the moment he realized what a *vates* was and did. There was no way he could forget about or ignore it. “But there are other things I *can* choose. I’m not the Boy-Who-Lived. I’m not the general of the Light; that’s you, sir. I’m not going to become a politician of some sort just because that would make people comfortable. And the phoenix web has made me hate giving orders. I can’t see myself at the head of an army. I can’t see myself at the head of any sort of force, really.”

Draco pinched his arm. Harry glanced at him, and saw Draco’s eyes widened in something that looked like a mixture of surprise and amusement.

“Do you think most of us are going to follow anyone else?” Draco whispered to him.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Purebloods ought to get over this dependence on anyone of pure power,” he whispered back. “It’s what keeps them following Lords. Do they want to be swayed only by magic all their lives?”

“It’s more than that, Harry—“ Draco began.

“I am glad, Harry,” Dumbledore interrupted then, “to know that ambition is not one of the reasons the Hat chose you for Slytherin.”

Harry shrugged. “I do want to accomplish things, Headmaster. Just not in the name of myself, or only for myself. I know that Connor has to lead us, because the prophecy chose him. But he’d be a horrible leader right now.” That caused only the smallest twinge of guilt in his chest, where before he would have been literally unable to say it. Harry had to smile about that. “I’m willing to help him become what he has to be. That’s one of my major ambitions.”

“And another?” Dumbledore was smiling too, encouraging, as though he thought he could trust Harry now.

“To become a *vates*.”

Dumbledore’s smile vanished, and he sat up. “I hope that you think on that long and hard, Harry,” he intoned. “After all, the wizarding world is built on webs. I do not imagine that most of the purebloods—“ for a moment, his eyes flicked to Draco “—would thank you for taking their house elves away.”

Harry smiled tightly. “I’m working on it, Headmaster. I know how hard it’s going to be.”

“That ambition has killed wizards in the past, Harry, or driven them mad,” said Dumbledore quietly, his eyes never wavering. “Why do you want to do it?”

“Because I want to,” said Harry, and stood. “Is there anything else that you wanted to request of me, Headmaster?”

Dumbledore sighed. “No. I will speak to Connor. It may take me some time to persuade both him and Sirius that their lessons

must cease.” He leaned forward, and connected his gaze with Harry’s strongly enough that Harry found it hard to look away. “I am glad that we are allies on this, Harry. I would not have wanted you as an enemy.”

“He had every right to think of you like that,” Draco hissed, hovering protectively at Harry’s right shoulder.

“It would have been counterproductive to make you an enemy, Headmaster,” said Harry. “You’ve hurt me, but I’m used to being a sacrifice. And other debts…” He thought of Peter, and Remus. “I can wait to collect them.”

Dumbledore’s face changed, but Harry didn’t stay to watch how it changed. He turned towards the office door instead, and waited patiently for it to shut behind them so that Draco could shout. He’d obviously been wanting to do so for a while.

Sure enough, Draco started as they rode the moving staircase downwards.

“What was that about not wanting to give orders, Harry?” he asked, with false sweetness. “What was that about not wanting to lead?”

Harry shifted to face him. “I’m hardly going to ignore the alliances I’ve forged with the purebloods, Draco,” he said. “That’s not what I meant. But I’m not going to march out at the head of some army, either. That’s absolutely ridiculous. Why should I? When former Death Eaters like Hawthorn Parkinson turn against Voldemort and ally themselves with me, it’s not in the hope that they’ll be able to sneak back to Voldemort when he rises again. They know that he wouldn’t forgive that kind of betrayal. They *are* committed to my goals, and my goals are Connor’s and Dumbledore’s.”

“No, they aren’t,” said Draco.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Well, not Connor’s, I’ll grant you,” he muttered, thinking of the way that his brother had run away from him. He had apparently proclaimed, in the presence of Gryffindors, that Harry had tried to kill him. That got a few of them looking askance at Harry, but since the Gryffindors who’d heard that proclamation included the Weasley twins, they had wasted no time in creating a mask of Connor’s face that floated about and wailed the same words while bursting dramatically into tears every few minutes. After that, most people were unable to take the news seriously. Harry was disgusted anyway, that his brother would think such a thing. “But they will be once I get to teaching him. And Dumbledore is finally coming around, I think. He knows it would be silly to provoke me. And he would be beyond stupid to alienate the purebloods, which he isn’t. I just don’t think that he thought he had any way of reaching them until now. Now he does, through me.”

He stopped. Draco was staring at him. Harry waited until they were beyond the gargoyle, and then asked, “What? Are you stunned by my brilliant plan, or by my pretty face, or what?”

Draco blushed fiercely, but cleared his throat and said, “Do you really *trust* them, Harry? I don’t. I think they’ll twist back on themselves the moment they realize that *you* trust them, and don’t want to hurt them. There were some purebloods who fought on Dumbledore’s side in the last War, you know. And look at them now. The Weasleys are still poor. Black’s fucked in the head. Do you think most of us want to follow their example?”

Harry groaned. “The Weasleys have been poor for a long time,” he said, as he started back towards the dungeons. “And you know what happened to Sirius. You were there to hear it.”

Draco sounded more normal as he followed, catching Harry up again easily. Harry wished for his growth spurt right now. At least then he would be able to storm away from Draco impressively. “Dumbledore could have helped the Weasleys, if he really wanted to. And he sure hasn’t done a good job of helping Black. If that’s his ‘protection’ for those dearest to him, then I don’t think any of us want it.”

Harry sighed. “Did any of the purebloods really think that I was going to turn my back on my brother and plunge wildly into some—I don’t even know what it would be they would *want*. Leading a rogue band of outlaws on a crusade of vigilante justice?”

“Of course not,” said Draco, with a sniff. “Vigilante justice is so *crude*. No, Harry. What we want is someone who’ll speak up for us, who will lead legal fights against the Ministry, who will defend our homes and families and traditions against any kind of threat, whether that’s Mu—Muggleborns trying to destroy our culture—“

“No one is out to *destroy your culture*, Draco—“

“Or other purebloods attacking us in the throes of war,” Draco finished stubbornly, and slapped a hand on the wall that hid

the Slytherin common room, preventing the door from opening. Harry turned around to face him, glaring. Draco didn't seem at all intimidated. His own face wasn't worked into a glare, but a simple stern look, as inflexible as the silver masks that Harry knew members of the Malfoy family had once worn to funerals. "We have a different view of the world than you do, Harry. You know our customs, but you don't know all the political realities. Of course, growing up as isolated as you did, that's not surprising. And we're willing to teach you, and allow you some time to learn them.

"But, sooner or later, we're going to need you for more than just sheer physical defense against the Dark Lord. We *want* a leader. I know that my father wouldn't have started truce-dancing with you if he wanted no more than a defender. I know what the truce-dance ultimately leads up to, and that's not the sort of connection that two soldiers forge with each other. It goes much deeper." Draco leaned closer. "You know that too, Harry, or you would never have answered him. Why did you?"

"Because it began as something I could do for my brother," Harry said through his teeth. "If the Malfoys weren't fighting him, then he had less chance of dying. I wanted to turn his enemies into friends. I intended your family to be part of *his* army, originally. Connor really will have to lead armies. Voldemort won't leave him alone until he does."

Draco cocked his head. "This isn't about your brother anymore, Harry. It never was, but you were too blind to see that. So see it now. I've been writing to my mother a lot, talking to her. You've read those letters. And you read those books on the Guile family and compulsion and Lords that she sent me. People aren't following you just to follow your brother by proxy or to get protection from—" Draco took a deep breath, and forced the name out. "*Voldemort*. They're following you for you."

Harry grunted. He supposed he would have to think about it. What he did know was that he was no more suited to be what the purebloods wanted him to be than he was suited to be *vates*, right now. He wouldn't give orders. He would leave decisions up to other people. He would follow the bonds of pureblood ritual and tradition, both because they were useful and because he loved them for themselves, but that was very different from leading, or governing, or ruling.

Right now. Does that mean that I could become what they want me to be, the same way I could become vates?

There was a disturbing thought, and Harry decided that he didn't want to think about it anymore. He nodded to Draco, muttered, "Thanks for telling me," and vanished into the Slytherin common room.

He couldn't think about this right now, he reasoned, as he dragged his books out from his trunk. He had Charms homework to finish.

"Good," said Snape's voice, from somewhere beyond the barriers that Harry had set up. "Now. Open your eyes, and tell me what you see." His guardian's voice had gone deep, lulling, into a softness of tone Harry would have never believed him capable of if he hadn't heard it.

Harry opened his eyes. He blinked. "A forest," he said.

"What?" Snape's voice cracked the softness, and the forest vanished. Harry shook his head and touched his temple. He was sitting on another Transfigured stretch of mattress in Snape's office, and the intense concentration needed to look for the edges of his magic was draining him. "What did you say?" Snape insisted, stepping forward from behind the desk.

"I saw a forest," said Harry, and glanced about. "The trees went just to the edge of your desk," he added, pointing. "I saw vines on the walls. There were flowers—I think they were orchids—on the ceiling. It was centered around me. I didn't have time to look behind me, but I think it might have been there, as well."

Snape was silent for long moments. Harry studied his face, but could tell no more from it than he had been able to tell from Dumbledore at the start of their meeting. He resigned himself to wait. Perhaps Snape was just considering what it meant, and didn't really have bad news to hand him.

As it turned out, it was the latter. "Harry," said Snape, "you remember that I told you last week about your mind reshaping itself as a forest, after the webs?"

Harry nodded.

"That is—not supposed to happen," said Snape carefully. "In your case, I think the magic that roars through you is taking on the challenge so as to have something to do. Also, it roots itself more firmly in you that way, and carves new channels it can travel. That makes it less likely to burst out of control."

“That sounds like a good thing,” Harry ventured, hoping to make Snape smile, but his guardian only nodded absently.

“But,” Snape whispered, “your magic obviously does not have *enough* to do. Or its strength simply overflows your mind. So it is changing a small portion of the world around you into a reflection of your thoughts.”

Harry felt a chill travel down his spine. “I don’t know what that means,” he admitted. “Are oaks going to start sprouting through the floor?”

Snape waved a hand. “Nothing like that,” he said, with the irritated tone Harry was more used to hearing from him. “It is not the physical world that it changes. It is the mental and perceptual one. People around you may begin to see the trees, the vines, the—orchids.” Snape curled his lip as though he disdained the word. “It may be as mild as that. On the other hand, they may begin thinking like you, too. The magic extends your way of thinking outward, if you will. Your mind takes over from the space that other people’s thoughts are more used to occupying. They may begin hearing what you think, or—“
Snape halted.

“I might start compelling them,” Harry finished with a sigh.

Snape shrugged. “Yes. Yet a different kind of compulsion from any you have done so far. There, other wizards, dazed by the strength of your magic, simply gave in to your desires. This makes them think that your desires *are* their own. In a deeper form, it might ultimately grow over their minds so as to make them part of your forest.”

Harry swallowed. He wanted to panic, and that meant he was not going to. “Is there any way that I can stop that?”

“Yes,” said Snape. “You may work more consciously with your magic. Assuming this is a result of its not having enough to do, concentrating it in other projects, using it more freely, might stop it from expanding your mind.”

“But that might mean more of the other kind of compulsion,” Harry finished.

Snape inclined his head. His eyes had never moved from Harry’s face, and they had gone inscrutable again. “Yes.”

“What are the other options?” Harry wished his magic was in front of him in some recognizable form, so he could glare at it. *Stupid magic. Why does it have to be this strong?*

“There are certain potions that will damp some of your strength for a time, so that you may grow used to controlling a certain level of it,” Snape said. “I am reluctant to use them, however. I think it would be better to work on conscious control.”

“Any other choices?” Harry asked.

“More Occlumency,” Snape pronounced. “Tend your mind. Find another shape for it to assume. Do not permit it unchecked growth, and most especially do not let the rest of your magic combine with it and spread it.”

Harry half-closed his eyes, trying to think of what he wanted his mind to look like. Perhaps he was thinking too hard about Snape’s word “tend,” or the fact that his thoughts apparently *liked* the shapes of trees and flowers, but he found only one that pleased him.

“A garden?” he asked, looking up at Snape. “Will that work?”

Snape’s lip curled again. “If you think I am going to teach you to construct mental gazebos and beds of roses, Potter, you *may* think again.”

Harry laughed, and used the laughter to ease past the moment of blinding, panicked fear, about what his magic might already have done to other people.

Yes, it might have. But this is one of those times when I recognize my mistakes and my shortcomings, and go on.

“No gazebos or beds of roses, sir, I promise,” he said. “I was thinking more a hedge maze.”

Snape’s eyes lit in interest, and he stepped back. “Ready, Harry? *Legilimens.*”

Harry allowed the intrusion, and settled himself to the task of making his incorrigible magic obey him.

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Chapter Thirty-Three: On the Wings of the Storm

A howl of outrage from Pansy distracted Harry from eating breakfast and mulling over how best to word his return letter to Lucius. He sat back with a frown and leaned down the table, trying to see what had happened to her. The only time he'd heard her howl like that before was when Millicent had put marmalade in her hair one morning.

But Pansy wasn't swiping at her hair, or attempting to strangle and hex Millicent at the same time. Instead, she held the *Daily Prophet* in front of her and shook it as though she were going to tear it apart. Her eyes were fastened to the front page, but Harry hadn't received the newspaper and couldn't tell from here what story had upset her so much.

He glanced at Draco. The other boy frowned and shook his head. Harry started to stand up, but Millicent tapped him on the shoulder just then and handed her copy of the paper over.

Harry focused on the headline, and felt his breakfast congeal in his stomach.

MINISTRY OF MAGIC TO ENACT ANTI-WEREWOLF LEGISLATION

Harry couldn't help stealing a glance at the head table. Remus was pale, but he met Harry's gaze resolutely enough. Most of the school still didn't know he was a werewolf. He obviously wanted to keep it that way by not showing any overt reaction to the story. He turned the page as Harry watched and calmly took a bite of his toast.

Harry went back to the story.

By: Melinda Honeywhistle

Minister Fudge has reported today that the Ministry of Magic will pass laws to control and regulate any werewolves living in Britain.

"It's quite ridiculous, the amount of leeway that we've permitted them," huffed the Minister as he met with the press on Friday to discuss the proposed legislation. "There are much tougher laws on the books, but we've never enforced them, out of the goodness of our hearts. And now, to learn that a werewolf would come into the Ministry and *attack* one of our valuable employees. It's an outrage!"

The Minister is referring to Monday's attack on Walden Macnair, an executioner for the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The werewolf Fenrir Greyback found his way into the Ministry offices of the Committee and tried to bite Macnair, claiming he wanted to punish the executioner for the amount of werewolves he had executed.

The attack was fended off and hushed up. Apparently, Mr. Macnair had a noble wish: to avoid bringing blame on all werewolves for the actions of one.

"Fenrir Greyback is a blemish on all his kind," he told this reporter when she caught up with him on Friday after the Minister's press conference. "He's one of the few who can pass on his bite in human form, you know, because he's so thoroughly embraced the wolf. I'm afraid of him. But that doesn't mean that we should toughen *all* the laws. Other werewolves might live in harmony with us, if we just give them the chance."

Minister Fudge evidently does not agree.

"What happened to Mr. Macnair is a horror and a crime that should never be allowed to take place again," the Minister proclaimed to all assembled. "Therefore, we are placing laws in—in place to insure that it does not."

The Minister refused to discuss the precise content of these laws, but hinted darkly that they would be much sterner than they have been in the past.

"We can't have *animals* attacking good, decent magical folk," was the Minister's last word as he left the press conference. "It's just not right."

Harry laid his paper down and fought to calm himself. He could handle this. He really could. He had to think, and not react.

The first thing that came to mind was the letter Scrimgeour had sent him, in response to Harry's request for Remus to take over guardianship of Connor. *That would be most unwise, Harry thought bitterly. Of course it would. The attack on Macnair hadn't even happened then, but the Ministry must have been considering toughening the laws. I bet you anything one of them is a law stating that no werewolf is allowed to have custody of a child.*

The second thing was Starborn's reminder that Macnair and Greyback were working together, two servants utterly committed to the Dark Lord's cause. Harry had no doubt that the attack on Macnair was fake, a way to shove the faltering Ministry into passing the laws in the first place.

But why? Those laws will make things harder for Greyback, too.

The answer came easily. *Because they want the werewolves to have no choice but to turn to Voldemort for help and protection—and become part of his armies, of course.*

Harry wanted to scream in frustration. He supposed he could send a warning to Scrimgeour, but he doubted the man would turn against the Ministry he so loved, and Harry wouldn't be able to explain where he got his information about Macnair being a committed Death Eater. *Mysterious letters, with a handwriting charm on them, from an even more mysterious source? Why, yes, of course, that sounds entirely trustworthy, Mr. Potter. I'll get on that right away.*

Harry shook his head and went back to his breakfast. Damn it, he would have to think about this, but he just didn't know what to do right now.

Actually, he thought, as he heard the muted sobs down the table, he did know one thing he could do. He shoved back his chair and went to comfort Pansy. She was having to pretend to her peers who didn't know about Hawthorn that she was upset with something else in the paper. Harry wanted to reassure her that she wasn't alone.

By late Saturday afternoon, Harry had decided what else he would do. He'd drafted a letter to Scrimgeour explaining the situation, Starborn's letters and all. Harry had admitted that he didn't know who Starborn was, and Scrimgeour was free to leave or take the information as he saw fit. But Harry would have been bothered to do nothing at all.

He didn't quite manage to slip out of the Slytherin common room before Draco caught him. "Going alone to the Owlery, Harry?" he asked, lightly, but with a familiar tightness around his eyes.

Harry scowled at him. "Well, I *was*." He hadn't been the most pleasant person to be around since the announcement of the Ministry's betrayal, he knew, but Draco took it in stride.

"Now you're not," he said, and jogged alongside Harry as he strode rapidly through the halls. Harry muttered to himself, and if the words "Ministry" and "blind idiots" appeared far more often than they should in a random rant, Draco was kind enough not to say anything about it.

Harry hesitated when they came to one of the usual third-floor corridors to the Owlery. It was full of second-year Hufflepuffs, and the Weasley twins were standing in the middle of them, with enormous smiles. Even as Harry watched, a *bang* and a flash of colored smoke went up from beside the twins, and the Hufflepuffs shrieked.

Harry shook his head. "Not that way," he murmured to Draco, and they backed off before anyone could notice them. Harry turned around to take another route.

A light scampering sound reached his ears, and he whirled, wand drawn in his left hand. His first thought was of an artificial Dark spider, like the one that had attacked him outside Trelawney's Tower in February. But he saw the slight twitch of whiskers, and the slender shape of a rat, in time to stop himself from firing a hex. He relaxed.

"Disgusting," said Draco, and Harry glanced over to see that he'd drawn his own wand.

"Wait, no, Draco!" Harry caught his wrist. "This rat is a... friend."

"Really," said Draco, in a tone full of drawling disbelief that he had to have learned from Lucius.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, and then Peter transformed. Draco yelped, but tried to step in front of Harry instead of scrambling away. "Who are you?" he asked. "If you want to hurt him, you'll have to go through me."

“And you say *I* say melodramatic things when I’m referring to my brother,” Harry muttered, exasperated, and dragged Draco out of the way. He nodded to Peter. “What brings you here?”

“I found a new hole in the wards,” Peter murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. “And I came to ask you if you could look into my mind. I know you said you were learning Occlumency. What about Legilimency?”

Harry blinked. “Yes, I am, but I’m a very poor beginner at it so far.” He’d had several arguments with Snape on the subject. While Harry had a natural liking for Occlumency’s defensive shields, he found it very hard to want to push his will into someone else’s mind. Snape understood that, and was deeply unsympathetic, pointing out that Harry still needed to learn it.

“Please try,” said Peter. “Lately, my thoughts don’t feel like my own. I see flashes of gold that remind me of the phoenix web sometimes, but I don’t see how, since I know I got mine under control or I could never have escaped from Azkaban in the first place. I woke up this morning with the urge to tell you to trust Dumbledore.” He shook his head. “I know it seems impossible, but could you please look?”

Harry hesitated, then nodded one more time. “All right, but if I don’t find anything, then you might want to go see Snape.”

“Are you kidding?” Peter snorted. “The man terrifies me.”

“He’s not that bad,” Harry began, but gave up when he saw the expression on Peter’s face. “All right, all right, but I’m not promising anything.” He shifted his wand so that it pointed at Peter—he still didn’t trust himself to do this wandlessly—fixed his eyes on the other man’s, and murmured, “*Legilimens*.”

A brief, dizzying swirl of motion consumed him. He felt as though he were traveling forward, on the end of an arrow made of pure will. Then he was past the first trembling barrier and into Peter’s mind.

He caught a glimpse of gold, but it vanished. Harry frowned and pressed forward, trying to find out if there really was a web here.

He found Peter’s mind odd—endless gray corridors, broken here and there by doors that Harry supposed led to memories and suppressed emotions. Dark, prowling shapes were probably his mental defenses, or his magic. It wasn’t until one of the shapes drifted past him and Harry recognized it as a Dementor that Harry realized Peter had constructed his mind to resemble Azkaban.

Swallowing a surge of pity that would distract him from his goal, Harry slipped past the Dementors and opened a few doors, looking for the golden web. He found nothing. The brightest color in Peter’s mind was olive green, which flashed whenever Harry came near it. He supposed that was the part of Peter’s will that had to do with protecting him.

Then he realized he had hunted in the corridors and behind the doors and past the Dementors, but he had not looked in one very simple place. He stepped back and looked up.

There was the web, a faint, glimmering thing, but real, stretching over the gray stone blocks of the ceiling. Harry let out a harsh breath and started to reach towards it, gently. He would not break it as he had the web of Remus’s *Obliviate*, but there was no doubt that Peter needed it gone.

Then something jerked him rudely out of Peter’s mind, and he looked up to see Professor McGonagall rounding the corner at a dead run, followed by Professor Sprout. “The wards are going mad,” McGonagall said, panting. “What in the name of Merlin--?”

Peter had already transformed and scuttled back to whatever hole in the wall he had emerged from. Harry grimaced and managed to keep from looking after him. *I bet Dumbledore left that hole open in the wards as a trap for Peter, so that he would be tempted to come here and seek me out, and Dumbledore could catch him inside Hogwarts.*

“I didn’t hear any wards, Professors,” he said, and glanced at Draco. “Did you hear any wards, Draco?”

The other boy solemnly shook his head. Harry smiled at him, thanking him for going along with the pretense, although he knew from Draco’s pointed stare that he would have some explaining to do later.

“Of course you wouldn’t, they’re keyed to the professors,” said Sprout, and pushed her tumble-down hat back on her head. “What do you think, Minerva? Should we search the corridors?”

“Of course, Pomona,” said McGonagall, but she was frowning at Harry. Harry put on his most innocent expression. He knew that he could probably get McGonagall to believe him about Peter if he took the time to explain, but he didn’t have Peter’s permission to do so, not even the implicit permission he’d granted Harry to tell Draco about him by appearing in front of them both.

McGonagall shook her head at last, and she and Sprout both turned, trotting down a side-corridor. Harry sighed and faced Draco.

“I suppose we’re going up to the Owlery?” he asked.

“Sure,” Draco agreed easily. “And along the way, you can explain why you have the most interesting friends.”

“Of course,” said Harry. “I think it all started when this stuck-up, snotty pureblood boy approached me on the Hogwarts Express in the first year...”

He ducked Draco’s punch, grinning. It kept him from thinking about what it meant that Peter was apparently wearing yet another phoenix web.

Harry yawned and knuckled at his eyes, then sat back with a sigh. Hermione had been right. Every single book with so much as a reference to the phoenix web had been removed from the library.

He stood, immediately drawing Millicent’s attention. She’d settled the incipient fight between Draco and Harry earlier in the evening—Harry wanted to go to the library; Draco wanted to stay in their rooms and work on his Charms homework—by volunteering to accompany him. Draco had been a bit uneasy, but since he trusted someone else to watch Harry in Divination for him, he couldn’t really object. And most people knew not to mess with Millicent, unless they wanted either a pulled ear or a vicious hex.

“Ready to go back?” she asked.

“Yeah.” Harry glanced at the clock he’d brought along with him, another part of Draco’s compromise. Draco seemed to think Harry would feel better if he knew instantly what Draco and Snape were doing at all times when they weren’t with him. That way, he would know where to find them if he needed their comfort or company.

Snape’s hand was lodged under PLOTTING. Harry hadn’t yet seen it move, except when Snape was making potions; if Snape stopped plotting even in his sleep, he did it long after Harry fell asleep himself. Draco’s was under STUDYING, but even as Harry watched, it moved. Harry smiled. So they had finished at the same time, and he could go back and entertain Draco. It really was a shame that the clock didn’t include a setting for ‘bored,’ which Draco usually was when Harry wasn’t with him.

Then Harry’s smile froze as Draco’s hand settled under IN DANGER.

Harry gasped, heart pounding and head feeling oddly light and dizzy. He nodded to Millicent. “Can you bring my clock and my books for me?” he whispered, and then tore out of the library.

“Harry? Harry!” Millicent was shouting after him, earning a sharp reprimand from Madam Pince. Harry ignored them both. Millicent was a smart girl. She would be able to look at the clock and see what was happening.

Harry reached the stairs and skidded down them, rolling and falling where necessary, the way that Lily had taught him to fall from a broom. His thoughts were chaotic, welling on the edge of panic, but he refused to let panic rule him. He made a plan instead, and brought his magic up around him, locking it firmly in place. He was ready if someone struck at him with a spell, and he was ready to destroy any Dark artifacts that might threaten Draco the way he had destroyed the snake.

He reached the dungeon corridor, and forced himself to pause as he heard a sharp crack from ahead. It sounded like the crack of a house elf’s Apparition. When he stepped around the corner, though, there was no house elf there.

Harry hurried to the door, gasped, “*Dragonsbane*,” and then all but jumped inside as the wall slid open. He tore through the common room, earning more than his share of curious looks, and then snatched open the door of their bedroom—

And stopped.

Draco looked up curiously from his Charms book. “Harry! You’re back. What’s the matter?” He sat up, looking concerned.

Harry stared around the room, breathing hard. He saw no evidence of Dark magical artifacts, nor of anyone hiding and waiting to cast a spell. He concentrated on his hearing, but couldn’t hear the slight breathing and shuffling that would have given someone under an Invisibility Cloak away. Harry bit his lip, bewildered. Had the clock been wrong after all?

A warning twinge, his magic breathing in another kind of magic perhaps, wafted over his skin, and he remembered his experience in Peter’s mind last weekend. He took a step back and looked up.

The ceiling was covered with a rustling mat of spiders, like the one that had attacked him in the corridor by the North Tower.

Harry had barely seen them when they fell on him.

Harry went to his knees, ignoring Draco’s shout of his name, forcing himself to remember what the spider in the corridor had done. *Breathed out spores*, he thought, and took a deep breath and held it, even as his skin crawled from the effect of hundreds of tiny legs racing all over it.

Hard ridges, the spiders’ metallic outsides, brushed and cut him. Harry felt mandibles snap at his sleeves and robe folds, but luckily the cloth was fending them off so far. But it was only a matter of time before one of them found skin. Harry wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn that their bite was poisonous.

He couldn’t use cold; it probably wouldn’t affect Dark magical artifacts like this. He shuddered as a crawling leg rasped at his lips, and one of the spiders did a tap-dance across his eyelid. He couldn’t use Parseltongue, as he had to call the snake, because these weren’t serpents.

What would be the best weapon?

He hit on it just as a spider hit on him, and its mandibles went home into flesh. Harry wailed silently at the unexpectedly icy sting of the poison, but didn’t let himself scream aloud. He was growing dizzy with lack of breath, and the solution to that problem was to destroy the spiders.

He imagined the small ball of golden light he’d called to rest in his hand, like a Snidget or a phoenix, when he’d given his message to everyone who cared to see it on the vernal equinox. He clenched his hands close together and imagined that intensity of power again, only this time he wouldn’t let it expand. He would concentrate it in a tight space, just around his body, just above his skin, and—

A second spider bit him just before it burst into flame from within, irradiated by a blast of pure magic. Harry viciously held onto his breath and his power, not letting it surge outward. It crackled just above his skin, burning the spiders’ metallic outsides, overwhelming their magic with its own, and Harry imagined it hotter and hotter, brighter and brighter, until the last spider fell away from him.

He stood, wobbling uncertainly, breathing in what felt like the most wonderful air ever created, and caught Draco’s horrified eyes in the moment before dizziness swamped him. “Poison,” he whispered. “Tell Snape to look at the spiders’ jaws, if any are left.”

He pushed his magic back inside his skin, and then collapsed. Two icy arrows of venom rode his body towards his heart.

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He knew he was in the hospital wing, because he remembered the spiders biting him, and where *else* would he be? He was not lucky enough to have Draco merely tell Snape and have his guardian brew an antivenin that would cure him at once and keep the matter quiet.

He saw Draco first, on one side of the bed, and Snape on the other. Draco gave a little cry of relief and clenched his hand down on Harry’s left one. Harry didn’t feel anything for a moment, and panicked, but then Draco lifted his hand high enough for him to see it was all there, fingers intact. Harry relaxed a bit and looked at Snape.

“The spiders’ ice numbed your extremities,” Snape said, his voice not giving anything away. “It will be some time before you regain all feeling in your left hand and your right foot, the places where they bit you. But you will live, and you will regain it

eventually.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you, sir. I’m alive thanks to a potion that you brewed, I take it?”

“There would not have been time to brew it from scratch,” said Snape. His body was still tightly coiled, his voice nearly as cold as the venom. “But it was similar enough to adder poison that I was able to modify the formula, and that saved your life.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harry repeated.

Snape abruptly stood and strode from the hospital wing. Harry watched him go with a puzzled frown, then glanced at Draco, who just shook his head.

“Don’t mind him, Harry,” he whispered. “He was frantic when he thought you were going to die. And then it turned out you weren’t, and now he seems to think he has to go cold to make up for feeling a real, human emotion. Besides, he needs someone to blame, and he hasn’t figured out how to blame you for risking your life yet.” Draco hesitated, his face growing sober. “Or who sent those spiders into the room.”

Harry gnawed his lip. His thoughts felt sluggish, probably as a result of the potions he’d taken, but he could force them to move, leap, and concentrate. “You never saw them enter?”

“No,” Draco admitted. “They were small enough that they could have hidden in all the corners of the room, then come together just in time to catch you.”

Harry blinked. “I thought they were for you,” he said. “The clock said you were in danger.”

“I probably was,” Draco said. “Snape recognized the spiders—the Dark Lord had some like them, from the treasuries of some of the older Dark families. They’ll obey their master’s orders, go into a room and wait for a command to attack, but they’re not really *smart*. After a certain amount of time has passed, if they can’t fulfill their orders to attack one particular person, then they’ll bite anything that moves.”

Harry sighed, as he remembered the crack of house elf Apparition. “I think someone had a house elf watching for me, to report when I was almost in the room,” he muttered. “And I didn’t even pause to think about it. I was too worried that you might already be dying.”

Draco grinned at him. “You don’t need to *apologize* for that, Harry. I’m flattered, really.” Then he sat back, and his face assumed a more austere expression. “But you do need to explain dashing out of the library so quickly that Millicent couldn’t follow.”

Harry stared at him. “I just did. I thought you were in danger.”

“And what if someone had attacked you on the way back to the dungeons?” Draco countered. “What if the person threatening me wasn’t setting up an ambush in our room, but along the way, and just used the spiders to make you panic and not think about where you were going?”

“That’s ridiculous, Draco,” said Harry. “You’re getting paranoid.”

“I’m sensible,” Draco retorted. “And you nearly died. And you have a vengeful best friend, and a vengeful guardian stewing in the dungeons who is going to make everyone’s life hell for the next few days while he tries to figure out a way to admit he was terrified for you. I think that’s worth some basic safety, Harry.” He leaned back and looked at him sternly until Harry nodded in reluctant acceptance.

“Good!” said Draco brightly. “Now, Blaise has agreed to give up some sleep so that you can still shower at your insanely early time—“

That was as far as Draco got before the door to the hospital wing abruptly crashed open. Harry blinked and turned his head. Connor stood in the doorway, looking nearly as angry as he had when he first accused Harry of making their mother a Muggle.

“How dare you!” he screamed in Harry’s general direction.

“I *am* going to kill him.”

Draco didn't shout the words, which was what had Harry worried. He snapped his hand out and cried, “*Expelliarmus!*” as Draco tried to draw his wand. The wand smacked into Harry's palm, and Draco gave him a furious, betrayed look.

Connor was still ranting. “How could you take me away from my lessons with Sirius?” he shouted. He stood at the foot of Harry's bed and yelled hard enough that Harry could feel the flecks of spittle on his face. “The Headmaster just told me. I don't *know* what you did to Dumbledore, maybe you compelled him or something, that would make sense, that's what Dark wizards do, but how could you—how could you—” Connor broke off, breathing raggedly. His face was red with splotches and tears.

Harry didn't know what Draco was going to do in time to prevent it, and given how sore his muscles felt, he might not have managed to move even if he did. Draco punched Connor in the face with all his strength. Harry heard the savage crumple of bone, and his brother fell to the floor, wailing.

“Your brother just nearly *died*,” Draco said, and he had never sounded more like Lucius to Harry. He bent over Connor and said the words directly into his face, tone hard and cold enough to make Harry shiver. “And *you*, instead of coming here to ask after his health like a concerned sibling, come here and *accuse* him of trying to make life *better* for you. So he's taking you away from that insane idiot you call a godfather. He's teaching you himself, did you know that? Giving up time and effort so that you can become a better wizard.”

Connor said something that Harry couldn't understand, given that his fingers were clamped over his face. At least part of it sounded like “want to corrupt me,” though.

Draco's voice grew harsher and quieter. “It's beyond me why Harry cares for you,” he spat. “But he does, Merlin help him, and so I'm not going to kill you—although I knew a few hexes that would be worth Harry's ill regard for the next two years. I'm going to insure that his life is still good, even with *you* in it, you worthless piece of hippogriff dung. You won't take anything away from him. I'll *drag* you into being a good brother if I have to. I'll make sure that he still smiles and laughs even while he's teaching you. And someday, I'll make you apologize, and mean it.”

He stood and moved away from Connor, who lay on the floor, sobbing. Harry sat in the middle of the bed and had no idea what to say. Draco moved up beside him.

“I'm never going to apologize for that one, Harry,” he said, eyes narrowed. “You might as well give up the idea right now. And I'm going to sit in on every one of your lessons with him, and make sure that you're not just pouring your skill and love down the drain.”

“All right,” Harry whispered. His head rebounded with the echoes of what Draco had said to Connor. Two realizations had come up on him sharply.

There really are other people in the world who don't think my brother is worth more than hippogriff dung. If I think that, I'm not going to be alone. I don't have to feel guilty. That was the first one.

The second was, *Merlin, how much must Draco care for me, to want to spend time with a person he abhors, just to make sure I don't kill myself trying to do the impossible?*

“Can I have my wand back now?” Draco asked, and Harry absently handed it over.

“What is all this?” Madam Pomfrey asked just then, sweeping around the corner with a tray on a strap around her neck. The tray contained various shimmering vials of potion, Harry saw. “I step out for five minutes, and a fight happens, in *my* hospital wing?” She shook her head and set the tray down on the table next to Harry's bed. “Into a bed, Mr. Potter—Connor. Mr. Malfoy, please leave now.”

She doesn't sound as outraged as she should have, Harry thought, staring at the matron. *And isn't it a coincidence that she only entered after everything was all over?*

Madam Pomfrey caught his glance and tilted him a wink as she helped Connor into a bed. Harry blinked several times. *So it's not only students who don't really like Connor.*

Merlin help me, I'll have a lot of work ahead of me to teach him the proper way of things.

“See you tomorrow, Harry,” Draco said softly, drawing his gaze back, and then squeezed his hand and left the hospital wing.

Harry lay back, absently accepting a sleeping potion when Madam Pomfrey insisted he take it. Until it took effect, his thoughts whirled and danced in the chaos he hadn't permitted them to assume earlier.

I have a lot of things to think about.

Harry winced as Sirius bowled out of the Great Hall, obviously on the verge of yet another fight with Snape. At least Sirius had himself under better control now, and would walk away when the insults grew too fierce, instead of attacking.

A glance back at the head table told Harry that Snape was smirking as he finished his breakfast, viciously pleased with himself. Harry groaned softly. He wished that Snape had found something more productive to do with his anger at the murder attempt on Harry than simply insulting the other professors until they cracked. Of course, if they could actually find out who had done it, then he might calm down—or at least refocus his anger on the criminal instead.

Harry sighed wearily and scooped up a spoonful of porridge. Dumbledore had questioned all the house elves in Hogwarts. None of them had put the spiders into the Slytherin rooms, or spied on Harry's progress and told the spiders' master when to release them. Harry didn't trust the Headmaster—least of all since he had learned about the renewal of Peter's web—but he didn't really think Dumbledore would have lied about this. Indeed, he had been very concerned over almost losing Harry. He still needed him to teach Connor, of course.

“Harry.”

Harry jumped at the grave tone in Draco's voice, and turned to see his friend holding the *Daily Prophet* out towards him. Harry swallowed and took the paper. He wasn't sure what he expected to see on the front page—more about the anti-werewolf legislation, which was encountering some problems, maybe, or mysterious news of Fenrir Greyback's even more mysterious activities.

His heart nearly stopped when he saw what was there.

DEATH EATERS ESCAPE FROM AZKABAN

“Shit,” Harry whispered, and skimmed the story. Various phrases leaped out at him here and there.

...lack of Dementors on the prison, as they were called to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry to look for the fugitive Peter Pettigrew...guards described a 'gray presence' invading their minds and sending them to sleep...anti-Apparition wards destroyed...the prison has lost all the Death Eaters in custody, including the infamous Bellatrix Lestrange...Aurors can find no trace...

Harry put the paper down and took a deep, steadying breath. He knew what he was going to do about this, unlike the werewolf legislation.

Thus, when Draco asked him just that a moment later, Harry was able to smile grimly and say, “I'm going to fight, of course. And train Connor to fight. He's one of their primary targets.”

“Aren't you glad that I insisted on coming to the lessons and tightening the protections around you after all?” Draco asked lightly, his hand shaking just a bit as he picked up an apple. “This way, we're already half-prepared.”

Harry nodded. His panic was subsiding into grim determination.

I will not let them destroy me with fear. Fear is eating the Ministry alive from the inside out. Fear is destroying Connor. It hinders Dumbledore and makes Snape impossible to live with.

I am going to fight.

~*~*~*~*~*

Interlude: A Last Warning*April 10th, 1994**Dear Mr. Potter:*

It has been some time since I have written to you, I know. I have been busy collecting information, at great personal risk to myself. The journey was not so bad. The destination most assuredly was, and if anyone had guessed what I was doing, the consequences would have been incredibly harsh.

I have prompted you to ask why Sirius Black did not go to Azkaban. However, you have not been diligent in seeking the answers. That will not do, Mr. Potter. You must begin to take your duties seriously—and that includes your duties as a leader of importance to both Light and Dark wizards as well as your duties in protecting your brother.

As you assuredly did not know, Sirius Black was your parents' original Secret-Keeper. But then his brother Regulus was captured when attempting to leave the Death Eaters, in possession of an object that Voldemort valued very much. Alas, I have been unable to learn what this object was.

Voldemort used a curse to connect Sirius's and Regulus's minds, and let Sirius feel his brother's pain as he tortured him to death. In so doing, he intended to break Black and make him give away your parents' location. But Dumbledore intervened before he could. Peter Pettigrew became your parents' Secret-Keeper in Black's place, with instructions to betray you at an appropriate moment. If that does not convince you of Dumbledore's malice and Pettigrew's innocence, then nothing ever will. Make a less wary connection with Pettigrew, I urge you. I believe he has come to seek you from pure motives.

This information I learned from Pensieives. There is one more piece of information, which I learned from a tapestry, and which may be of interest to you:

Sirius was disinherited by his parents when he was sixteen, after he ran away to your father's house. That resulted in his mother blasting him off the Black family tapestry and making his brother Regulus heir. However, the tapestry I have seen has Sirius's name printed clearly on it.

I believe this is the reason that Regulus's existence was concealed from you, your brother, and so many other people, as well as the circumstances of his death. There are spells that will work against inheritance magic if the designated heir is both dead and forgotten by enough people, and if the person selected as heir instead is related to the family by blood or adoption. It is the only reason I can give for why Sirius Black's name is still on the tapestry as the heir of his line, rather than the inheritance having passed to his cousin, Bellatrix Black Lestrage.

For some reason, Sirius wanted to remain his parents' heir, and Dumbledore agreed.

Think on that, Mr. Potter, and be careful whom you trust. This is one of the last times that I will be able to help you pass one of the harsh tests of life. Soon, you must take your place as leader, and then there will be no one to shield you. You must make your decisions, and those decisions will include killing.

Yours in starlight and shadows,
Starborn.

*April 10th, 1994**Lucius:*

You will note already that you do not recognize my handwriting. That does not matter. Be assured that I hold the same position as the last person who wrote to you. However, he has proven...most unsatisfactory as a servant. He has been replaced.

You do not know me by my writing, Lucius. This quill was guided by unfamiliar hands. However, I know you. I can imagine your eyes widening with shock, then narrowing as you try to process what this will mean for you and your family. Have no fear, my sly and cunning Lord of Bad Faith. I will tell you what it means.

It means destruction. You and your family were doomed from the moment you chose to ally yourselves with Harry Potter. I

have been patient long enough. There is no forgiveness now. And my true allies, now escaped from the isle of mists and unhappy memories that obscured them for so long, will not forgive you, either.

You will have heard about the attack of spiders on your best hope for the future? That was only a demonstration of my power, Lucius. Be assured, if I wanted him dead, he would be. However, I do not yet want Harry Potter dead. I have far more specific uses for him in mind. There will be justice before I am finished.

The Dark Lord has almost returned, Lucius.

Now comes the night, and out of this darkness, there will be no morn.

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

Chapter Thirty-Four: Educating His Brother

“I don’t think he’s coming.”

Harry glanced up, blinking, from Scrimgeour’s letter, which he was reading for the fifth time, in an attempt to deduce any useful clues from the bland government-speak that the Auror had chosen to send him in return for his warning about Greyback and Macnair. “Why not?” he asked, when he finally realized Draco was talking about Connor.

“I don’t think he’s coming,” Draco repeated. He gave a sneer around the abandoned classroom they sat in, as though the newly cleared dust was about to return.

“Yes, but that doesn’t tell me *why*,” Harry said, folding the letter and tucking it in a pocket. “He said he would be here.” He held up the piece of parchment he’d enchanted to communicate back and forth with a piece of parchment Connor held. It was a variation of the spells that made the Marauder’s Map, but simpler; it insured that any message written on either piece of parchment would appear on both. Connor’s *I’ll be there. Now stop bothering me* was still visible at the top of the page. Harry knew from the scratches on the b’s, almost tearing through the parchment, that his brother was angry and sullen.

“Because he’s afraid of you,” said Draco, leaning back on a desk and kicking at the legs of another. “Because he’s afraid of me. Because he’s a wanker.”

Harry tried to hide a chuckle, though he suspected from the sidelong glance Draco gave him that he’d probably heard anyway. “You’re bored, aren’t you?”

“Well, that and he *was* supposed to be here five minutes ago,” Draco said.

“You said that you would help,” Harry reminded him. “Of course, you can leave, and I wouldn’t blame you. This isn’t likely to be easy, or pleasant.”

Draco shook his head, his face closing. “I said that I would help you get something worthwhile out of him, and I will,” he said. “Besides, if I left, you would have to come with me. There’s no way that I’ll let you be alone with him ever again.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Draco often made grand pronouncements like that and forgot them five minutes later. This one would linger, undoubtedly—it had only been three days since Draco punched Connor in the nose—and it was true that Draco was giving up his Easter holidays with his family to stay at the school and help Harry with Connor. But he would have to forget it soon. “Whatever you say.”

He glanced up sharply as the door opened. Connor shuffled in, his face red. Harry couldn’t tell if it was mostly from sullenness, embarrassment, anger, or something else. He shut the classroom’s door behind him and leaned against it, glaring at Harry, his arms folded.

Harry felt a brief and entirely unexpected twinge of sympathy for teachers like McGonagall, who had to coax students determined to resist her teaching methods into appreciating the subject. He knew he couldn’t get away with her sternness, though, nor with Snape’s intimidation. He thought it better to imitate Remus, so he plastered a smile on his face and said, “Welcome, Connor. I’m glad that you decided to come.”

“The Headmaster told me that I didn’t have a choice,” said Connor. He’d made an obvious effort to strip all the emotion from his tone, but some was still there—bubbling fury. Harry concealed a sigh, making sure he did better at it than he had hiding his laughter from Draco. “And he told me that I can’t have lessons with Sirius any more, either. *Why* did you do that?” He

squinted at Harry, ignoring Draco with all the persistence of a child.

“Because I’m worried about you,” said Harry. *Remus is always honest. He always explains the motivations behind his lessons.* “You were spending so much time with Sirius that you were picking up on his attitudes. You’d started to hate Slytherins and think we were all evil.”

“Well, you are,” said Connor, sidling a few steps away from the door, but not coming any nearer Harry.

Harry sighed. *Maybe this is the place to begin, then.* He’d intended to start with practical lessons first, to get Connor used to some other kind of magic besides compulsion, but he couldn’t do that if Connor absolutely refused to learn. “Do you really think that everyone in Slytherin is evil, Connor?” he asked softly. “The little eleven-year-olds who were Sorted into our House this year? Or the people who work in the Ministry and on the *Daily Prophet* and in Hogsmeade and in Diagon Alley and everywhere else who were Slytherins?”

“None of them work in those places,” Connor insisted.

“It looks like you’ll have to give him practical lessons in basic intelligence, Harry,” Draco drawled.

“Shut up, you’re not helping,” Harry muttered at him, and then dived in before Connor’s startlement could give way to outrage. “They do, Connor. Did you know that Madam Malkin, the one who made our robes for Hogwarts, used to be a Slytherin?” It had been easy enough to learn that; *Hogwarts, A History* had a list of past Slytherin students and what they were doing now. “And Zonko, who runs the joke shop? And Rufus Scrimgeour, who’s the Head of the Auror Office? He chases Dark wizards all day, and he made a vow when he was twelve that he was going to use Light magic only, and he’s kept it ever since. Do those sound like evil people to you?”

“They don’t *sound* like it,” Connor admitted reluctantly. “But they could be hiding it. Sirius told me. That’s the trouble with Slytherins. You think you know them, and then they turn out to be something else.” He glared at Harry. “Like you. We thought you were going to be a Gryffindor all the time we were growing up, and then it turned out that you weren’t.”

Harry sighed. “I don’t think anybody *planned* where I went, Connor.”

“I knew,” said Draco lowly.

Harry shook his head at him. “I wanted the Hat to put me in Gryffindor,” he went on, turning back to his brother. “That was so I could protect you. I wanted to share the same House as you did, the same friends, the same life. I wanted to do everything for you.”

“What changed?” Connor whispered, and Harry was astonished to see tears edge into his eyes. It honestly hadn’t occurred to him that his brother, under all the rage and the hate and the fear, might miss him.

“Then? I wasn’t sure.” Harry shrugged. “Now, I think it had to do with how well I’d been trained to hide everything—”

“Ah-ha!”

Harry rolled his eyes. “That was Mum who trained me to hide things, not anyone else,” he said sharply. “No one was ever supposed to know that I could protect you, that I was the reason you were surviving the attacks that you were. I was supposed to guide and protect you into becoming a defeater of Voldemort without ever revealing that I’d done it. I was supposed to die in the final battle defending you, if possible, and no one would ever know that it came from my dedication to your service. It would just be the love of a brother for another brother.”

He felt a brief tremor of unease race down his spine as he contemplated that. He had seen his life as a straight line for a long time, running until that final battle, when he would undoubtedly die. If he survived, the images were less clear, but they would still include serving Connor.

And now those were gone, and Harry had, so far, no perfected image of the future to replace any of them.

It’s no wonder that so many wizards gave up on being the vates, he thought. *I would give much for a path where I knew where I was going.*

He shook himself out of it when he realized that Draco’s arms were around his waist, and Draco was glaring bloody murder at Connor over his shoulder. Harry turned to face him. “What?” he whispered.

“He’s just standing there,” Draco snarled back. “Like he doesn’t know what to do. Like he doesn’t think that his precious Gryffindor Mu—“

“*Draco.*”

“Muggleborn, Muggleborn, I was going to say Muggleborn,” said Draco. “Like he doesn’t think she could have made someone into a Slytherin. I know that you told him about being forced to act as his slave once before. Why doesn’t he believe it?”

“Too much time with Sirius.” Harry tried to slip out of Draco’s embrace, and couldn’t do it. Draco even shook him slightly when he tried.

“No,” he said. “I want him to see that someone values you, damn it.”

“Or you want to taunt him about having my company and friendship when he doesn’t,” Harry muttered back.

“That, too.”

Harry faced Connor once again. Connor had closed his mouth and swallowed painfully. Then he looked up and said, “But you can’t deny that the largest number of Death Eaters were Slytherins, Harry.”

Harry shrugged. “No, I can’t. But only because Voldemort was in that House and had the most contacts among them—“

“Ah-*ha!*”

“That’s really very annoying, you know,” Harry told him. “And Slytherin House existed for almost a thousand years before Voldemort came to Hogwarts, and it went on existing after him. *My point* is that not everyone who comes out of the House is evil, Connor. I’m not going to force you to judge me as good, or Draco, or Millicent, or anyone else in Hogwarts right now. But if you really think that the Sorting Hat separates out people who are evil or good, then why do you think there are three good Houses and one evil? Why do you think Slytherins are allowed to stay in Hogwarts at all? Wouldn’t it make more sense to just exile them the moment the Sorting Hat chose them as Slytherin, and refuse to teach them magic?”

Connor waved a hand. “It doesn’t work like that. Sirius explained it to me. They have to keep Slytherins around to keep an eye on you. It would be worse to let you run around loose and become even Darker wizards.” He scowled at Harry. “And Gryffindors are the best of the best, the Light wizards.”

“And Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” said Connor, with an impatient shrug. “Sirius didn’t spend a lot of time talking about them. They’re just… there, I suppose. The wizards in them can be good, but that doesn’t mean they’re really *important*. They follow Gryffindors when it comes to fighting Slytherins, and that’s enough.”

“I resent that highly,” said a voice from the door.

Harry whirled as much as he could in Draco’s hold, which wasn’t much. Zacharias Smith leaned against the classroom door. He had a smile on his face, but it didn’t reach his eyes. They were fixed on Connor, and they made Harry wince. He had seen Zacharias look like that in class when he thought someone else was being stupid, and it usually meant a series of pointed questions was about to occur.

“And so do I,” said Hermione, as she pushed in behind Zacharias. “You’re making our House look incredibly asinine and prejudiced, Connor.”

Hermione had been feeling like that for some time, really.

She was the one who had all but forced Connor into going to his lesson with Harry, by threatening him with not helping him study for Charms if he didn’t. Since Connor was having a lot of trouble with levitation Charms stronger than *Wingardium Leviosa*, he had slouched off, with a scowl.

Hermione hadn't been able to restrain herself. She'd waited until ten minutes after Connor left, then announced to Ron that she was going to the library. Since Ron was engaged in a game of chess with Ginny, he'd just let out a "Hmm," and Hermione had ducked out without further problems.

I have to see what they're studying, she'd assured herself as she hurried down the stairs from Gryffindor Tower. It might benefit me, after all. If they're studying pureblood rituals, then I can get to see them in action, and complicated spells would help, too. It's not really just nosy curiosity. Of course not.

She did cast the Disillusionment Charm on herself before she reached the classroom door, and was glad she had. Zacharias Smith was lurking there, listening in a way that Hermione was convinced was...evil. Or at least, annoying. Zacharias Smith was an annoying git who only got as many points as he did for Hufflepuff because he was pureblooded, Hermione was convinced, and had mastered pureblood poise. That meant she had to work twice as hard as he did, since she was Muggleborn. And Smith never let her forget it, either; whenever a class, even History of Magic, referred to purebloods somehow, he would catch Hermione's eye and give her a cool smile. She wondered if he knew that only made her more determined to defeat him.

Bloody annoying git, Hermione's thoughts continued, and were so pervasive that for a moment she didn't listen to what was actually happening in the classroom.

Then she did, and was appalled.

Connor's an idiot, she thought fretfully. All right, so I don't like most Slytherins either...well, Harry's all right. And even Malfoy's all right when he's worried about Harry. And I suppose Parkinson hasn't been as bad since that newspaper article about werewolves, though I still don't know why it affected her so much. And Millicent terrorizes people who want to hex Harry, not me.

But still! she added in her head, feeling she was being disloyal to Gryffindor. I don't think that he has any right to spout that slime about Slytherins. How is it any different from being prejudiced against Muggleborns, really? Some Slytherins are perfectly awful people, but some aren't. And I can think of Hufflepuffs who are worse, she thought, with a glance at Smith.

Then Connor dismissed the whole of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff Houses as if they weren't important, and that made Smith step in. Hermione had known it would. He couldn't stand being insulted, even if it was by proxy and not personally.

"I resent that highly," he said, sliding into the room.

Hermione hesitated for a moment. *Do I have to go in? No one knows I'm here. And I'm sure that Smith will only try to outshine me, again.*

No. I know I'm here. And if I don't say anything, then I'm agreeing with Connor, and I don't want to do that. Besides, a preening pureblood shouldn't be the only voice of good sense here.

She lowered the Charm, stepped in behind Smith, and said, "And so do I." For a moment, she wondered if she'd said the words soon enough after Smith's for them to really play off his, but decided she had, from the fact that no one looked at her in confusion, only surprise. "You're making our House look incredibly asinine and prejudiced, Connor."

Connor gaped at her. Harry just lowered his head as though resigned, and Malfoy tightened his arms around his waist, shooting Connor a smug smile that Hermione doubted he noticed.

So, of course, Smith had to fill the void.

"Careful, Granger," he murmured. Hermione glanced at him and saw his eyes narrowed in that squinty pureblood way she hated, but they were narrowed at Connor and not her. "Are you sure you should be using the word 'asinine'? We don't want to strain the little boy's brain-power, after all."

Hermione found an unexpected smile creeping onto her face. "You're right, of course, Smith," she said. "Since Connor's apparently never read any book, at all, that talked about a good Slytherin, I think he can't have read too many books." She nodded at Connor with mock apology in her expression. "Sorry, Connor. Little words from now on, all right?"

Connor went red and began to splutter. Smith cocked his head on one side, watching him. "What do you think, Granger?" he asked her. "Will dramatic speeches from our future leader of the Light consist of splutter, splutter, spittle, spittle?"

Hermione pretended to debate with herself, pursing her lips in a way she'd got from McGonagall. "Add another spittle, I think," she said finally. "There's certainly enough flying from his lips."

"*Hermione*," said Connor, in a deep, betrayed wail. "You're supposed to be my *friend*. A *Gryffindor*. Why are you doing this?"

Hermione's temper flared abruptly. She wasn't sure why. Maybe it was the overdramatic self-righteous whinging that Connor was doing right now. "Really?" she snapped. "I was under the impression that you didn't call your *friends*, and I quote, 'interfering busybodies who should know better than to think their brains give them the right to order everybody around.' I was trying to talk to you about my own perceptions, Connor. I wasn't some pawn of Harry's. And I won't be your pawn, either. You're an obnoxious, big-headed, unappreciative, idiotic *moron* who wouldn't know friendship if it bit him on the arse!"

The room was silent. Everyone was gaping at her, even Malfoy—all except Smith, who just turned to her and raised his eyebrows.

"And when did he call you that, Granger?" he asked.

"Two months ago," said Hermione starkly. "In Divination, when I tried to tell him about a subject I'd learned about in a—a private meeting. Yes, I was telling him because Harry asked me to, but it was the *truth*. You can't ignore the *truth* just because you don't like your brother!" The hurt rushed through her again. Connor had made no attempt to apologize about that remark, and neither had Ron. They both seemed willing to pretend it hadn't happened, instead. Hermione wished she could forget it, but she had an excellent memory, and years of experience, in Muggle school, with people who'd insulted her in almost exactly the same terms. She'd tried to be a friend, and look what it had got her.

"And he never apologized?" Smith asked, his eyes flickering to Connor. "But he still wants to think of you as a friend? And he has the gall to think you should lie for him just because you're a Gryffindor?"

"No, and yes, and yes," said Hermione, glaring at Connor. He couldn't have looked more stunned if a Bludger had hit him in the head, she thought. *Well, good. Maybe he can start growing up around everyone, not just Harry.*

"Then I think your description of him was a *bit* off," said Smith, his tone clinical. It reminded Hermione of the way that her father discussed tooth problems in his patients. "I don't think he would appreciate friendship if it paraded naked in front of him, wearing a banner that listed the names of all the Gryffindor Death Eaters."

Hermione couldn't help herself. She laughed, and that seemed to be all that it took to break the frozen mood. Smith gave her a narrow smile that couldn't quite be called a grin. Malfoy snickered. Harry stood up straighter and turned to face his brother.

Connor snapped.

He drew his wand, yelling something about making her and Smith sorry they'd ever been born. Hermione didn't think she needed to make out the actual words. She knew their general gist. If Connor did read at all, she thought, it was bad Muggle novels with villains who twirled their mustaches.

She drew her own wand before he could get off a spell, aimed it coolly, and said, "*Tarantallegra*."

Connor began dancing. He yelped, and tried to keep his wand straight regardless, but it fell from his hand as his body gave a particularly violent jig. Smith and Malfoy were laughing openly now.

Harry said, in a desperate, resigned voice that made Hermione feel sorry for him, "*Finite Incantatem*."

Hermione snorted in annoyance as the spell ended. She'd put a bit of extra force into her wrist when she cast that one, hoping it would make the spell last longer and resist the first application of *Finite Incantatem*. Of course, given how powerful Harry's magic was, any chance of studying that was lost.

Connor's legs came free, and he knelt down on the floor. Hermione could see his shoulders shaking, but wasn't sure if he was merely shivering from the force of his reaction, or whether he was crying soundlessly.

Harry squirmed out of Malfoy's arms and walked across the room to kneel beside his brother. He said something Hermione couldn't hear. Connor didn't move. Harry put out a hand to touch his brother's hair, and Connor's arm snapped out, knocking it away. Harry winced a bit and touched his wrist.

Malfoy hurled a spell at Connor then, but Hermione didn't hear what it was in the midst of Harry's barked, "*Protego!*" She watched in envy as the Shield Charm worked, popping up in front of Harry and Connor and deflecting Malfoy's hex, whatever it had been, away. She had tried the Shield Charm several times so far, but she wasn't getting it right. She didn't know if she didn't have enough strength for it yet, or if it was her wand movement or something else that got in the way.

Malfoy said in a tight voice, "Harry, come out of there. It's hopeless. You have to see that—"

"It is *not* hopeless," said Harry, in a voice that made Hermione think he thought it was but didn't want to admit it. "And having anyone else here was a bad idea. I need time alone with Connor. Please, Draco, just leave." He turned around and looked at Hermione and Smith. Hermione winced. His eyes were still resigned, not angry, and he looked incredibly weary. "Please," he repeated.

Hermione nodded and backed out of the room, listening to Malfoy argue with Harry. She felt a deep stab of pity for them both. Malfoy clearly despised Connor, and it couldn't be easy for Harry, having to choose between his friend and his brother.

She turned around once outside the room, this time towards the library. She really was going to go there and research how best to perform the Shield Charm.

"I can cast *Protego* perfectly," Smith announced from behind her.

Hermione turned and glared at him. Yes, he'd been funny in the classroom, but it was clear that he was still the same annoying pureblood git he'd ever been. "Good for you," she said tartly.

"And I can teach other people," Smith offered. He stretched a hand out in front of him as if admiring his fingernails. "At least, when they actually try and aren't hopeless idiots like the big-headed moron in that classroom."

Hermione hastily shut her mouth, because it was undignified to leave one's jaw hanging open. "I can try," she said quietly.

Smith nodded to her, giving her one of those cool not-quite-smiles. "Shall we, then? I know a quiet room where we can practice."

Hermione nodded back and fell in beside him. She supposed Connor wasn't the only one who might need to revise his prejudices.

"Because I asked you to, Draco, that's why." Harry could feel his self-control slipping. He wanted to comfort Connor and slap him both at once. He wanted to hug Draco back for his protectiveness and slap him for that hex. This time, he wasn't sore and sluggish in a hospital bed, and he actually could do something if Draco wanted to hurt his brother. He glared up at his friend from behind his Shield Charm, which he still hadn't lowered. "This is important to me."

"He'll hurt you again," said Draco, darkly. His wand hadn't moved.

Harry shook his head. "I can prevent that." He could, too. Wards wrapped right over his skin would work.

"Not physically," Draco insisted. "Mentally. You're going to have to listen to his stupid babbling. And then you'll come back to the Slytherin common room all self-doubting and needing to be reassured, Harry. I *know* it."

Harry straightened his shoulders. "I was under the impression that you didn't mind the reassuring, Draco," he said.

Draco blinked. "I don't," he said, and then scowled, as he realized he had just tumbled headlong into his own trap. Reluctantly, he put his wand away. "Sometimes I wish you hadn't learned to be such a good Slytherin, Harry," he muttered.

Harry laughed, and saw Draco's expression alter to one of concern. The laughter did sound bad, Harry had to admit, stretched and scraped thin. "I'll be along in an hour, Draco," he said. "I promise. And I'll tell you everything that happened after you left, and let you reassure me if I need it. Promise."

"What about the next lesson?" Draco still didn't seem inclined to move.

"I don't know," said Harry. *This one was an unmitigated disaster, but that wasn't Draco's fault as much as Connor's.* "It

depends on how well this one goes.”

Draco snorted and walked towards the door, pausing to look back over his shoulder when he was there. “He’s hopeless, Harry,” he whispered. “Too far gone for *any* teacher to reach, I think, and not worth what you’re going to do to yourself trying to teach him.”

Harry met his eyes calmly. “It’s my decision. And he’s my brother.”

Draco sighed windily and left the classroom.

Harry sighed in turn and ran a hand through his hair. He felt tired already, and he hadn’t even thrown much magic or spent time dodging around the room from hexes. Learning what Connor had said to Hermione probably made him weariest, followed by Connor’s never-ending prejudice against Slytherins.

I think it would be easy to hate you, sometimes, he thought, as he looked down at his brother. *You make my life harder, and I really don’t need that right now. And you’re so stubborn. And there are people around me who would be willing to care for me even if I didn’t care for you. It’s the first time that’s ever been true.*

But I can’t give up on you. You’re our hope for the future. The prophecy isn’t going to choose anyone else just because we want it to. And I love you, Connor. It’s exasperated love right now, but there it is. And how can I justify giving Death Eaters who killed and tortured people another chance, but not you?

My own morality scares me sometimes, Harry finished, and decided that was quite enough time spent in thought. He shook Connor’s shoulder. This time, as he had expected, his brother didn’t slap his hand away, but only curled inward more tightly.

“Connor,” said Harry.

More curling.

Harry sighed and sat down beside him. He looked at the wall, not his brother. Looking at his brother brought too many emotions surging up, thick and choking, and he didn’t know how to deal with them. He would just speak aloud for a while and see where that took him.

“I always knew that you were my little brother,” he said softly. “*Little*, even though we’re twins. And I fought to protect that innocence in you. Mum wasn’t going to tell you about my training, but I could have. Remember all those nights we spent comforting each other when something ridiculous had gone wrong, when Mum or Dad got upset at us for something we didn’t do, when Sirius played a prank that went just a little too far or Remus couldn’t come and visit because of the full moon? Remember all the secrets we shared? I showed you the fairies near the wards, and you showed me the frog eggs you found near the pond. Remember how nervous you were when we came to Hogwarts? You didn’t know how well you’d fit in with other people, because we’d been alone so far. You told me that you envied me for my calmness. That wasn’t calmness, Connor. That was purpose. I knew I was always going to be with you. The future was so clear.”

Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “And now, it’s not. Well, it never was from the moment I went into Slytherin, but I wanted it to be. And you did make friends, and you did fit in. But now...now you don’t.

“That’s hard for you to understand, isn’t it? Why people dislike you so much. You know that you’re Gryffindor, and Gryffindor is more popular than Slytherin. You know that you’re the Boy-Who-Lived, and you get attention paid to you, and you don’t see why that attention should be negative. You know you’re a hero, and the least everyone could do is thank the hero who saved them from Voldemort.

“But, Connor, it’s more than that. Dad loves you because you’re his son. I love you because you’re my brother. Sirius and Remus love you because they’ve known you all your life. Mum loves you insanely, fiercely, intently. Dumbledore favors you because of the prophecy.

“But either that doesn’t apply to other people, or they don’t care as much. They *can* love you, Connor, but you can’t just demand it of them. The Slytherins won’t be evil because you want them to be. Hermione won’t be your friend unless you apologize or make some other effort at being friendly towards her. I know Ron sticks by you, and the Gryffindors laugh at your jokes, but they’re the only ones. Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs are just as important as everyone else, and they’re not going to laugh at your jokes.

“I don’t know how else to explain this to you, Connor. The world isn’t the way you think it is. Things are never simple. The

sooner you can get that through your head, the better off we'll all be. If Sirius told you things were simple, he was lying. If Mum told you things were simple, she was lying. *She* ought to know how complicated she made her life, and mine, by teaching me to play sacrifice."

Harry closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and said, "You know what? I think that's what I hate most out of what she did. I have no idea how much of the love I feel for you is real, and how much was trained into me. I have no idea how I really feel about you, and when you're thirteen and you've lived with someone for your entire life, you're supposed to know, aren't you?"

He stood up and looked down at Connor, who still had his head bowed and his forehead resting on his knees. "I am going to continue teaching you," he said softly. "But I'd like to do it not just because you're the hope of the Light side, but because you're my brother and I love you. You're making that awfully hard right now."

He turned and walked to the door. He was halfway there when he heard a muffled sound behind him. He paused, but didn't turn around. That might well lose Connor his courage.

Connor was murmuring something, the same thing, over and over, and steadily raising his voice loud enough to hear. Finally, Harry could make it out.

"I'm sorry."

Harry released his breath, feeling as though he had just avoided running off a cliff. He still didn't turn around.

"I accept your apology," he said, and then gently left the classroom and shut the door behind him.

It's only a tiny sign of progress, he reminded himself as he made his way back to the Slytherin dungeons. *Not a lot. There's an incredibly long way still to go.*

But he's not hopeless, whatever Draco says. He's not.

He's my brother, and I love him.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Five: Walpurgis Night

Had no one else *spoken* to him yet?

Millicent couldn't believe it. Then she recalled what she knew of her peers in Slytherin, and snorted. Oh, yes, of course she could believe it. After all, they mostly existed in some strange sort of limbo where they thought Harry could be trusted, and yet didn't want to reveal any of the secrets he would need to know to him. There was Draco, but the Malfoys hadn't joined in this celebration for years, disdaining it as too common and too plebian.

Too wild, Millicent thought, as she watched Harry composing a letter to Lucius Malfoy on one of the couches and Draco stretched out on the one nearest, watching him, *is nearer the right word.*

Well, she wouldn't allow it to continue. She waited until Harry twitched, indicating that he knew she was watching him, and looked up. Then she put on her most gracious smile, the one that her mother had taught her for welcoming Death Eater guests.

"Harry," she said. "Has no one invited you for tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night?" Harry looked blank. Draco, Millicent saw from the corner of her eye, had narrowed his gaze until it could have burned a hole through her—if Millicent was the kind of person who ever paid attention to Malfoy glares. She turned her head fully towards him and smiled, and Draco scowled and looked away.

"Yes," said Millicent, sitting down on the couch next to him. Harry moved to shield the parchment from her view. Millicent didn't care. She already knew it was a letter to Lucius, and beyond that, she didn't need the details of the truce-dance. At least, as her father would say, Lucius was no longer acting like an idiot. "This is April twenty-ninth, Harry. And tomorrow is April thirtieth." She leaned nearer to him and lowered her voice. "Walpurgis Night."

Harry's eyes widened behind his glasses. "That was where you went last year, then?"

Millicent nodded, impressed that he could connect the night last year that most of the Slytherins had quietly vanished from their common room to this date with such accuracy. They had done it the first year Harry was here too, of course, but he had been too absorbed in his brother to notice at all. Last year had been a bit better as far as Harry's attention was concerned, but they still didn't want to take the risk of inviting him. This one, Millicent fervently hoped, would finally see Harry taking the place he had to take if he was going to be more than an unbound house elf wandering around and getting into trouble. "Yes. We'll leave the school and travel to a—well, a place whose name you don't need to know if you don't come. It's a Dark wizards' holiday, or used to be. Some of them," she added, with a glance at Draco, "think themselves too good to celebrate it any more."

"It's a random holiday," Draco said darkly. "It makes no *sense*."

"It stands opposite in the year from Halloween," said Millicent. "That doesn't make it random, Draco."

"I don't understand what happens," Harry broke in gently. At least he wouldn't have to be taught the skills of graceful interrupting, then. Millicent favored that. The less they had to teach him, the sooner Harry could get out there and start *doing* things. "If it's just a party, why couldn't you have it here in your rooms?"

Millicent smiled, and Harry leaned a bit away from her. She guessed her smile was Adalrico's wild one, then, the one that said things were finally moving on some investment or intrigue he'd worked out. Well, she was his heir, so that shouldn't come as a surprise. "It's not a party, Harry. It's a festival. And...well. You know that on Halloween, there used to be a belief that the spirits of the dead came back, even if they weren't ghosts?"

Harry nodded cautiously.

"Well, you can't see the *spirits* of the dead unless you make the proper sacrifices, and very few wizards or witches are willing to make those any more." Millicent shrugged. "But *everyone* can see the magic of the dead. And that's what comes back on Walpurgis Night, Harry."

She knew from the brewing thunderstorm smell in the room that she'd caught him. Harry was possessed of magic, and possessed *by* it. He always leaned towards the most powerful spell someone else was practicing at the moment, and lifted his head if someone else's power flared out of control. Millicent didn't think he had any idea he was doing it, but she noticed, because she was observant.

"I don't know what that means, exactly," said Harry. "But I'd like to find out."

Millicent cheered silently, and inclined her head to him. "Then we'll take you with us."

"How do we leave the school?" Harry asked. "Don't the professors notice?"

Millicent gave him her mother's smile again as she stood. "Granger isn't the only one to have a Time-Turner, Harry."

As she walked away, she could hear Draco arguing with Harry behind her. Draco was repeating all the arguments the Malfoys had against Walpurgis Night, the reasons they had abandoned the holiday. It was too wild, it was too violent, it did nothing for anyone but make them drunk on magic and think they could conquer the world, and anyway, how could Harry want to be alone with several dozen Dark wizards and their children, at least some of whom would be Death Eaters?

Harry made a calm answer, and Millicent knew he would be coming. She supposed there was the small chance that Draco might come, too, for his sake, but she doubted it. The Malfoys were too proud, and the thought that someone else might see them look undignified, even for a moment, was anathema to them.

Draco could unbend for Harry in private, Millicent had no doubt, but not in public.

It seemed that Harry had recognized the same thing. At least, Millicent thought it from the glimpse of his letter to Lucius that she'd received when he carelessly moved his hand.

Well, really, she defended the action to herself as she started studying for Charms again. I'm a Slytherin. I don't really care what the letter says, but it might be good to know, someday.

“Harry, I wish you wouldn’t,” Draco whined. They were on their way back from the Owlery, where Harry had just attached his letter to Lucius to Hedwig’s leg and asked her to carry it to Malfoy Manor.

“I know,” said Harry. “But you can’t always get what you want, Draco.”

“Why *not*?”

Harry concealed a smile—grinning now would only encourage Draco to whine further—and shot him a sidelong glance. “You know, you can come with me. It doesn’t seem as if you would be out of place at this celebration, given what it’s meant to do.”

“No.” Draco’s face had closed. He shook his head, his eyes remote. “It’s...it’s a Malfoy family tradition to stand back from this, Harry. We have our pride to maintain.”

“Yes, I know,” said Harry, and couldn’t keep his lips from curling in a vicious smile as he thought of the letter he’d sent to Lucius.

He imagined Draco’s father receiving the letter and blinking at the small silk pillow that Harry had sent along, plucked from a couch in the Slytherin common room. Then he would read the letter.

Dear Lucius:

I salute your choice of vernal equinox gift. I must consider carefully what it says about you, that you believe my family is my weakness, what holds me back, and that you would send me a gift capable of severing those ties.

I have sent you a gift that should allow you to do the same thing. When and if you unbend your stubborn neck and learn that some things are more important than Malfoy pride, the pillow should provide a comfortable resting place for it. It was designed to support someone lying completely with a curved neck, not one straight enough to cost us both our sanity and our truce.

Our definitions of pride are very different, Lucius, and so are our definitions of family.

Merry Walpurgis Night.

Harry Potter.

“How do we get there?” Harry asked Millicent, as he waited with a milling group of Slytherin students later that night after dinner in the Great Hall. Blaise Zabini was in the group, and Pansy, and Marcus Flint, and everyone else on the Slytherin Quidditch team, and other students from other years whom Harry didn’t know nearly as well. Draco had pointedly retired to their room earlier, as had Vince and Greg. Harry wondered if their families didn’t celebrate the holiday, either, or if they were simply showing solidarity with Draco.

“This way,” said Millicent, and unfolded her hand to reveal a smooth black stone. Harry thought it had been carved, but he wasn’t sure. It rose in a tiny pyramid from a round base, looking rather like a half-melted candle. As he peered more closely at it, he saw it wasn’t black, but a dark green.

“A Portkey?” he asked.

Millicent smiled slightly. “Not really. With a Portkey, there’s always the chance that someone could intrude on the holiday whom we don’t want there. A Light wizard, for example.” She breathed on the stone, and traceries of silver ran down it, as if her breath had been frosty. “This calls out to the Dark magic in you, and pulls you to the largest concentration of Dark magic in Britain—which will be our Walpurgis celebration. Tonight, at least.” She looked up and winked at Harry. “You wouldn’t like some of the places it would take you other nights of the year.”

Harry shuddered, staring hard at the stone. “Um, Millicent,” he said quietly. “I’m not sure it will work for me. I haven’t used *that* much Dark magic.”

“You’re thinking of Dark in terms of compulsion, the way that Professor Lupin taught us, aren’t you?” Millicent asked. The

strands of silver on the stone were pulsing now, spinning and writhing about. Harry found it hard to look away from it and focus on Millicent's face, but he made himself.

"Yes," he admitted.

"There's another sense of Dark, Harry," said Millicent calmly. "And it holds tonight. Dark magic is *wild*." She abruptly tossed the stone into the air.

It hung there like a small dark sun, though its rays were silver instead of gold. It spun faster, and faster, and faster, and this time Harry didn't think that he could pull his eyes away. He found himself bracing as if for a blow. His magic was creeping out of him, rising off his body like steam.

But that wasn't because he was afraid, he realized a moment later. The stone was calling to it, and his magic answered, stretching luxuriously. He could feel the magic from the witches and wizards around him doing the same thing. Blaise was trembling. Pansy hopped up and down in place. Millicent watched the stone with a slight smile, eyes half-closed as her power rose singing around her.

Then the silver slanted away from the stone like the Muggle fireworks Harry had seen once when his family visited his mother's sister, and came down around them, forming an enormous net, or cage. Harry had the impression that things were changing rapidly behind the silver bars, but he couldn't remove his gaze from the stone to make sure. The deep green was growing, absorbing his gaze, reminding him of the Forbidden Forest. He had the insistent urge to reach out and touch the stone, and he trembled. This was Dark magic of a kind he had never even considered, powerful and chaotic but not malicious.

"Here we are!"

Harry blinked, hard, and came out of his daze. They were standing in another place entirely, on a steep bank, thick with gorse and heather, which led down towards a clearing. A nearly full moon shone overhead. Harry turned and looked at the clearing, and caught his breath.

The clearing's grass was a deep, unnaturally smooth green, and the fire that blazed in the middle of it, giving the light to see it, was silver. Leaping ghostly flames intertwined with each other, now the color of frost, now pale gray, now the hue of polished Sickles.

Harry wondered if that was the reason that Slytherin's colors were green and silver.

"Come on!" Millicent yelled at him. Harry turned towards her and saw that she had caught the stone, or disposed of it somehow. She grabbed his wrist and tugged on it. Her face was flushed, her eyes glittering as if she had a fever. "No one else is here yet, so we get to claim the best spots."

The other students seemed to be thinking the same thing. They all but hurtled down the hill, laughing as though they were about to collapse in a moment. Harry staggered, but quickly regained his balance, and managed the run even with Millicent not letting his hand go. He found he didn't mind it. A subtle touch of hysteria had entered his mood. It was very, very easy, he found, not to think about his brother, or Draco, or being a vates, or any of the one hundred and one other things that he had to think about when at Hogwarts.

He felt *free*.

They reached the clearing, and their feet made no sound as they ran over the grass. Harry flung himself down in front of the fire with the others, and put out one hand. The flames licked just past it, now cool as a wolf's wet nose, now warm as its breath. Harry shuddered once, and then laughed again. He thought he laughed for a few minutes, but no one shrieked at him to stop, as they would have anywhere else. He rolled on his back—at some point Millicent had let go of his hand—and simply laughed and laughed until his breath came short and his throat was sore.

He took a deep breath, caught Millicent's eye, and asked, "Why am I feeling like this?" He meant it as an accusation, since after all she hadn't told him about this, but the effect was ruined when he was giggling like a maniac half the time.

"Because of the magic," said Millicent, almost matter-of-factly. At least her face was flushed as though the night around them were much colder than it actually was, though, or Harry would have felt inclined to hurt her for being so unaffected. "It's all around us. You're feeling it much more than anyone else, Harry, because you're so strong. You have your own magic to deal with, *and* the magic around us is drawn to you." She smiled slightly and inched nearer to him. "Right now, it really, really wants to make you feel happy."

Harry blinked and turned his head to study the fire. He was still smiling hard enough to make his face hurt, but at least he seemed to be back in control of his voice. The other Slytherin students were sprawled around the fire, talking to each other with a casual ease Harry had never seen them exhibit in the common room. One of them, a boy Harry thought was a sixth-year, gestured lazily, and a rock flew from the ground into his palms, where he began playing with it. Harry blinked again. He might still have trouble distinguishing the power from his mood, but it was clear that there was quite a bit of it in the air tonight, to let people perform wandless magic.

He wondered what he could do, but decided he should wait to experiment. He was almost stupefied with joy as it was.

He looked at Pansy, who was lying with her head resting on his shoulder, humming a nonsense tune. “Hey, Pansy?” It seemed to take forever for her to look at him, but she did, smiling. “Who lit the fire, if we’re the first ones here?”

Pansy blinked slowly. “It lit itself,” she said, and gave a careless shrug. “It always does.” Abruptly, her gaze cut past Harry, and she sprang to her feet like a fawn. “Mum! Daddy!” she cried, and ran across the grass towards them.

Harry turned and saw the pair descending another slope than the one they had taken, moving slowly and regally. The clearing was really a dip in the land, he realized now, surrounded by hills on all sides.

Millicent tugged on him. “Come on. You should stand and greet Pansy’s parents. You’ve formally allied with them, and you’ve done so much for Hawthorn, and you haven’t met her father yet.”

Harry nodded and ambled to his feet. Part of him wanted to force this drugged feeling out of his head. The other part was enjoying the relaxation, and allowed him to feel nothing stronger than curiosity as he went forward to meet Pansy’s parents.

Hawthorn looked resplendent in a pale green gown, though when he got close enough, Harry could see that her face was still white and tired from the full moon a few days before. She turned and gave him a slight gesture as he approached, a cross between a bow and a curtsy. “Harry,” she said, and looked proudly at the man on her arm. “This is Dragonsbane Parkinson, my husband and Pansy’s father.”

Harry turned and looked at Dragonsbane, and shock cut through some of the haze of the magic. The man was entirely wrapped in black cloth, from head to foot; only his hand was visible, where it rested on Hawthorn’s arm, and his index finger bore a ring with a large, pale blue stone. The black cloth drifted as though caught by wind, though Harry could feel no wind blowing in most of the directions it drifted. There was a very faint smell around him, sickly sweet. Harry identified it after a moment as the smell of rotting flesh.

Awe replaced his shock. “You’re a necromancer, sir?” he whispered.

“I am.” Dragonsbane’s voice was deep and smooth, with only a trace of an emotion. Harry couldn’t tell what the emotion was, amusement or courtesy or curiosity or something else—though he assumed he would have already known if the man was displeased.

Harry went on staring. He hadn’t expected to meet a necromancer. Few wizards became them anymore, since the sacrifices to do so were enormous. Dragonsbane would have to shield his face from the sight of anyone but his wife and children for the rest of his life. He could only speak aloud on two nights of the year, Halloween and Walpurgis (though Harry hadn’t been sure about the date of the second one, knowing next to nothing about Walpurgis). He would see how long every wizard or witch he met was destined to live, but was forbidden to speak of it. He would even have to give up his birth name, whatever it had been, choose a new first name, and take on the surname of the family he had married into. That would have been the reason Hawthorn made the alliance with him, Harry realized then; she was the one born with the Parkinson name.

At least, Harry thought in wonder, as he looked back and forth between Dragonsbane, whose eyes he could feel resting on him, and Hawthorn, who was beaming at him, he could understand now why Hawthorn’s husband hadn’t reacted badly when he found out that she was a werewolf. And he had his silent, nagging question answered, about what sort of wizard would be willing to marry the Red Death.

“I’m very pleased to meet you, sir,” said Harry, finally remembering his manners. He only half-remembered the formal greeting that one gave to necromancers, since he had never expected to meet any. He hesitated, then decided that it was worth the risk. “I wish you basalt, and the ash of the volcano, and fires that no water can put out, and the black wind that blows between the stars.”

Dragonsbane cocked his head, or at least Harry thought so. His clothing was so shapeless that it was hard to tell. “The dead

approve of you,” Dragonsbane whispered at last. “They have been talking about a magic rising that stirs their sleep. You are one of the components of that magic.”

Harry suppressed a shiver, and nodded. “Thank you, sir.” For a necromancer to respond at all to the greeting was a rare honor.

Pansy giggled at him. Harry saw that she had her arms wrapped around her mother’s waist, and she was grinning in his direction. “You look as though you just met a ghost, Harry.”

“I met one who speaks to them,” said Harry, and bowed to Dragonsbane. “I am very glad to have seen you, sir.”

Dragonsbane gestured once with the pale hand that had not let go of Hawthorn’s arm. Harry made sure not to look too directly at the stone of his ring. “We will see each other again,” he said. “And the next time but one is in a home of my kindred.”

Harry nodded slowly, wondering when he would have occasion to visit a necropolis or a graveyard. “I’ll remember that, sir.”

Hawthorn smiled at Harry and led Dragonsbane down into the dell, whispering to Harry as she passed, “I am so glad that you could join us at last. It is time that you learned more about the Dark.”

I suppose so, Harry thought dazedly as he watched them go. Pansy skipped back and forth between her mother and father, babbling like a child, her hands sometimes flashing in what Harry guessed was the sign language Dragonsbane would use to communicate with his family the rest of the year. He shook his head.

“Potter.”

Harry turned swiftly. Other people had begun arriving while he talked to the Parkinsons, and while most of them had simply trailed past him with curious looks, it seemed that there was someone Blaise wanted him to meet.

“May I present my mother, Arabella Zabini?” Blaise said. He gave a stiff bow, then stepped out of the way.

Harry met the witch’s eyes steadily, to be met with a quirk of her lips in return. Arabella, he knew, was a Dark witch who had never been a Death Eater, and she looked it. Her skin was smooth and utterly black, her eyes large and darker than Snape’s. She wore her dark hair coiled in so many intricate braids around her head that Harry had no idea how long it was. She was easily the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

That beauty had snared seven husbands, one of them Blaise’s father. They had all died, one by one. Supposedly it was of poison. There was no evidence incriminating Arabella Zabini, of course. There never was. The most the Ministry could do was hold her for a short time and then let her go. On one of those journeys to the Ministry, Harry remembered, she had managed to get Sirius sacked.

“Mr. Potter,” she said now, and her voice had an odd musical quality to it that instantly made Harry alert. She extended her hand. “My son has told me so much about you.”

Harry warily took her hand, his eyes traveling her hair. Yes. *There*. A tangle of small bells coiled demurely around the end of one braid, bound so they wouldn’t jangle. They testified, to anyone who looked for them, that Arabella Zabini had mastered musical magic. She could use it in her voice, doubtless to seduce people and put them off their guard.

“Good evening, Mrs. Zabini,” he said, bringing his attention back to her face. “Are you going to sing for us later?”

Arabella’s eyes widened briefly, then narrowed, and a pleased smile appeared on her lips. “I had no idea that you had such superb taste in music, Mr. Potter,” she said.

“We have a Songstress among us,” said Harry, letting go of her hand and stepping back into a deep bow, while surreptitiously checking his hand to make sure that there were no small pinpricks on it, such as might come from spider bites or poisoned rings. “It would be crass of me not to suggest it.”

Arabella studied him in silence for a moment, then nodded. “It has been years since anyone *dared* to ask me to make music on a Walpurgis Night,” she said, putting the slightest emphasis on the verb. “I should be happy to, Mr. Potter.”

She gave him a calculating smile and swept past him towards the fire. Harry looked at Blaise, raising his eyebrows. Blaise’s

jaw was hanging open, but he quickly shut it and nodded, a faint grin curling his mouth.

“You impressed her, Potter,” he said. “That’s damn hard to do.”

Harry let his breath out. “I’m glad.” His body was thrumming with energy now, and he didn’t know for certain how much had to do with the magic in the air. He felt as though he had just escaped alive through a deadly trap.

Of course, you knew it was going to be like this when you agreed to come, he reminded himself, turning back towards the circle of celebrants around the silver fire. Dark wizards and Death Eaters don’t make the best of company.

Yes, but no one said anything about the necromancer and the Songstress.

“Come on, Harry!” Millicent called. She was standing near Adalrico and a pale, blonde woman Harry supposed was her mother. “The festival is just about to get started!”

Harry shook his head, braced himself, and plunged back into the fray.

Hawthorn stepped forward, her hands held in front of her. Harry thought she was cradling something, but he couldn’t be sure what it was. It sparkled and shifted and changed shape when he tried to focus on it. It was either silver or green, though, he was certain of that.

“This is Walpurgis Night,” said Hawthorn, her head lifted and her voice clear as it cut across the crowd of witches and wizards, stilling any chatter at once. “This is the night that the magic returns, the night when the magic renews, the night when the Dark cries out in its power. I claim the right to speak by virtue of having survived Darker magic than anyone else here this year.”

Her face turned haggard for the briefest moment, and then she shook her head and smiled, and it was gone. Harry glanced at Pansy, who was standing with her eyes fixed adoringly on her mother, and shook his own head. *If someone had asked me before I met her, I would never have thought that the Red Death could smile like that, or that someone could love her so.*

Hawthorn lifted her hands high. “There is magic coming again,” she said, voice growing clearer still, until it remind Harry of the cry of a great bird. “There is power coming again. Some of that power stands among us now, not confined by compulsion in that poor understanding of Darkness that we know best, but free in a manner that we can only half-understand and must trust.”

She cast her hands into the air, the whatever-it-was she held pinwheeling across the sky. It changed shape and burst as it expanded, and Harry finally made it out. It was a rain of flowers, with silver petals and green leaves. It was a flock of birds, their silver wings beating steadily around green bodies. It was a shower of dust, both silver and green, that lifted his head and his heart and shook him to the depths of his being.

“May we all be unbound!” Hawthorn cried.

The atmosphere changed as the flowers/birds/dust fell, from solemn to abruptly frenetic. Harry felt the dance begin, but he couldn’t have said the moment when he was pulled into it. Suddenly his feet were moving, and wild music poured out of the air, coming from Merlin knew where, surrounding them and snaring them and pulling them on.

Harry found himself dancing opposite Hawthorn, who smiled at him and spun around, her gown and hair flying wildly, her face shining with a joy that was almost wolfish.

He found himself dancing opposite Millicent. She gave him a smug grin that said, “See? Aren’t you glad that you came?” But the dance took her away again before Harry could make up his mind how to answer.

He found himself whirling in a tight ring with Arabella, who moved like a swan landing on the water. Harry heard the music shift, and was certain that she was adding her voice to it. She didn’t stay long enough for him to be sure, only leaped and skimmed with her dark gown rising like wings, and then came down again and was gone.

He found himself dancing opposite Dragonsbane, and the music grew muted and he felt the intense cold of death brush against his fingers; they turned blue.

He found himself dancing opposite Pansy. For the first time since the article about the Ministry's anti-werewolf legislation appeared, she looked completely relaxed. She spun in a circle and clapped her hands above her head, sparkling trails of dark green and dark blue magic outlining her body, and Harry saw the witch she would become in that moment, several years on, graceful and confident as her mother was.

The dance continued until Harry couldn't tell when it had begun, though he was certain his feet ought to be more tired than they felt. He was broken from his utter trance when he heard ecstatic, wordless cries, mingled with a few names. He lifted his head.

Black silhouettes of beasts were springing down the hills, and curving through the air above them, and rising up from the ground, all moving towards the silver fire.

Millicent's words returned to Harry. "But *everyone* can see the magic of the dead. And that's what comes back on Walpurgis Night, Harry."

And, indeed, these did look like the odd form, half-snake and half-lizard, that Harry's magic had assumed in the Chamber of Secrets when it first broke free. He could make out the shadow of a dragon, and a trotting beast that looked like the bastard child of a unicorn and a thestral, and a fleeting shape that might have been a banshee. They swirled around the fire, joining with the dancers, brushing against them sometimes. Harry continued dancing, and wondered what would happen if one of them touched him.

He had the chance to find out when the dragon swerved in midair, stuck its silhouettes of claws out before it, and scraped them through his own shadow.

Gold sparkling so deep that it nearly sickened him and nearly made him sing, gold spinning itself out of the lead, gold springing and dancing as it finally answered the call of the potion he had made...

And then the dragon flew on, and Harry, his throat rasping with shock, found himself stopped, the dance having let him go at last. He stared up at the memory, and shook his head. That had been the magic of an alchemist, then, one who had managed to turn lead into gold.

These were memories, he thought, all of them, though he didn't know of any way to distinguish which dead Dark wizards they belonged to.

The unicorn-thestral charged him, its horn spearing his shadow.

Serpents rising, hissing, calling, crowding around a pool of molten gold, piling on top of it in a wriggling, sliding mass, pulsing, shifting, beating like a heart, and then coalescing abruptly into an egg of heartstopping beauty...

Harry gasped as that one let him go. The magic shaped into the unicorn-thestral had been a Parselmouth's once, then, and still held the memory of creating a basilisk. He watched in wonder as it wheeled, tail swaying behind it like contours of ink, and sought another wizard to share the memory with.

Other witches and wizards around him cried out, or tilted their faces back and absorbed the memories in silence, or shook before them. Harry took a few steps forward, willing to seek out any who would speak to him, halfblood that he was.

They all spoke to him, or so he thought; it was hard to distinguish some of the shadow-shapes one from another. He caught glimpses of exquisite, unique potions; of magically-bred plagues; of spells that did three things at once; of people turning to stone statues from the gaze of a wizard who had given himself Medusa's abilities; of a wave rising hard and high enough to smash an island to pieces in a roaring storm; of a sword enchanted until it could cut the very air. All of those and more, and it felt as though the boundaries of his being rippled and expanded outwards, filled with a heritage he hadn't even known was there.

At last it ended, and the shadow-shapes leaped high and dived deep and ran fast and vanished. Harry noticed he wasn't the only one on the ground, shaking. Some of the wizards and witches had their hands over their eyes, and Harry heard low murmurs that sounded like prayers or curses.

Then Arabella Zabini began to sing.

Harry had never heard a Songstress; he had only read descriptions of their voices. It was nothing like the real thing.

Dark, the books had warned gravely, but Harry found that he willingly yielded his thoughts to be sculpted into new images. He, along with everyone else there, saw a hillside turned purple by the light of the setting sun, already scattered with bodies. He, along with everyone else, saw the blood among the flowers, and the Dark wizards retreating frantically before the Light ones, blocked by powerful Light artifacts from using their full power.

Dangerous, the books had insisted, but Harry presently couldn't see the danger as the notes plunged and twisted and turned, taking him into minds and whisking him out again, giving him glimpses of wives and sons and daughters and husbands and mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers, letting him see and understand those who were on the verge of dying.

The song rose, reaching steadily for its crescendo, and Harry felt his mood spin upward with it. Shining patches of light cut past him, reflected in darkness, as if he were underwater and swimming for the surface. The world trembled and splashed and broke apart, and he reached that surface.

The Dark wizards joined hands, sinking their feet into the earth and clasping their magic in an unbreakable wall. They shed fear, shed panic, resolved not to be ruled by it, and gave their trust to leaping wild magic.

The magic soared out of them, joyous, snarling, free, and ripped the Light wizards in half like a sweeping sword cut. Abruptly, the scene of battle on the hill by sunset changed from a victory for the Light to a victory for the Dark.

Harry found himself cheering as the song ended, along with everyone else, and blinked, sitting back. He probably shouldn't have been cheering a scene of such violence, but it had seemed like the only sensible thing to do.

He glanced up, and met Arabella Zabini's gaze. She looked satisfied.

That was a test, Harry realized abruptly. *She wanted to see how I would react to a scene of Light wizards being slaughtered.*

He attempted to give back a glare that said his reaction was more an indication of her song's power than his sympathies.

She chuckled at him and turned away in a sweep of her dark gown.

Harry shook his head and stood, slowly, his legs wobbling. Millicent was beside him in an instant, whispering, "So what do you think?"

"I..." Harry shook his head. "How much more of this is there?"

Millicent laughed. "Not much more. Just one more major ceremony, and then it'll be done. Most of us stay for a little while, eating and talking, but we go back early to the school anyway, so we don't have to use the Time-Turners for more than a few rotations." She cocked her head at him. "No one would think badly of you for going back now," she whispered. "They're already impressed."

Harry shook his head again. "No. I want to see what this ceremony is."

Millicent said, as they walked back towards the center of the circle where the silver fire blazed, "You know, Harry, you would make a very *good* Dark wizard."

Harry chose to ignore her.

By the time they reached the fire, the ceremony had already begun. At least, he thought that was why there was a circle of absolute blackness on the grass in front of the fire, slowly pulsing and expanding. The wizards and witches who had come to celebrate stood around it, moving back only slightly as it consumed more and more of the grass.

Abruptly, the circle extended upward as well as across, rising into a tall, slender black cylinder. Harry stared at it hard, and shivered. His eyes ached just trying to pierce the blackness.

The shape focused itself some more, and then a shape like an awning molded out from the top. Harry squinted, but still didn't know what it was until it stopped moving. *A doorway.*

Hawthorn stepped forward, her voice gone back to the clear one that she had used at the start of the evening. "This is the circle of unbinding. Whoever goes into this is entirely unbound, entirely free, for one instant—body, magic, mind, heart, and soul." She paused for a moment, her eyes cutting across the crowd. If they lingered on Harry, he really didn't feel it. "There is, of course, the possibility that you will not come back to yourself," she added softly. "But perhaps vanishing is worth it, for

the one moment of perfect freedom.”

Shit, Harry thought, as he stared at the black thing. He could hardly risk death, not when other people needed him so much.

But the temptation to enter it was present from the moment Hawthorn finished speaking, and even in the silence that followed, when everyone else regarded the cylinder with solemn expressions and made no move.

“Does someone have to enter it?” Harry whispered to Millicent.

Millicent shook her head. “No. This is the part of the ceremony that most often gets neglected, in fact. It *does* kill people.” She leaned towards him earnestly. “It separates you entirely, Harry. Every part of you. It detaches your soul from your body, and your magic from your mind, and so on. And whether it puts them back together...well, that’s up to you, really.”

Harry stared at the dark thing. It sat there. “How long before it vanishes?”

“An hour,” said Millicent. “We can go back to Hogwarts—“

“No,” said Harry, and stepped forward. His heart was pounding crazily. He could see almost nothing but the doorway, but he was aware, in other ways, of the gazes swinging to embrace him, of Millicent’s expression—not quite awe and not quite pride—as she helped him forward, of Hawthorn stepping out of the way.

“You risk your life freely?” Pansy’s mother asked him.

“I do,” said Harry, and then he stepped forward and through the doorway before his caution could eat his desire to be free.

He whirled free.

He found himself drifting in darkness, with a gulf beneath him and on either side so vast and terrible that his mind would break trying to comprehend it. So he didn’t try to comprehend it. He drifted, and gazed down and up and around until the directions broke, and he could no longer tell which was which.

It didn’t matter which was which. They were only part of his human perception. He closed his eyes, or he opened them, and he whirled.

He whirled, bound to a wind, cutting beneath small points of light in a blackness so huge that it made his soul ache. *Stars*, he thought, *and this is the black wind that rides between them*. Whenever he looked up at night, the impression he had was of millions of stars, but now he realized how wrong that was. His eyes sought out the stars only because they were prejudiced by being able to see light. In truth, darkness was the vaster creation, space unending and wondrous, empty void with nothing to fill it but more darkness. And darkness always came, unspent, inexhaustible, created and born and generated of itself in a way that light would never manage.

There was darkness before there was light, and there will be darkness when the light is all gone.

There was darkness in his heart, too, despair and hatred and rage that he had fought so hard to suppress. Harry found himself gazing at those emotions, and he was unafraid. Yes, they were there. Yes, he would feel them. Yes, he could see the fine cracks running through his conceptions of the universe, places where someone could hit him and fracture him. But they were whole and unbroken as yet, and he was free to look at them and accept them calmly.

He climbed as if he had wings. Webs seethed around him, and Harry knew them all, the webs of his ordered thoughts. He touched them and crawled them and felt the sheer stickiness of them, and was unsurprised to see how many of them led back to Connor, even now. That would change. His mind was already changing, moving into the forest where strange and wild creatures could run. That meant the webs would have to find new places to attach, and if those places were still on Connor, then Harry would be more than surprised.

He danced among his magic, which refused to form one beast as the magic of the dead wizards had, or one memory, but formed many, all alive, all shifting, pulsing, changing like the snakes in the vision of the basilisk egg. From moment to moment they changed, from moment to moment they were different, and Harry caught glimpses of what his magic could do, and he laughed in wonder, and again he was unafraid. It was not the same thing as courage, this unfear, being far calmer. He didn’t have to brag or fear what he could do, because he *knew*.

He couldn’t keep hold of the insights. They whirled away from him, flew away from him, danced away from him, and he

spun back together, bindings once again taking hold, body and mind and soul and magic and heart to each other.

He found himself on the grass, on his knees, on the other side of the black cylinder. Harry took a deep breath and climbed slowly to his feet, then walked around the cylinder to join the witches and wizards again. The silver fire was almost out, he noted.

They stared at him solemnly, and then they began nodding, and whispering, their voices like wind in a large grassy plain.

Harry found it easy to ignore them. He stared at the stars, his gaze this time picking out the voids between them instead of the points of light. Had he really ignored darkness that easily, all his life? Had he really disdained Dark magic as only compulsion, and Light magic as only free will?

It was more complicated than that. Dark magic was also wild, and Light magic was also tame. And yes, compulsion and wildness did not seem to sit side by side easily, but they were both true.

Harry's eyes came back from the heavens when Millicent touched his arm. She was smiling at him softly.

"A bit of refreshment, and then we'll go back to Hogwarts," she said.

Harry nodded, and let her pull him back into the circle of chattering Dark wizards and witches, part of him still free and gone flying.

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

Chapter Thirty-Six: You Cannot Afford Not to Listen

Snape closed his eyes, ground his right front teeth into his right bottom teeth, and tried to think of something he could say that would make an impression on the irritating child in front of him.

"Harry," he said finally.

Harry glanced up from brewing Wolfsbane, his eyes wide and attentive. His hands never stopped selecting, stirring, and mixing. He had done it so often now that he might be able to do it in his sleep. Snape didn't understand why Harry wouldn't brew some of his own and sell it to other werewolves who wanted it. Dumbledore would pay for the ingredients gladly, since he would take it to mean that Lupin had definitely committed to staying with them for the next year. Meanwhile, Harry could be making some money of his own, independent of the Potter fortune that he might never see.

But Harry had said he wouldn't steal from Dumbledore or Snape, and that he would prefer to give the potion away. *Give it away!* Snape sometimes wished that the boy's inner Slytherin had sucked a bit more of the Gryffindor out of him.

But that is not what you are supposed to be worrying about, he reminded himself, and looked sternly back at Harry. He suspected that the boy's magic might have begun to reach out and wind his thoughts in vines, turning them away from any greater source of irritation towards a lesser. They would have to work on that. Snape did not intend to be subject to any form of compulsion, no matter how minor, largely because of how it would devastate Harry when he found out.

"You left the school," he said, this time keeping his voice free of inflection. "You promised me you would ask me for permission before doing that."

Harry froze for a moment, then carefully added the demiguise hairs to the portion of the potion he was working on and stepped away from the cauldron before turning to face Snape. "I'm sorry about that, sir," he said. "I forgot."

Snape drew in another breath of air. This was something else he had been meaning to address, but it had to wait for the proper time. Being beside himself with rage when he'd first heard about Harry's little jaunt in the company of the purebloods for Walpurgis Night would only have led to something unfortunate. So he'd waited until he thought he could be calm.

And now he was. He *was*, he assured himself. But he was also disturbed, and by something far more important than the fact that Harry had been outside Hogwarts for an unspecified period of time.

"Harry," he said, "you still do not think twice about risking your life."

Harry flushed. Snape wondered, narrow-eyed, exactly what had happened at the celebration. Millicent had refused to let

Harry tell either Draco or Snape, saying it was a private matter between those who'd attended. Harry had seized on that excuse a little too eagerly for Snape to think it meant anything good.

"I'm not as reckless as I was earlier in the year," Harry protested. "Really. I sensed a bunch of webs in myself when I lost the phoenix web, but I didn't cut at them. Only the one, to release my magic-feeding ability."

Snape shook his head slowly. "It is not the recklessness I am speaking of. It is the *thoughtlessness*." He heard his voice descend, becoming icy, and realized he was angry after all. *Well, Harry will just have to deal with it. This should have been solved long since.* "You do not risk your life or your sanity quite as often or quite as suddenly. You think about it first. But you still do not think about the *danger*."

"I do so!" Harry's eyes flashed, and Snape felt the first faint beginnings of a headache. "I weighed what you would think of me dashing into my own mind the way I had into Remus's. And I do consider what you and Draco would feel if I died."

"That is not what I meant." Snape rubbed his forehead. His own emotions were back to weary resignation. He didn't think it was Harry's mind influencing him after all, but the simple fact that he was trying to be a guardian to the third most powerful wizard in Britain, who also happened to be a child recovering from abuse.

Harry stared at him.

"I mean," said Snape, "thinking about your own life. You have no self-preservation instinct, Harry."

More puzzled silence.

"Staying alive for yourself," Snape clarified. "You think of what would happen to me or Draco or Lupin or your brother if you died." And that was progress. Snape had to admit he preferred being on Harry's list of "people who might be hurt if Harry Potter were to meet a sudden demise" to Connor Potter being the only entrant. "But you do not think of your own life as worth anything unless you can spend it serving or defending or protecting others."

Harry sighed. "You know that's the way my mother raised me, sir—"

"I fear that you will never overcome it if you do not begin to see it as a problem," Snape interrupted him. He knew his ward's patient tone. Harry would manage a reasonable explanation that would make Snape think the problem had been solved until five minutes after he walked out of the room, whereupon Snape would realize the explanation solved nothing at all. That tendency had only become worse in the few days since he returned from Walpurgis Night. Sometimes, Harry could not be allowed to be as mature as Snape knew he was. "You *must* begin to value yourself for yourself, Harry. Not just for what you can do for others, not just as someone whom anyone else would be sorry to see die, but for yourself."

Harry blinked at him. Snape fought down the temptation to simply snarl insults until they broke through the mask of indifference. It wasn't a mask, and if he wasn't good at this, then at least he'd known what kinds of things he was letting himself in for when he agreed to be Harry's guardian.

"I do, sir," said Harry at last, just as Snape was about to speak again.

"Do you?"

Harry nodded. "Of course, sir. I like being alive. I take pride in what I can do. I would much rather be alive than dead." He paused, his head tilting slightly to one side. "Isn't that what you mean, sir?"

"Yes, and no." Snape wished irritably that Dumbledore had not turned into a complete fool where the Potter twins were concerned. He would have been able to frame the issue with words that made sense and taught Harry to see exactly what he wanted him to see. *Which is the problem. Harry would not like that. At least I know he prefers my stumbling honesty.* "Is there any cause you would not risk your life for, Harry?"

"Dumbledore's," said Harry at once.

"But he wishes to protect your brother and defeat Voldemort," said Snape. "What other cause does he have?"

"The cause of enslaving me." For a moment, there was enough bitterness in Harry's voice that Snape felt himself relax. If Harry could only hang onto it... But then it was gone again, and Harry was shaking his head. "I have to remain free."

“Why?”

“So I can teach Connor, and brew the Wolfsbane Potion, and figure out some way to fight the Death Eaters, and—“

“Harry.” Snape strode over until he stood in front of Harry, and compelled the boy to pay attention to him by the simple expedient of staring him down until he did. “You need not do everything. Trained Aurors cannot find Bellatrix and her companions.” And if he had private nightmares about them catching Harry or himself, those were no one’s business. “You *can* take some of your life to do other things.”

“Such as?” Harry folded his arms.

Snape hated that damn mature look, at least when Harry was using it to fight him. And this wasn’t even fighting; it was Harry assuming the attitude of a parent. That made Snape doubly hate it. “Whatever you like to do,” he said. “Play Quidditch.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t enjoy it as much anymore. It takes time away from my training Connor and planning.”

Snape ground his left teeth together. Much as he had to admit the bargain of teaching Connor was good since it placated Dumbledore, he still thought Harry’s brother a lost cause. “Not that, then. Cast spells for fun.”

Harry gave him that impossibly gentle and impossibly infuriating look. “I don’t have *time*, professor. I can’t afford to use my magic for frivolous things. I might get addicted to the power. Besides, I’m busy learning spells that can be useful in the war.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

Harry let the mask slip a bit, let his bewilderment peek through. “Advanced defensive and offensive spells, sir. I told you I was going to start studying them. And medical magic. I can heal broken bones now,” he added with a hint of pride. “Wouldn’t that be useful on the battlefield?”

“Why would you not leave that up to Madam Pomfrey?” Snape demanded.

Harry cocked his head. “Why, sir? She’d be in Hogwarts, and probably far from any battle scene. The Death Eaters aren’t going to make attacking the castle their first priority. The wards are too strong. They’ll be fighting further away. I’m more mobile than she is, and I’m stronger.”

Snape slowly shook his head, unable to find words to express his dismay. What *did* Harry do for fun? He realized he didn’t know. He would have studied all during his childhood; he didn’t appear to know how to read for pleasure. Quidditch was something Snape and Draco had forced him into, much as he loved flying. Magic was always to be used for something else. It didn’t help that most of Snape’s childhood leisure time had been spent inventing nasty intrigues and even nastier potions or spells. He didn’t have any idea what normal children did for fun. And Harry was not a normal child.

At the same time, he thought it sad beyond the words he didn’t have that Harry was the one thinking calmly of battle tactics, and training as though he fully expected to go out and die the day after tomorrow.

This summer, he thought, suddenly seized by inspiration. *The end of the term is only a few weeks away. He will spend the summer here with me—I would not dare take him to Spinner’s End, not with the Death Eaters abroad—and perhaps Draco, if that can be arranged with Lucius and Narcissa. His brother will be gone back to his Mudblood of a mother. We can teach Harry how to have fun.*

It was appalling, really, how much that thought pleased him.

“Make sure that you rest,” was all he could say to Harry now. “Make sure that you take some time to relax.”

Harry blinked once, and then his face lit up. “Of course! Because I have to be rested and have a relaxed mind to fully understand my training,” he said. “Of course, sir. I understand. Thank you for the reminder.” He smiled at Snape and all but bounced out of the office.

Snape made a grumbling noise in his throat and turned to the pile of books that he had acquired from the Department of Magical Family and Child Services. He had wanted them for another purpose, but they should serve this one: teaching him what children raised pureblood did beyond dance and watch each other like hawks.

“All right,” said Connor suddenly. His lip was bitten from trying to stay silent in the face of Draco’s taunts, and his cheeks were red, and his eyes looked as though he hadn’t got enough sleep lately to do anything more than shamle around, for all that he was glaring at Harry. Harry reminded himself again that some of those things were the inevitable consequences of having his brother and his best friend in the same room. “Say that I *do* believe you, and not all Slytherins are evil.”

Harry blinked and licked his own lips. He had been giving Connor another lecture for an hour already, and to break through Sirius’s training so suddenly was not what he had expected. “Yes?” he said.

“Then tell me why Salazar Slytherin left a Chamber of Secrets in the middle of the school, and a monster who could kill Muggleborn students!” Connor said triumphantly. “He must have been evil. He could actually condone the murder of students, and he helped *found* the school. Why would anyone who comes out of his House be good?”

Harry shook his head slowly. “Connor. Do you *really* think like that? Or do you have a mad gnome in your head who starts yelling whenever you hear the word *Slytherin* in any form?”

Connor flushed further, but said, “Answer the question, Harry.”

Harry knew he shouldn’t. It was only an hour. It was only a display of the same kind of stubbornness that Connor had shown before. And he had apologized last time. He’d come to the lesson without prompting this time. He’d ignored most of Draco’s insults. They were making progress.

But Harry did it anyway, and lost his temper.

“Slytherin may have been evil,” he snapped, leaning forward. He felt Draco jump and look at him in what was probably excitement. Harry didn’t care. “But that doesn’t mean that everyone who comes out of his House is. Fuck, Connor, don’t you *get* it? If you really think that a founder’s character is passed down to everyone in his or her House, then you can’t explain Gryffindor Death Eaters. Because how could they be evil, if Godric Gryffindor was so pure and good?” He was yelling by now, halfway across the abandoned classroom to his brother.

Connor folded his arms. “I didn’t say Gryffindor was *perfect*,” he said. “But he was good. And most of the House is good, with just a few bad apples. But Slytherins are all evil.”

“You great *git*.” Harry felt his magic stir around him and reach out towards Connor in interest. He tried to clamp down on it, but his temper flared again when he saw Connor just smirking at him, as if to say that Harry’s little display proved his inane theory. “I gave you a list of Slytherins who weren’t evil earlier, and you *agreed* with me!”

“They aren’t perfectly evil,” said Connor. “But they’re still evil.”

“You said they *weren’t*!”

Connor shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Harry, Harry, Harry. You don’t understand. You can judge someone’s *general* character by their House. That means that Gryffindors are *generally* good and Slytherins are *generally* evil. So sometimes you get a few Gryffindors who falter. It happens.”

“Then you should get some Slytherins who shine, too,” Harry said. He barely recognized his own voice. “That’s the outcome of this supposed logic of yours. Say it, Connor!”

“I’m not going to lie,” Connor said, his face turning closed. “You can’t make me.”

Harry flung out one hand, and his magic lashed and grabbed Connor, lifting him off the ground and pinning him to the wall. Connor’s eyes promptly went wide, but he held still. Harry wondered if he thought it would be a good idea not to anger Harry further, or if the weight of the power on his limbs simply wouldn’t permit him to move.

“I don’t care *what* Sirius told you,” Harry said. “Sirius isn’t Merlin. He isn’t even Dumbledore. He’s not right all the time—half the time—a quarter of the time. *Slytherins aren’t evil. Gryffindors aren’t good.* What the *fuck* do I have to say to get this through to you?”

Connor’s face went pale, but he simply hung there for long seconds. He seemed to be thinking. Harry glared up at him, and kept the hope out of the glare. Perhaps his brother was, after all, changing his mind.

Connor looked directly at him. And Harry saw the flash of understanding there. Connor *knew* he was telling the truth.

But his face closed again in the next instant, and he began what Harry knew was a lie. “Sirius didn’t tell me anything like that. He just hinted, and I came to the understanding on my own. I told you what I think about Slytherins, and about Gryffindors. Those are my own opinions.”

Oh, no you don’t, brother mine, Harry thought. “Sirius *did* tell you those things,” he said, and Connor’s face could have been made of milk.

“He did not,” he said, with an undertone of desperation bubbling in his voice. “I came to them on my own. I told you. I’m the stupid one. Isn’t that what you always think about Gryffindors?”

“I do,” said Draco.

“Draco,” said Harry, his magic curling around him like the mad tentacles of the Squid, “could you please do me a favor, and shut up right now?”

Draco shrugged and shut up. That didn’t dim the expression of enjoyment on his face when he watched Connor held in mid-air, but Harry supposed he couldn’t ask him to stop smiling.

Harry turned back to Connor. *I should have suspected this before. Connor’s never this stubborn on his own. He’s only this stubborn when he’s protecting someone...*

Just like me.

“Connor,” he said, “I promise I’m not going to hurt Sirius. Just tell me what he said to you. And tell me why you think I would hurt him,” he added.

“No,” said Connor, and he was sweating, his eyes glazed and wild. Harry felt him straining against the weight of magic on his limbs, and it was now obvious that he couldn’t move. “He *told* me. And it—“ He slammed his mouth abruptly.

“Connor—“

“*No!*”

Connor’s magic turned wandless and fought against his own, and Harry knew he couldn’t hold his brother much longer without damaging him. He relaxed his grip, and Connor slid gently down the wall and landed on his feet. He immediately stood up and ran to the door, his eyes on Harry as he opened it.

“I’m going to Dumbledore,” he said. “I’m going to tell him what you did. He won’t make me have lessons with you now.”

He slipped out and shut the door behind him.

Harry made himself relax by degrees, and glanced at Draco. Draco’s face was somewhere between smug and concerned.

“That went well,” he said, when he caught Harry’s gaze.

Harry shook his head and put his head in his hands. One bad side effect of Walpurgis Night was that he saw Connor from more of a distance than ever. He kept seeing more and more of his brother’s faults—the stubbornness, the blind trust in everyone who was Gryffindor unless they “turned against him” the way Hermione had, the refusal to apologize or admit he was wrong even when he knew he was, and the clinging to his own status as the Boy-Who-Lived.

He’d felt uneasy about that all week, but for the first time, the idea really formed in his mind, in so many words:

If Connor’s the Boy-Who-Lived, then Voldemort’s already won.

“Go to *bed*, Harry,” said Hermione, pausing behind him in the library.

Harry blinked and looked up from the book he was reading. He scowled at her. “Listen to your own advice,” he said, nodding

to the enormous pile of books in her arms.

“I am going to bed,” Hermione retorted. “I just have a bit of light reading to do first. But you look half-asleep on your feet, Harry.”

“I’m sitting down.”

“*Harry.*”

Harry rubbed his face. It was true that he was tired, and if one of the other Slytherins had been with him, he would have been hustled and poked and prodded and taunted into going to bed already. But he had created an illusion of himself and left it in the common room again. He simply had to have some time to research the phoenix web, and try other methods of getting it out of Peter’s head. Draco and Millicent and the rest seemed to think that because Dumbledore had called a halt to Connor’s lessons for a week to “cool everyone’s head” and find out why Connor had thought Harry would hurt Sirius, Harry would have more time to rest. Harry knew better. He wanted to use the time for *productive* things.

On the other hand, if he was tired enough, he would probably miss some vital thing in the books.

“Just one more hour, Hermione,” he muttered. “Please.”

Hermione sighed at him, shook her head, and made her way out of the library. Harry dived back into the book. It was a more general one, containing hints on Occlumency and Legilimency as well as mind-webs. If Snape or Draco came and chided him for reading it, Harry could say that he was just striving to understand his own thoughts.

He flipped the page, the text blurring before his eyes, and took off his glasses. Surely the text wasn’t blurring because he was *tired*. That was silly. He hadn’t reached the stage of exhaustion where he felt like a wet rag yet, and that was the one where his eyes burned. It was just a smudge on his glasses. He wrapped and rubbed them in his shirt, then put them back on and peered at the page.

...common myth that Legilimency can be used this way, just as it is a common myth that the Soul Strength Spell can be used on a child...

Harry sat straight up, his heart pounding. He suddenly wasn’t tired anymore. He leaned forward and read the passage three times, until he was absolutely sure he was seeing what he had thought he had seen.

It is a common myth that Legilimency can be used this way, just as it is a common myth that the Soul Strength Spell can be used on a child. In truth, Legilimency on a truly unconscious person is impossible, though it can sometimes be used with those who have gone into comas with magical causes. In the case of ordinary unconsciousness, however, the thoughts shut down and are too malformed for the Legilimens to tell what they are. She will find herself caught in a web of dreams, and is likely to stumble unless she has experience in one of the dream-reading arts.

Similarly, the Soul Strength Spell, commonly used to test the strength of character that may let a person endure a certain specified task, cannot be used successfully on any child younger than twelve, and there have been arguments for not using it on anyone younger than fifteen. A child’s character is too unformed, full of drifting thoughts and influences that the spell is unable to recognize. Sometimes, it will return a false answer. Most often, the spell simply does not work.

Harry leaned back and stared at the ceiling, catching the book automatically when it tried to slip from the table. He didn’t want it to thump and alert Madam Pince that he was still here.

Peter had claimed that Dumbledore had used the Soul Strength Spell on Harry and Connor before he made Peter into Sirius’s sacrifice, and determined from its answer that Harry could better stand being the sacrifice than his brother. According to this book, that was impossible, since Harry and Connor hadn’t even been two years old yet.

So Harry was left with two possibilities, neither of which he liked.

First, that the spell had returned a false answer, and Harry was not actually stronger of soul than Connor was—or, in the case of the question that Dumbledore had asked, not actually meant as a sacrifice.

Harry backed quickly away from the gulf he could sense opening in his thoughts with that answer, and looked at the second one.

The second one was that Peter had been lying.

But why? Harry thought, closing his eyes. *What would he gain from it?*

He snorted to himself a moment later. *Can you ask? My belief, my trust. He's an escaped Azkaban prisoner, Harry, and one I'd been told all my life was evil. He had to have something to tell me in order to get me to trust him.*

That didn't mean that everything he'd told Harry was false, of course. But it did send a shiver of unease across Harry's mind.

He took a deep breath and stood. Everything else in Peter's story had sounded true; Dumbledore certainly hadn't denied it. And Peter had risked his life for Harry several times. Until Harry found another piece of evidence, he would not let himself think that Peter was false.

But that meant he needed to confront the other possibility—that the spell had returned a false answer.

The suspicion raced through his mind like a jagged crack, and joined with his thoughts about Connor from earlier in the week. Harry shuddered once, and then cast a Disillusionment Charm on himself so he could slip past Madam Pince.

He had to see Snape, right away.

Snape groaned as a sharp rap sounded on his office door. That someone was bothering him near—he glanced at his clock—eleven at night was insane. And he knew it couldn't be Harry, because he'd checked on Harry just half an hour ago, and found him peacefully asleep in his bed.

Snape called, "Enter," braced for it to be Dumbledore with word of some emergency, or Minerva wanting to discuss the Slytherin-Gryffindor scuffle that had happened earlier in the Great Hall, evolving into a full-blown food fight.

It was Harry, becoming visible as he opened the door. From his face, he hadn't been to bed at all. Snape discovered he wasn't too tired to feel rage.

"What have you done?" he hissed, rising from behind his desk. "If you tell me that you cast another illusion of yourself—"

"I cast another illusion of myself," Harry said.

Snape narrowed his eyes, pondering if he were actually angry enough to ban Harry from playing in the Quidditch match against Hufflepuff this weekend. It might cost them the Quidditch Cup if he did, but Harry would certainly know how seriously Snape took his crime.

"But we don't have *time* for that right now," said Harry, and came a step forward. His eyes were wide, his face pale, and when he turned his head, his fringe swished aside enough for Snape to see that the lightning bolt scar on his face was brilliant. "I just found out something that made me worry."

Snape let his anger retreat to the back of his mind, inside one of the quicksilver pools he usually used to contain his magic. He gestured Harry to a chair and sat down opposite him. He hadn't forgotten Harry's punishment, but it could wait, and be all the more devastating when his ward had forgotten about it.

"What was it?" he asked.

Harry swallowed. "I found out—or thought I did—from Peter that Dumbledore cast the Soul Strength Spell on me and Connor when we were babies, and that was how he knew who would be the best sacrifice. That was how he knew for certain that Connor would be the Boy-Who-Lived, too. I was the stronger of soul, and I wouldn't crack if I was asked to protect my brother."

"That is impossible," Snape interrupted, unable to keep silent any longer. "The Soul Strength Spell does not work on infants."

"I know," Harry whispered. "I just read that." Snape quelled the urge to say something about Slytherins who not only lied to their Head of House about where they had been at night, but also used that time to read more than was necessary. "But, Professor Snape, that means a few things." He took a deep, dragging breath, and ran a shaking hand through his hair. "Peter

was lying, maybe, and if so, I don't think I should be alone with him any more."

"I never thought you should," Snape could not resist pointing out.

Harry gave him a distracted nod. "Or Dumbledore lied about casting the spell," he whispered. "Or the spell returned a false result. And if either of those two things are true, then..." He trailed off and stared past Snape.

Snape followed the course of his mind easily enough. Two leaps and a jump, and one was there.

Dumbledore had no guarantee outside the prophecy that Connor and Harry were meant to play the roles he said they were.

No one had actually been at Godric's Hollow the night of the attack—except Voldemort, whom they certainly couldn't ask.

That meant that Harry could, possibly, be the Boy-Who-Lived.

Snape watched his ward's face grow paler and paler, and suppressed his triumph. Harry would misunderstand a smile now. "What makes you think this?" he asked. "Surely one lie is not enough to bring down something you have believed in your entire conscious life."

"Because," said Harry, and choked for a moment. Then he looked up. "Because Connor's an idiot."

Snape told himself he could smirk later, and only nodded gravely, imploring Harry to continue.

Harry sprang to his feet and started pacing in front of the chair. "Because he isn't that magically powerful," he said. "Oh, I know the Boy-Who-Lived isn't going to kill Voldemort that way, but at the moment, I don't see how he could survive a duel with him long enough to kill him any other way. I've tested his power, and it's at its strongest when he's most frantic—which isn't going to work in a battle. And he's not very compassionate, either. He demands absolute loyalty and love from others, but if they do something that he thinks of as a betrayal, he turns on them without further compunction. He doesn't *forgive*. He doesn't think of the future. He isn't interested in doing all sorts of things, like learn history and the pureblood dances, that would make him a better Boy-Who-Lived." Harry turned and glanced sidelong at Snape. "He doesn't *love* people very often."

The smirk would not be restrained. Snape was only thankful that Harry was too distracted to take it personally. "And because of that..." he prompted.

"Because of that," Harry muttered, "I don't know how he *could* be someone whose innocence and purity are essential to bringing down Voldemort. I was the sacrifice to make sure he stayed pure, but all kinds of impurities were apparently there already." He laughed, and it was the laugh that Snape always hoped he would never have to hear again.

"Surely you do not blame yourself for that," Snape said.

Harry gave him an odd look. "Of course not. Not even I can be responsible for what got mixed into his character when he had the happiest and most peaceful upbringing we could conceive of." He sighed. "I should have told him the truth, yes, and I wish I knew just how much I love him, but I don't think that would have necessarily made him more loving. He's known all his life that he's the Boy-Who-Lived, and the past few years that he would have to work harder, and he *still* doesn't."

Snape nodded, and felt triumph irradiate him. "And what other signs are there?" he asked. He could give them to Harry, but he knew Harry learned best when he came up with them for himself. Besides, that would make it harder for him to hide from them later, if he started regretting that he'd ever thought this.

Harry sighed and swept back his fringe on purpose this time, to touch his scar. "This bleeds," he said. "And I have prophetic dreams that are usually connected with Voldemort somehow—I think," he added. "I never did find out what the dreams I was having this year were about. But I dreamed about Quirrell. And Tom—Tom Riddle said there was a connection between us." Harry closed his eyes. "I always thought it meant that I had a bond to my brother, and Riddle was connected to me through *his* connection to Connor. But...maybe not."

Snape cleared his throat. He did have a bit of information to offer, something Harry could not have known. "There is one person who might be able to tell you the truth, Harry."

"Who?" Harry whispered, his eyes flaring open.

“Pettigrew,” said Snape. “Dumbledore told me once that there were two people who could have told us for certain what happened when the Dark Lord attacked you: the Dark Lord himself, and Pettigrew, who was with him. At the time Dumbledore told me this, he claimed Pettigrew was insane, and only grew more so with every passing year. But that is obviously not true.”

Harry stood stock-still for a moment. Then he whispered, “Of course. He told me that once before. But I think he assumed I already knew what happened, that I knew I could have been—could have defeated Voldemort and didn’t care, since I was under the influence of the phoenix web.” He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. “But how can I know for certain that he’s telling the truth? He could have been lying about the Soul Strength Spell. I don’t know if I can trust anything that he says.” He hesitated for a long moment. “And he told me that the phoenix web Dumbledore had cast on him was trying to return. That might make him even more untrustworthy.”

“Do you what you can to meet with him in a setting where I may attend you,” Snape suggested. “This weekend, perhaps. I am a Legilimens. I should be able to tell you for certain whether he is lying.”

“And remove his phoenix web?” Harry looked up at him in hope.

Snape ground his teeth. *When did ‘defend Harry’ turn into ‘help Harry’s friends?’* But he knew that it would make Harry happy and ease any worry that he had about going into the meeting, so he nodded. “If it comes to that,” he said.

“Thank you, thank you!” Harry abruptly darted forward and caught Snape around the waist in a spontaneous hug. He pulled back before Snape could say anything about it, and grinned at him. “I feel much better about everyone potentially being wrong about Connor, now,” he announced.

Snape caught his eyes. “I hope so,” he said. “I have thought for two years now that you were the true Boy-Who-Lived, Harry.” He saw Harry wince, and realized his ward hadn’t once used the title to refer to himself. “And I hope for the wizarding world’s sake that you are. We are doomed if we have that idiot leading us.”

Harry laughed softly at him, and slipped out of the room. Five minutes passed, in which Snape basked in his triumph.

Then he realized that he hadn’t managed to assign Harry a punishment for leaving an illusion of himself asleep in Slytherin, and his curses shook the walls.

Harry opened his eyes quickly and let out a long, slow breath, forcing himself to relax. Everything had gone well. He’d slipped back into Slytherin and into his bed, taking the place of his illusion, before anyone had realized he was missing. And then he really had fallen asleep. He’d hate to ruin that by screaming now, just because he’d had the dream of a ring of dark figures closing in around him again.

He raised his hand to his scar, and felt it come away bloody. He sighed and sat up, looking at the blood in the faint light from the slumbering Fawkes’s feathers.

He had a lot to think about concerning his dreams and his scar, if...

Harry let out another sigh and flopped back. There were still things that his new interpretation didn’t explain, of course, like why Connor had a heart-shaped scar if he really hadn’t played any part in Voldemort’s defeat, but he thought he was close to getting definite answers, and that heartened him.

He closed his eyes, and tried to figure out what the dream meant. His scar hurt too badly to go back to sleep right away.

Death Eaters.

Harry’s eyes shot open, and his heart began to beat very fast. That thought had not been his own. It had been another voice in his head, low and sorrowful and definitely male. Harry thought he ought to recognize other voices in his head by now, after having Syllarana and Tom Riddle in there.

Who are you? He carefully formed and cast the thought.

The answer came at once, somewhere from the back of his mind. *Don’t remember that. I never remember. But I know what you’re dreaming about. Death Eaters. They’re free, aren’t they?* The voice was wistful.

Harry shook his head slightly from side to side. He strained for a visual, the way he always had with Tom Riddle, but could see nothing, only utter darkness. At least that made it easier to concentrate on the voice. *They are. But why do you think the figures in my dream are Death Eaters?*

I can feel them, said the voice. *I can feel anyone with a connection to Voldemort. I think I was his, once. Or him? Maybe. I don't know. But I drift around and look out through people's eyes every so often, people who have a connection with Voldemort. You. Snape. Your brother. Pettigrew.*

Harry shuddered. That was beyond frightening, that someone had been watching through his eyes and sharing his memories and he hadn't known. *How long have you been here?*

Months.

What were you doing before that?

I can't tell you that. The voice was sad again. *Memories are gone.*

Harry swallowed. *Are you sure you can't tell me who you are? You can't remember your name or anything else that might let me identify you?*

Oh! The voice sounded delighted for the first time. *There is one thing. I can't tell you, but I can show you.*

Pain abruptly exploded in Harry's scar, then his hands, then his feet, then all through his body. He writhed as it ran like fire down his sides. This was worse than *Crucio*, worse than his dream in February of the rat and the dog.

Fawkes began trilling urgently. He felt hands shaking him, but he couldn't respond. So much pain thudded through him that he couldn't unclench his jaw. He heard distant shouts, one of his name and one of "Get Snape!"

Pain turned the world behind his eyes red, and then yellow, and then blue, slowly blooming into black.

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

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Gone Round the Twist

Harry opened his eyes slowly. He could feel his shoulders aching first, before his head, before his scar. He thought that was odd, but he didn't try to roll them or stretch, as might have been his first action on waking otherwise. He turned his head slowly from side to side instead, and saw the dimness of the hospital wing around him. He was sprawled in a bed, and Snape was asleep in a chair beside it, looking uncomfortable. Harry wondered if the discomfort came from the position or actual worry over him, and then dropped that line of thought as too potentially uncomfortable for *him* in turn.

I'm sorry.

Harry managed to stifle his gasp in time, which pleased him. Let Snape sleep. *What do you mean?* he whispered back, wondering if thoughts that were too loud or too deliberately formed could wake an Occlumens.

I said that I would show you some key to my identity, the voice murmured. *Instead, I hurt you. The pain was what I felt in the past, but that doesn't mean that I should have hurt you.*

Harry reached up and touched his forehead, but still, his scar refused to ache. He wondered why, given the voice's claimed connection to Voldemort.

I don't know, the voice explained. *I told you, I can't—*

Remember anything about who you were, I know, Harry finished with a weary sigh.

The voice whined in his head, sounding rather like Connor when he'd just got in trouble and was in danger of being sent to bed without dinner. *I'm sorry.*

Apology accepted, Harry said, because otherwise he felt as though this might go on forever. *But please tell me if you remember anything. Then perhaps we can move your voice back into your own rightful mind, and stop your own suffering as*

well as other people's.

You would do that for me? The voice sounded both wary and pleased.

Of course, Harry said. *You can share my memories. You must have seen that I would want to put you back in your own body.*

Oh, yes. You're compassionate that way. I'm sor—

Snape chose that moment to stir and wake up. He looked Harry directly in the eye, and his face tightened.

I can tell you what he's thinking, offered the voice smugly. *Want to know what he's thinking?*

Not particularly, no, Harry snapped back at it. Too late; he had the feeling that the voice had already drifted away from his mind like a cobweb. He didn't know where it had gone, probably to Snape's mind, but he hoped that it wouldn't come back and pass on the thoughts it found there.

"What happened?" Snape asked quietly. "You have been unconscious for more than a week, Harry. This is Friday night. It will be—" He swished his wand, conjured a clock in mid-air, and studied it for a moment. "Saturday morning in two hours."

Harry shook his head, even as he tested his sore muscles and found them weak enough for what Snape said to be true.

"There's a voice in my head," he said. "Something that speaks about a connection to Voldemort, and being able to read the thoughts of people who have a connection to Voldemort. He said he couldn't remember who he was, so I asked him to give me a clue, and he showed me. Pain," he added, just in case Snape didn't understand what he meant.

Snape's breath hissed out of him as if Harry had punched him in the solar plexus. Then he leaned forward and clenched his hands on Harry's shoulders. "Use your Occlumency," he demanded. "Force him out."

Doesn't work that way, the voice said smugly, drifting back into his head. *You can tell him that. I come through your scar, and through his Dark Mark. Unless you can obliterate those, then I can keep talking to you. Did you know that Snape's bad habit used to be biting his toenails?*

Harry tried to snicker and gag at the same time, and wound up choking. Snape shook him to get him to pay attention. Harry looked up and shook his head. "He says that it can't be done. The connection to Voldemort is my scar, or your Dark Mark, and there is no way to close those."

Snape pursed his lips around another hiss. Then he said, "We will discover a way. I will not have someone in your head who hurts you. Not again."

That was only one time! The voice was indignant now. *You'd think that he'd trust you by now.*

I wish you would go away and shut up, Harry thought wearily at it.

The voice gave him a sound that Harry thought was the equivalent of sticking its tongue out, and then the sense of another person in his mind left again. Harry let his head sag back on the pillow. He was not sure what he thought of all *that*. Perhaps the voice had been unhinged by all the pain it had gone through—or, rather, its owner had been unhinged by all the pain *he* had gone through. That would explain the ridiculous mixture of suffering, apologies, and childish teasing.

Yet another insane person in my head, Harry thought, as he closed his eyes. *How wonderful.*

"We will find a way to defeat this," Snape whispered, stroking his hair away from his forehead. "I promise you, Harry. I will not see you suffer more than you already have. What I can do to protect you from harm, I will."

Harry smiled in spite of his immediate desire to answer that he was the one who did the protecting, not Snape. He let himself slip into sleep, half-listening for echoes of the voice as he did.

It did not return.

When he woke, Draco was there, and scowling at him.

“You’re stupid,” he accused Harry.

Harry managed to raise his eyebrows. “Really?” From the light around him, he assumed it was Saturday morning, and that seemed surer from the lack of sounds in the halls and the steaming bowl of porridge that sat beside the bed—though there was really the same breakfast in the hospital wing every morning, come to think of it. Madam Pomfrey didn’t seem to trust her patients to consume anything stronger than porridge. With some help from Draco, Harry managed to sit up and maneuver the tray onto his lap. He began eating, and sighed in relief as he found that he could grip and lift the spoon. Having someone else feed him was the ultimate in humiliation as far as he was concerned.

“Yes,” said Draco, crossing his arms over his chest and staring Harry down. “Trust you to *talk* to someone who just strolls into your head and starts telling you that he came through your connection with the Dark Lord.” He had the sense to say the last quietly, at least, and with anxious glances at the door to make sure no one was there first. “Snape told me what happened. Honestly, Harry. Why didn’t you come and wake me up? Why did you demand clues to his identity?”

Harry blinked at him. “Because you were already asleep, and I wanted to know who it was. Wouldn’t you have done the exact same thing, Draco?”

“I would have screamed like someone was using *Avada Kedavra* on me, that’s what I would have done,” said Draco.

Harry shook his head and sipped the porridge again. “Yes,” he said. “We’re two very different people, Draco.”

“Yes,” Draco echoed, sitting back in his chair and giving Harry a dark look. “I’m sensible, and you’re stupid.”

Harry chuckled, which only made Draco scowl harder. “Who won the Quidditch match?” he asked, knowing it would have taken place the first Saturday that he was unconscious.

Draco’s stare this time was long and slow. “We did, Harry,” he said, as if talking to a first-year. “Honestly. It was *Hufflepuff*. The only one who’s worth anything on that team is Diggory, and he wasn’t flying that well. We took the Snitch after only an hour, and we’ve got the Quidditch Cup unless Gryffindor or Ravenclaw manages to pull six hundred points out of their arses on the next game.” He nodded, looking satisfied with himself.

“Well, good,” said Harry. “And classes?”

Draco shrugged. “Were the same as ever. Professor Lupin is moving us on to vampires next.” The glee in his voice made Harry suspect that would probably be Draco’s favorite lesson. “Snape is having us brew a potion you’ll have no trouble with, of course, and Longbottom made his cauldron explode.” He paused, his brow wrinkling. “And Loony—“

“Luna, Draco—“

“—came and left this for you.” Draco held up a necklace thick with swan feathers and blades of grass. “She should something about it protecting you against the Wrackspurt invasion you’re suffering.” It was obvious that Draco was trying hard to keep from snickering. Harry ignored him. Luna’s gift was heartfelt, and he always wore the necklaces for at least a short time, until the string unraveled or too many of the objects fell off and got lost. He put it around his neck now, pleased to note that his hands didn’t shake.

“I’ll have to tell her thanks,” he muttered, and then looked back at Draco. “Has Dumbledore decided what to do about my brother’s lessons yet? Or has he made any progress in finding out who put those spiders in our room?”

“No to both.” Draco could manage a snort that would make a thestral proud when he wanted to, Harry thought. “Idiot. If he would just use a few mind-reading spells, the way you know he could, then he would probably have the answers to both questions in no time at all.”

“He’s not going to do that, Draco,” Harry said, and finished the porridge. Draco put the tray back on the table for him without prompting.

“Why not?” Draco demanded, as he fluffed Harry’s pillow without being asked, either. Harry restrained a comment about him being Madam Pomfrey in training that would probably get him punched. “He compels people all the time. Why is this different?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know, but he must have his reasons for not doing it.” He closed his eyes. Sleep was close, and sounded more and more tempting the more he thought about it.

“You just forgive everyone too easily, Harry,” Draco muttered, but he sounded affectionate rather than despairing. Harry was sure he felt a soft touch to his scar just before sleep claimed him.

Harry leaned against the wall of the first floor corridor and let out a shaky breath. After he'd eaten lunch in the hospital wing and proven he could walk around the room without breaking stride, Madam Pomfrey had reluctantly agreed to let him go back to the Slytherin common room. She'd offered to escort him, or to call one of the Slytherins up to escort him, but Harry had politely refused both. He had to make it on his own, or he would have to doubt how much he had recovered.

Maybe this wasn't a good idea after all, he thought, as the world danced around him. He closed his eyes and gave his head a good shake, in hopes that would cure it.

“Harry.”

Harry opened his eyes swiftly. He hadn't heard that voice in weeks, at least addressing him. He straightened as much as he could and pulled his magic around him in wary defense. It answered at once. Weak though he might be in body, it was strong, and it had been bored, Harry suspected, during the week in which he hadn't used it. Now it snarled, low and eager, in his head.

Sirius stepped out of the shadows and stood looking him over, smiling faintly.

Harry blinked. He hadn't paid that much attention to Sirius in a long time, and was astonished to see how much better he looked. The dark shadows beneath his eyes were gone, and he had a touch of color to his cheeks that hadn't been there before. His hair was trimmed from the messy shoulder-length tangle it had been. He also waited without strain for Harry to acknowledge him, where before he would have been jittery and might, Harry thought, have used compulsion.

“Sirius,” he said finally. It was as much as he wanted to give, but it seemed to be enough for his godfather, who nodded and let his smile widen.

“Listen, Harry,” he said. “I wanted to apologize for being a right git earlier in the year.”

Harry stared at him, and lost his voice. When he found it again, it was to say, “You call trying to kill me, and attacking Snape, and pouring your brand of poison into Connor's ears, just *being a right git*?”

“I could use a stronger term, but I didn't know if you would want to hear language like that from your dear old godfather,” said Sirius. His smile turned self-deprecating. “I fully expect you not to forgive me. You forgive almost everyone, I know, but I also know I crossed the line.” He shrugged. “Just wanted you to hear the apology and decide if you wanted to accept it or not. I'll be talking to Connor, just as soon as Dumbledore lets me have contact with him—” he rolled his eyes to show that he could take and appreciated the joke “—and telling him to apologize, too. It's painful that this has gone on as long as it has.” He nodded to Harry and turned, as if he would walk back up the corridor.

“Wait!” Harry called.

Sirius turned and raised his eyebrows, waiting.

“What made you decide to apologize?” Harry demanded, taking a step away from the wall. Perhaps shock was giving him strength, but this time he didn't think he would collapse. And it felt weak to be leaning on the stones, and the last thing he wanted to do was show weakness to Sirius. “This is—out of the air. A bolt of lightning.” Sirius's lips twitched, and his eyes went to Harry's scar, but he didn't say anything. Harry pressed forward. “Why now, and not before?”

Sirius blinked and drew out the golden ornament that hung around his neck. Harry stared hard at it. It was round, studded with rubies and small golden chains leading back to the main one that looped around Sirius's neck. Harry could sense the song of powerful magic around it. Of course, Dumbledore had made it for Sirius, and only Dumbledore in Hogwarts had magic that powerful.

“This,” said Sirius fondly, regarding the thing as he might a Christmas gift. “This finally tamed my thoughts, and gave me the help I should have asked for long since.” He looked up and winked at Harry. “But your poor old godfather was too stubborn, and thought he could handle everything on his own. It's brought me back slowly. First I could control my behavior, then I could stop feeling the urges to do things like attack you or hex Snape, and then I could control my words. And now I've seen

that I was always in the wrong.” He shrugged when Harry’s stare sharpened. “Like I said, I don’t expect you to forgive me. But the option is there.” He turned as if he would amble off.

“Wait!” Harry said again, and again Sirius turned around and waited patiently. Harry had to think of what question he wanted to ask. His mind was buzzing with confusion, and insistence that this reconciliation couldn’t be true, that it was too easy. “How does it work?” was the only question he could ask without sounding rude.

“Order,” said Sirius happily. “It traps my chaotic thoughts when they would get out of control, and brings them back into patterns that do what I tell them to. I have to think of the consequences, which is something that I almost never did before. That means that I can’t really play jokes, anymore.” He pulled a wry face. “But I would much rather be sane than otherwise.”

Harry nodded. He supposed something like that would work, though since he had never known just how deranged Sirius was, he had never been sure how powerful a corrective Dumbledore would need to give. “And you really want to continue being my godfather?” he asked.

Sirius blinked slowly. “That isn’t something I would willingly give up, Harry,” he said, a hint of reproof entering his voice for the first time. “I said I would be your godfather the day you boys were born, and I always will be. Regretfully, as long as you won’t forgive me. Happily, if you do.”

Harry stared again. He wanted to let himself accept this, truly he did, but he remembered how Sirius had apologized and then changed his mind before. There was just too much chance that the same thing would happen again.

“It’ll have to be regretfully, for right now,” he said.

Sirius nodded. “I expected no less.” He shrugged. “But let me know if you ever want to talk again, Harry.” He walked away this time, and Harry let him go, with dignity. He did favor his left side slightly, Harry thought, but that could be the result of a broom injury while he helped referee the latest Quidditch match. Harry had been unconscious, and hadn’t asked Draco about that—not that Draco would have considered something like that worth reporting.

I’m missing an awful lot, with Sirius, Harry thought, and for the first time in months, he regretted it.

He turned and pursued his course back to the dungeons, in a more sober and thoughtful frame of mind than he had been since awakening.

“He said there was no way that we could keep him out of our heads as long as we still bore our connections to Voldemort,” said Harry, eyeing the thick potion Snape was brewing. It didn’t look like any he’d seen before. It was currently the color of dew, but it kept violently changing color, and had been seventeen different ones in the last seventeen minutes. Even now, as Snape scattered powdered newt eyes into it, it burped and changed into a purple mass.

“I don’t care,” Snape snapped. “He must have been lying, and if he was not, there are potions that will counteract any intrusion. We have worked too long and too hard on your mind, on your Occlumency shields and your other defenses. I will not see you vulnerable that way.”

Harry looked over and rolled his eyes at Draco, who stood on the other side of the room, against the wall. Draco didn’t roll his eyes back. He was watching Snape as though he would memorize all the steps of this insanely complicated potion, and he had an intent frown on his face.

Harry frowned in turn, and sat back on the chair they’d provided for him when his legs began to shake, kicking at the rungs. Draco seemed to think that Snape’s potion would work, and that the voice, whoever it had been, needed to be kept out of his head. Harry supposed he could see that. His pain, and then his being unconscious for a week, must have been terrifying for them.

He couldn’t help but feel cautiously hopeful. He hadn’t had any more pain through his scar since that initial outburst, and the voice had not returned. The reconciliation with Sirius was odd and unexpected and not something he was going to fully trust, but it had the *potential* to turn out well. This was the first day he had been awake, and he could still move around with short rests, and he seemed to have no permanent side effects from the pain. He also had less homework to make up than he might have, since he was far enough ahead in most of his classes to know the material for the third year by heart. He could rest until Monday, if he wanted to.

If he had seen Connor, or had some assurance that his brother had visited him while he was in the hospital wing, then his life would have been as close to content as it ever came.

Harry closed his eyes and tried, again, to work out what the best solution to that problem would be. Perhaps he should simply tell Connor that Sirius had approached him and offered to reconcile? That might shock his brother into dropping the act, and telling Harry why he had been so intent on trying to protect Sirius. Harry had no doubt but that his godfather was the heart of the matter. Lily might have been, originally, but Lily was outside the school, and Connor seemed to have accepted that her magic was not coming back no matter what Harry might do or say. Sirius was nearby, and vulnerable to a powerful wizard like Harry, should Harry decide that he wanted to hurt him.

What would make him certain beyond a doubt that I was going to hurt Sirius, when we haven't even talked to each other in months? And he did seem certain. What would make him think—

Harry's eyes flared open, and his breathing quickened. *The prophecy. The prophecy he heard. Fuck, that must be it. I have to find Connor and tell him about Sirius trying to reconcile, then. Maybe that will persuade him to tell me what the prophecy said, and we can try to avoid it together. Or figure it out. It wouldn't surprise me to know that he's interpreted it wrongly.*

Harry tried to hop up from the chair in his restlessness, and found he couldn't; his legs had gone to sleep. As he shook them and tried to get the tingles out, Draco strolled across the room to him, just incidentally getting between Harry and the door.

"And where do you think you're going?" he all but chirped.

"To see Connor," said Harry, impatiently wishing that his left foot was not waking up with such sharp pins and needles. "I just figured something out about why he didn't want me to hurt Sirius. It's important."

"You aren't," Draco corrected, his voice still chirpy. "You aren't going anywhere alone, and you aren't going anywhere near your brother until you're fully recovered."

"That's true," said Snape, without looking away from his potion. It was now the color of new grass, Harry saw, and smelled like nasty cheese. The color changed again as Snape added crushed rose petals, and at least the smell was more pleasant now.

"You don't understand," Harry insisted. "Connor heard a prophecy in February. I think the prophecy said—or he imagined it said—something about me hurting Sirius. That's why he's been resisting me so hard. I have to go and explain to him that I don't intend to hurt Sirius, but I need to know the prophecy, so that we can work on it together."

"You are not going near anyone but other Slytherins this weekend." Draco's eyes were flinty. He held up a hand when Harry opened his mouth to object. "*No, Harry. You could have fucking died. Yes, again, I know, but that doesn't make it any less important. You had a fucking voice in your head, and you can't be trusted not to risk your health on the whim of the moment. You are staying right here until Professor Snape finishes his potion and tests it.*"

"But why?" Harry demanded. He knew it was a stupid question, knew Draco must have been more worried than he let on all along, but this was so *important*, more important than silly House prejudices or their odd idea that his twin might hurt him. Harry could pin Connor to the wall again if he had to.

Draco's face flushed, and he leaned nearer Harry. "Because I refuse to let you die," he said. "*Sit. Down.*"

Harry sighed and sagged back into the chair. He couldn't outrun Mrs. Norris at the moment, and he supposed that taking Draco with him when he talked to Connor wouldn't make much of a difference—

Wait. Yes, it would. All right, I'll put Draco under a Silencio before we start the actual conversation.

Harry relaxed. Draco eyed him suspiciously, and then turned and looked at Snape. "Is the potion almost done, sir? I think that we should feed it to Harry before he comes up with some other insane plan."

"Almost," said Snape, and the potion turned clear again. Snape studied it with his head on one side, his fingers tapping out a rhythm on the edge of the cauldron. Harry *burned* to say something about that, since it was one of the things that made Snape take House points from Gryffindor in class, but he kept silent. This was not the kind of atmosphere into which he wanted to throw that remark.

Into that silence came the flutter of wings. Harry looked up in surprise as an owl flew through the slightly open door of Snape's office—the potion had had to send its fumes somewhere—and over to him. It was a barn owl, one of the ordinary

school birds, and it took off again the moment Harry removed the parchment from its leg. Harry supposed it had already been fed or paid.

He unfolded the parchment, and frowned. It was blank, without the slightest trace of a note to make this worth whoever had paid the owl. Was it a joke, perhaps? Something like the Marauder's Map, where he had to speak a specific phrase to get it to work?

It would be just like the twins to send me a blank piece of paper that explodes in my face, he thought then, and cautiously held it away from him.

Words began appearing on it in the next moment, in a flowing, looping hand that he didn't recognize.

Hello, Potter.

Now comes the night, and out of this darkness, there will be no morn.

Harry stared. This *had* to be a joke, and perhaps he was supposed to recognize the last words as some quote from a song or a poem, but he didn't. Who would be writing to him like this?

"Who are you?" he asked aloud, and then realized that was stupid. If this parchment functioned like the ones he and Connor had used, then he had to write back, not speak.

Snape looked up sharply. He didn't appear to have noticed the owl's arrival. "Is the voice in your head again?" he asked.

Yes, said a smug tone from the back of Harry's mind.

Harry shook his head, because he couldn't have Snape bothering about that right now. "Someone's writing to me through a piece of parchment," he said. "Do you have a quill?"

Draco raced to retrieve him one, and stood behind him, one hand resting lightly on his shoulder, as Harry braced the letter on the table to write back. *Who are you? Do I know you?*

The answer appeared almost at once. Harry could hear the laughter. *Oh, yes. In the past few months, you have come to know me very well.*

Harry narrowed his eyes. *Who are you?* He underlined the middle word for emphasis.

Come, Harry, you are not able to figure it out? Oh, I am so disappointed in you. Of course, I suppose that you could have been a bit too trusting. Trusting Slytherins and Headmasters and former Death Eaters...and rats.

Harry's breath rushed out of him. "Peter?"

Very good, the answer appeared at once. *Oh, yes, I have eyes on you, Harry, though I am not there with you. We're going to play a little game now, since everything is ready at last. See if you can figure out the moves before I make them. Or just after I make them, which is the more usual course. Let's have some fun.*

In the next instant, Snape screamed.

Harry's head jerked up, and he saw his guardian sagging to the dungeon floor, his right hand tearing at his left arm. Draco shouted and bowled over to him, helping him tear. In moments, the sleeve was pulled back, and Harry could see the ugly flare of the Dark Mark. Just seeing it made his scar burn, and he closed his eyes and fought back pain and nausea and the thick bile of betrayal.

"What do you *want*?" Harry shouted, easing himself off the chair. Snape's screams were inhuman. Harry reached out towards him with magic, but found nothing that he could affect. The pain was coming from inside Snape, through the connection that he had forged long ago and of his own free will with Voldemort. Harry could practically see the conduit, coiled like a shimmering serpent atop the dark one, but he couldn't touch it.

He glanced back at the parchment even as the reply to his question formed.

To play. You have cost my Lord enough time in the past. A swift death is out of the question. To make you suffer, to make

those whom you love suffer...yes, I think that will do well enough.

How is your brother, Harry?

Harry swore under his breath and reached for his pocket. Of course, this was the one day that he hadn't brought any of his maps with him, and he couldn't see where Connor or Peter was in Hogwarts. And Snape's screams were driving nails through his head, pushing him closer and closer to the edge over which panic would bear him.

He had to do *something* about that.

Harry focused all his will on Snape, and whispered, "*Consopio.*"

The screams stopped as Snape fell asleep. He would have fallen, too, but Draco caught and gently laid him down. Harry stood amid the sounds of his own panting for a moment, then turned back towards the parchment.

That was clever, scrawled the mocking message. *Very clever. You can send someone to sleep when he suffers pain, yes. But it won't be as easy next time.*

I will give you the answers that you've wanted, Harry Potter. But first, I think you should go to the second floor. There's a locked door there that I want you to open, one that leads to an office you haven't entered all year.

Harry closed his eyes. He knew what the message must be talking about. The door to Sirius's office.

He snatched up the parchment and walked towards the door. Draco joined him without comment, and caught Harry when he wobbled. His eyes dared Harry to say anything about that, anything at all, to send him away or tell him to stop. But Harry just nodded to him.

"We've got a game to play," he said, and then turned and cast a ward over Snape's office as they left it, to hold Snape safe against any harm that might come to him. He barely thought about it as he created it, though he did make sure to close any small holes a rat might have crawled through. His shock and pain had given way to something else, something that was familiar and crawling out of the darkest parts of him.

As he hurried towards the second floor, Draco supporting him where necessary, ice raced along the walls beside him and behind him and ahead.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight: A Blow-Up Between Brothers

Harry waited for a moment while what appeared to be most of the Ravenclaw Quidditch team went by, chattering about how they would beat Gryffindor in their match in a few weeks. He leaned partially against the wall and partially against Draco, though he drew away from the latter the moment the team was by. Draco gave him a sharp look.

"I don't want to look as though I'm about to fall over," Harry explained, before turning and concentrating on the door to Sirius's office.

"But you *are*."

Harry ignored that. He certainly was *not*, and if he'd felt a brief moment of surging dizziness and nausea, that didn't matter, did it? Peter was certainly not about to wait for him to catch his breath.

He glanced at the parchment, which had sprouted new letters. *I can watch you, you know, Harry. And that was not an impressive display. How are you ever going to face my spells, when I finally tell you where I am?*

"Bastard," Harry muttered.

That insult long ago lost the power to sting me, I assure you. Harry had never seen Peter's face twisted into an evil smirk, but he found it surprisingly easy to imagine. *Now, open the door. I want you to understand the full history of my brilliant plan, and you can't, not unless you see what lies in Sirius's office.*

Harry tried a simple *Alohomora* first, and wasn't surprised when it didn't work. No professor would leave his or her door

bound with magic that all the students could counter. He considered a spell like *Reducto*, but that would draw attention, and he desperately didn't want anyone else involved in this little game. He knew that Peter would not hesitate to hurt anyone else.

That's going to be a problem, in a short time, Harry thought, glancing sideways at Draco.

"I don't suppose you have the counterspells?" he snarled at the parchment.

Why, Harry, I thought you would never ask, the parchment replied at once. *The password is Freedom of the mind*. The last word was scrawled with a distinctive flourish.

Harry paused for a moment, wondering what that password said about Sirius, and then leaned close to the door and whispered it.

The door softly came open under his hands. Harry pushed it inwards and stepped into Sirius's office, remembering what it had looked like the last time he had been here. Peter wasn't *quite* right in saying that he hadn't been in Sirius's office all school year, since he and Snape had chased Remus here when he wanted to bite Sirius, but that had been only a few days after the New Year, and perhaps the voice was being very literal.

Then, the office had been neat and cozy and warm, with a Gryffindor Quidditch banner hung on every wall.

Now, it was dim, the only light a dying fire, and it looked like a cross between a battlefield and a half-destroyed treasure vault.

Harry stared at the cages stirring with spiders of the kind that had attacked him in the Slytherin bedroom. Another one caught his eye, and he saw the swimming motion of the same kind of snake that had attacked Draco. He closed his eyes.

"No," he whispered. "I don't understand. How?"

Draco caught him from behind and leaned him against the table, on which rested other artifacts, weapons of some kind, radiating powerful magic. Harry opened his eyes to read the parchment's answer.

Oh, Harry, I am watching you, and the expression on your face is everything I hoped for. But you should have guessed before this, Harry. Who but a powerful Dark wizarding family would have access to the kind of artifacts that came after you, the kind of artifact used to watch Lucius Malfoy and determine his true intentions from his blood? And, of course, Sirius is still heir to that family, even though he should not have been. Dumbledore saw to that. He could not bear that the Second War might come and they wouldn't have access to the kind of weapons that the Blacks possessed.

Harry felt a gust of anger grip him, and rattled the parchment. "How do I know you're Peter? Why shouldn't you be Sirius?"

Because you would know Sirius's handwriting, wouldn't you? came the swift answer. And this is not Sirius's handwriting.

Harry controlled his anger as best he could. Currently, his magic was gripping the edges of the parchment, suggesting it could rip it, and he didn't dare do that. "So why isn't Sirius helping you anymore, then?"

He grew too sane for us to use anymore, the parchment reported. By now, it had covered both sides, and Harry wondered what would happen next. What happened was its flipping itself over, the lines it had already written vanishing, and the new message beginning at the top of the front again. *When he was still insane, struggling under the influence of the curse that the Dark Lord used to bind his mind to his brother's, then he was very useful. A trusted member of the Order of the Phoenix, who would occasionally break and give us information when the pain became too much for him, and who didn't dare tell anyone else what he was suffering because of his stupid pride, who thought he had to fight alone? Oh, yes, very useful.* The writing paused for a moment. Harry tried to force away the image of Peter waiting with a quill in his hand and a manic grin on his face. *Tell me, Harry, who do you think it was that dropped the anti-Apparition wards in your first year and gave the Lestranges access to the Quidditch Pitch?*

Harry lost his breath yet again, and closed his eyes. He heard Draco make an unexpectedly deep and dangerous sound of outrage. Harry couldn't confront him about it, though. His mind was on the first Quidditch game he had ever played opposite Connor. Their parents, Sirius, and Remus had come. Sirius's face had been haggard, his eyes drowning above the dark circles of nightmares.

For at least two years, then, Sirius had been struggling madly against that curse, his sanity wavering whenever he tried, bouncing back and forth between the madness that had led him to attack Snape this autumn and turn against Harry in second

year, and the calmness that made him the godfather who had gifted Harry with the armband that would enhance a Parselmouth's magic. And he had said nothing. The parchment called it "stupid pride," but now that Harry knew about Peter, he could well imagine what else Sirius had been thinking. Someone had already been sacrificed for him. Sirius hadn't been indifferent after all. Guilt had probably been eating him alive, and when he found out that the sacrifice wasn't enough to free him from Voldemort's curse, he would have determined to fight the rest of the battle alone.

Oh, Sirius, you and your stupid hero complex, Harry thought, and opened his eyes to read on.

Dumbledore's ornament made him too sane, the parchment wrote, Peter wrote, the words rippling with what Harry imagined was probably disgust. *So we did, after all, have to replace him with a more satisfactory servant. And now I am here, and the attempt to resurrect the Dark Lord is not going to fail after all.*

Harry shook his head slowly. "I thought you went to Azkaban for love of your friends, Peter, not for love of Voldemort."

Draco leaned heavily on his shoulder, supporting him or being supported, as the answer appeared. *I lied. And now he is almost returned, Harry. A few more steps remain, a few more movements on the game board. First, of course, you might want to ask yourself where Sirius is right now.*

Harry stiffened, and felt his lungs refuse to work. Draco pounded him on the back until they did again. Harry winced, and whooped out the breath, and snapped aloud, "Walking around the castle, I would assume."

Wrong. The ritual to bring back the Dark Lord requires certain...sacrifices. And who better to be one of them than a man for whom so much has already been sacrificed, and who is fated to die anyway, if one believes the second prophecy?

"How do you know about that?" Harry demanded. He felt horribly helpless, writhing between the urge to rush out and find Sirius right now, and the temptation to keep reading on, so that he wouldn't cause Sirius immediate death or debilitating injury.

I know pain, Peter said. *And Sirius has never been good at resisting it. He bore that curse in his head for twelve years, Harry, did you know that? It never broke, though he told everyone else it did, in the hopes of easing his own conscience over my supposed sacrifice.. He relived Regulus's torture each and every time he slept, and the curse whispered and urged him to act in my lord's voice. Sometimes he broke. Often he didn't.*

Harry shivered. He thought he knew now why he had dreamed so often of two dark figures in torment, and why those dreams had ceased after his nightmare of the rat and the dog. That had been around the time that Dumbledore's ornament had finally taken hold of Sirius and cured him, to hear the Headmaster tell it. The snapping teeth of the small creature had been the ornament and not Peter after all, Harry thought. His mind had been free at last, with no more reliving of pain...

And now his body was not.

The point is, the writing continued, when he could finally direct his eyes back to it, *I think you should know the second prophecy before you come and visit with me and Sirius. And I'm not going to write it down for you. That would be too easy. Find a way to learn it, Harry, and then come to me. And be assured, I shall know if you do not. I have eyes upon you.*

Harry pulled himself sharply out of the tumbling disgust and rage that wanted to seize him. He clenched his hands in front of him. "How do you want me to find out the second prophecy without alerting everyone to what you're doing?" he demanded.

You're an intelligent boy. I'm sure you'll figure out a way.

Harry nodded, once. "Draco," he said, "do you know where Connor is right now?"

Draco's eyes were almost black. Harry blinked so hard at that that he nearly missed Draco's words. "If you think I'm going to let you confront your brother in this state, you're mad."

"Draco," Harry whispered, "we *have* to."

Draco shook his head. "The *proper* thing to do is turn this over to McGonagall right away, if you trust her," he said.

That wouldn't be smart, the parchment pointed out helpfully. *I can hear every word you see, mark every expression on your faces.*

Harry bowed his head. He couldn't risk it, not when Peter apparently had Sirius and was going to hurt him. If he understood Peter's temperament right, he was interested in this game right now, and would play until Harry managed to find him. But let someone else step in, and everything was about to go badly wrong. Peter hadn't vetoed the suggestion of Connor, so Harry guessed that he didn't mind if his brother knew.

"I'm going with you, at least," Draco said.

Harry gave the parchment a wary glance, but received only the message *Such loyal friends you have, Harry. Even now, Sirius is struggling against me, as though he could get out from under the control I have over him. Stubborn son of a bitch.* Once again, Harry thought he could hear the laughter.

Harry nodded. "That's fine for now. Come on." He turned and limped three steps to the door of Sirius's office.

"Wait!"

Harry glanced over his shoulder. Draco was picking up a spider from the table, and Harry winced. "It's going to bite you," he whispered.

"It is not." Draco shook the spider back and forth, and showed its unmoving legs. "I don't think anyone but their master can really control them, Harry. And since Sirius Black isn't in a position to control them right now, they aren't going to respond. But I do want us to have proof of what happened, in case someone is inclined to question this ridiculous story. I would be." He slid the spider into his pocket.

Harry paused abruptly, a spasm of doubt going through him. *If only their master can control the spiders, then why did several of them attack me after Sirius supposedly gained his sanity?*

And then there had been the sharp *crack* of a house elf's Apparition in the hallway that day...

Harry restrained himself from glancing wildly around the room, though he thought he knew how they were being watched now. The Blacks would have had access to a house elf along with all these malicious Dark treasures, though, and a Black house elf could have come and gone freely from Hogwarts in a way that a Hogwarts house elf could not have. He had a slight, fragile advantage, or two if one counted his perception of the flaw in Peter's story—whatever it meant. It was still true that he did not recognize the handwriting on the parchment, and he would have known Sirius's.

"If you must, Draco," he said aloud. "Come on. Let's go find Connor."

Good idea, the parchment said.

Harry smoothed his face into desperation for the sake of the house elf's eyes, not that it was hard, and led the way out the door.

Harry swore and banged his trunk shut. Draco glanced up, startled, from where he was studying the spider critically. He'd placed it on his bed and cast several spells at it, none of which raised a response.

"What's the matter?"

"My maps of the school and the grounds are gone," Harry muttered in disgust. "I can't use them to tell where Connor is."

He noticed the parchment trembling in the way that meant new letters were appearing on it, and snatched it up, glaring balefully at it.

I could have told you that, if you asked, Peter was writing. Did you think I would have left you with a weapon that would let you know where we are before I am ready? Easy enough for a rat to steal in and remove them.

"Great, but now I have no idea where my brother is," Harry snapped aloud. Blaise, Vince, and Greg were out in the sunshine, which was the only reason he dared speak like this.

Find him, the parchment suggested, without much compassion.

Harry drew breath to reply, but someone banged on the bedroom door just then. Draco tossed a fold of his sheets over the spider, and moved over to open it, giving Harry a look that Harry correctly interpreted as *Stay still and behind me*.

Harry didn't think he had the strength to argue. His head and gut were both blazing and slowly spinning with tension and exhaustion. He did call up his magic, but let it drop again when he saw it was only Marcus Flint at the door, his face wrinkled into an expression of disgust.

"Your brother's at the door of the common room, Potter," he said. "Something about your godfather."

Harry nodded back, grateful for the information, and stepped forward. Draco was beside him in an instant, one hand resting on his shoulder for support and to control how fast he went. Harry gritted his teeth and told himself that he was grateful, really he was, to have such a good friend. That he wanted to kill Draco right now was more a reflection of his own tense mood than anything else, he thought.

But he still can't come with me to wherever Peter and Sirius are.

He and Draco were going to have to talk about that, probably in a few minutes, or possibly a few hours, whenever Peter made up his mind to end the game. Harry suspected it was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

They came to the door of the common room, and Harry knew from Connor's desperate, tearful eyes that his brother already suspected something was wrong.

"Where is he?" Connor demanded, one hand in his pocket. Harry suspected he held his wand, though he hadn't drawn it yet. "I've looked for him everywhere, Harry. What happened?"

"I need to know the second prophecy, Connor," said Harry, checking to make sure that the common room door had slid shut behind them and that no one was coming down the corridor. "I know you know it, and I know it has something to do with Sirius, and I know that—"

"And you kidnapped Sirius so that I would tell it to you?" Connor backed away from him, eyes so wide that he seemed to be drowning his face in hazel. "Are you *insane*?"

"No, no, not that!" said Harry, and reached for the parchment—only to realize he'd left it on his bed. He cursed and glanced at Draco. "Draco, will you go and get the parchment, please?"

"And leave you alone here?" Draco's voice sounded like Narcissa's now, and he held his wand out, though not quite pointed fully at Connor. "No, Harry. Never. Since you have no self-preservation instinct, I'm just going to have to be that instinct for both of us. And I'm not leaving you with your brother."

Harry counted to ten in his head, in Mermish. "We do not have *time*," he said. "Please, Draco, we have to—"

"Come to that, Harry," said Draco, in a cheerful voice that didn't at all give Harry warning of what he said next, "your godfather can go fuck himself, and your brother can go fuck himself, and everyone else who needs you to rescue them and think for them can go fuck themselves. I'm protecting you. Your life matters more to me than any of theirs."

"But it's not that way to me," said Harry.

"I know," said Draco. "That means that I'm just taking on a role that you would have yourself, if you'd been raised by someone sane."

"Don't talk about our mother that way!" Connor yelled, and this time he did pull his wand.

"We really don't have time for that," Harry muttered. "Connor, please. I didn't take Sirius, but he is in danger, and I believe that he's probably going to lose his life unless I know the second prophecy. It's important. Please? I have to know it, and I know that you know it."

Connor shook his head, his face turned pale again. "It says that you're g-going to kill him," he stammered. "But prophecies can be shifted, if you try hard enough. They can *shift*. If I can make it mean something else, if it does mean something else, then Sirius isn't going to die." His eyes fixed on Harry's face with a resolve that Harry found familiar. It came from their last lesson together, when Connor had started fighting back against him with wandless magic. And he was close to the edge of panic now, his magic plunging around him like a wild horse. "I'm certainly not going to tell you how the prophecy says

you're going to kill him," he whispered.

"The exact wording *matters*," Harry said. "And I need that prophecy, Connor. Please. Give it to me."

"You could rip it out of his mind with Legilimency," Draco whispered into his ear. "Damn it, Harry, *do it*."

"That won't make me any better than he is," Harry snarled back, and hated the moment of temptation that he felt. He tried to smile soothingly at his brother, though he suspected it was impossible under the circumstances and it came out as a twisted grimace instead. "Please. I'll swear by whatever you like, by Merlin or magic or by an Unbreakable Vow, that I'm not going to kill Sirius."

"The prophecy says that you are," Connor whispered. "And if I told you, then I would be making it come true. There's so little room to turn it aside, now. We're getting into the last moments."

"Does it say something about May?" Harry kept his own voice a whisper, too, wondering if he could lure the prophecy out of Connor by playing into his own half-conscious rambling. It seemed to work. Connor's eyes turned to him, but they weren't piercing and panicked. They were dreamy, as though Harry were a figure he was seeing in his own mind.

"Yes," Connor breathed. "Do you *swear* that you haven't kidnapped him, Harry? Do you swear that you haven't hurt him?"

Harry nodded. "I promise you. In the name of Merlin."

Connor nodded back. "Then I think I know where he is," he said, voice just barely above a mutter. "The last safe place, he told me it was." He blinked, and the mask of sleep or unconsciousness was gone from his eyes, replaced with the same grim determination Harry had been trying to inspire for the cause of Connor becoming a leader. "And I won't let you hurt him."

"I said that I wasn't—"

Connor narrowed his eyes, and Harry recognized the surge of magic, the cool wind in his thoughts, that meant he was about to start using compulsion. With an effort, he kept his voice even. "That doesn't work on me, Connor, remember?"

"There are other kinds than the kind I used on you, Harry," said Connor, voice detached. "Reinforcing someone's deepest desires is the simplest one. And right now, I have the perfect candidate for that."

Harry knew what would happen then, but knowing what would happen wasn't the same thing as being able to prevent it. Connor's gaze moved past him and fixed on Draco, and the next moment Draco grabbed Harry's arms and held them firmly together behind his back.

"I'm *not* letting you go into danger," he murmured fiercely into Harry's ear.

Connor nodded to Harry. "He really wants to protect you," he said. "Just the way that I really want to protect Sirius. I'll get him off Hogwarts grounds, help him flee to a place where he'll be safe from you and the prophecy will have to mean something else, and then come back and face the consequences of this. Whatever they are." He gave a fleeting, fragile grin, and then turned and ran up the dungeon corridor as if there were Grimms after him.

That left Harry with a struggling Draco, who wanted to protect him by any means necessary. Harry tried to throw off the physical grip, but the attack of pain more than a week ago, and then the week in bed, had left him desperately weak. It was easy for Draco to pin him against the wall.

"I'm not letting you go into danger," Draco repeated, looking more stubborn than ever, his eyes still dark. "I'm going to put you to sleep, and then we're going to wait for Snape to wake up. He'll be able to talk sense into you. You know that he wouldn't want you going into danger, either, wouldn't want you risking your life for that mutt of a godfather."

Harry knew he had to do something about Draco before that happened. The moment Snape was awake and through the ward that Harry had put around him, then he could give up any thought of going after Sirius. Draco was right; Snape wouldn't think Sirius's life worth the potential loss of Harry's.

Harry began to call on his magic, rationing it carefully. If he simply attacked, without finesse but with a great pulse of power, then he would hurt Draco. This had to be done with the fine control he had worked on with Snape.

"*Consopio*."

Harry felt the sleep spell coming at him, and knew he could bounce it—but that would mean being prepared for an attack in the next instant. He took a deep breath and unleashed a bit, just a tiny bit, of his ability to eat magic.

It came to life around him, hissing like a hungry snake, and devoured Draco's spell. Harry let his body sag as if it had hit him, though, and Draco scooped him up, cradling him in his arms. He murmured the password, and carried Harry through the common room and towards their bedroom the moment the door opened. Harry waited, tense as he could be when he was letting his muscles lap over Draco's arms like pudding, but Draco didn't call on anyone to help. He appeared to believe that protecting Harry meant protecting Harry by himself.

Accordingly, once they were in the bedroom, Harry gathered his magic up and used it to pour strength into his limbs, the way he had when he was holding Fenrir Greyback back from biting him. He rolled out of Draco's grip and managed to stand, wobbling, beside his bed. The parchment was there, but when Harry shot a glance at it, he didn't see any new writing on it. He supposed Peter, or whoever was really managing to control the Black spiders and the Blacks' house elf, was content merely to watch and see how this would play out.

Draco smiled at him, a smile full of appreciation. "I should have known that such a simple spell wouldn't take you down," he murmured. "There's still the chance to be sane about this, Harry. You can give me your word that you won't try to escape, and we can go and wake Snape up together. You know that he can help you figure out some plan to keep you safe and perhaps even rescue your godfather."

Harry coughed. His stomach, for a moment, felt as though it were about to empty itself out his throat whether or not he wanted it to, but he held it down. The next moment, he heard the voice murmur in the back of his head. *You're not going to be sick. It's not that kind of pain.*

Harry felt the voice settle, watchful, in his thoughts. He ignored it for the moment, though. He didn't know how much help it would be, and perhaps it was even content to stay neutral. It certainly hadn't done anything for him so far.

I am trying to. The voice sounded injured.

Draco was already aiming his wand again. "*Petrificus Totalus*," he said clearly, and the spell's light came for Harry.

The snake wound around his shoulders ate it without being asked, and the magic around Harry began to purr. Harry felt a bit stronger. He pushed away the temptation to eat more. This was still Dark magic, and he was using it at all only because he couldn't risk Draco disabling him. He had to think of something soon, something that would not hurt Draco but would convince him to stay here.

He laughed, in the next instant. He really should have thought of this before. Draco wasn't doing this of his own free will. Harry could return his free will to him.

He locked up the magic-eating ability again, caught Draco's eyes, and whispered, "*Legilimens*."

He was past the barriers in a moment; Harry wondered if that was because of the strength of his magic, called and dancing around him, or because Draco had little true interest in keeping Harry out of his thoughts. Then he had no time to wonder, swept away by what was before him.

Draco's mind was a house, created in the same silver-gray shade that most of Malfoy Manor was, shading from deep at the bottom to pale at the top, like a rising wave. Harry stood in a wide entrance hall with a spiral staircase in front of him, each tread a different color. Corridors led in different directions, locked doors standing firmly in them, and winds blew past Harry's head, carrying delicate glass bubbles that swirled with more colors still.

Across one of the corridors ran a thick rope, obstructing passage down it and bouncing back the bubbles when they tried to drift over it. Harry strode towards it and laid his hand on it, certain he could unbind Connor's compulsion in a moment and return Draco's mind to where it needed to be.

The rope buzzed and hummed and sang when Harry touched it, and affection poured through him like a tidal wave.

Harry snatched his hand back and stared at the rope. It was an intruder in Draco's mind. It shouldn't work so well as a conduit for his emotions.

Perhaps he had done something wrong. He touched the rope at a different place this time, and made sure to concentrate on his

image of Draco free, so that he wouldn't feed the compulsion.

Once more, the affection pounced on him and rolled over him, inundating Harry with ripples of protectiveness and possessiveness and friendship.

Harry stumbled, but managed to retain his grip on the rope, and remembered Connor's words in the same instant.

"Reinforcing someone's deepest desires is the simplest one. And right now, I have the perfect candidate for that."

Draco really did want to protect him. Draco really did feel this affection for him. The emotions weren't unnatural, but what Draco really felt when it came to Harry.

Stunned, disbelieving, struggling hard to avoid confronting what that would mean, Harry stepped away from the rope. He couldn't unbind the compulsion because he didn't have time. As Connor had said, it was wound into the deeper structures of Draco's mind, already making itself a natural part of his thinking, and it would take very fine work to separate it out again.

Harry did a simpler thing, reaching out to the light that surrounded him in Draco's mind and asking it to dim. It did, thrusting Draco into unconsciousness and Harry out of his thoughts.

He opened his eyes and found himself crouching on the floor between their beds, with the voice in the back of his head murmuring some vague appreciation. He forced himself to his feet with a grip on the bedclothes, and stumbled around Draco's bed to look.

Draco lay on the floor, his wand sprawled by his outflung hand, his face peaceful. Harry couldn't help lingering for a moment, staring, before he shook his head and whispered, "Sorry, Draco."

Draco wouldn't be able to come with him. Harry had known it. He did regret leaving him this way.

He made it back to his bed by sheer force of will, and pumping more and more of his own magic into his limbs so that he could stand straight. He picked up the parchment, and saw more words appearing.

You've done the right thing, Harry. I would hate to have someone else interfere in our little game. Now, of course, you have to figure out some other way to learn the second prophecy, as your brother will certainly not tell you, and Sirius isn't in a position to tell anyone anything at the moment. Harry wished he couldn't so clearly imagine the vicious chuckle that would follow those words.

Oddly, he felt stronger than he had a short time before. How much of it had to do with the emotions he'd encountered in Draco's mind, he didn't know, but he would take what he could get.

And, right now, he had a plan to learn the second prophecy.

In fact, he thought, one hand reaching for the spider Draco had left on his bed and one for the parchment, if I'm thinking right, I already did.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Help From Hermione

Harry had reached the Gryffindor portrait hole before he realized he had no idea what the password was; Connor hadn't seen fit to give it to him lately, and Harry didn't associate regularly enough with any of the other Gryffindors.

He paced and swore for a moment, then spun and looked up at the Fat Lady, who was staring back at him in interest. "Can you appear on the other side of your portrait?" he asked.

"Yes, dear," she said, giving him an odd look. "Are you all right? You're sweating, and pale, and frankly you look as if you should be in bed."

Harry nodded distractedly. He didn't have *time* for people parenting him, no matter how few people seemed to believe this. "Could you reappear on the other side of your portrait and call for Hermione Granger, please? It's *vital*ly important that I speak with her."

“Of course, dear,” said the Fat Lady, and gave him one more sympathetic look before she vanished. Harry waited, though he did force himself to stop pacing and lean against the wall. He didn’t want to exhaust all his strength. He still had to persuade Hermione to go through with this plan, and that was likely to take some doing.

The parchment in his hands rattled. Harry warily lowered his gaze. The writing had a slant to it it hadn’t had before. With a leap of his heart, Harry recognized Sirius’s handwriting.

Harry, you must listen to me. I can’t stop—

The writing jerked to a stop, a flying spot of ink appearing beside it, as though someone had roughly snatched the quill from Sirius’s fingers. Harry waited, barely breathing, until the mocking hand appeared again. *Sorry about that. He continues to fight, even though he knows it’s hopeless. Really, is this a trait of all Gryffindors?*

Harry narrowed his eyes, and added that hole in the story to the hole in the story about Sirius’s spiders attacking after he supposedly regained his sanity. Peter would know exactly what Gryffindors were like, having been one himself.

The portrait swung outward just then, and Hermione poked her head out. Her eyes widened when she saw him. “*Harry?* Why aren’t you on a bed in the hospital wing? I don’t think you should be up yet!” Her voice was shrill, and rising further in her concern.

Harry wondered, irritably, why that was the first thing anyone thought of. He probably looked awful, but why would he have left the hospital wing and tottered up to Gryffindor Tower if this wasn’t urgent?

“Hermione,” he said softly, “I need your help.” He motioned her out of the portrait hole, and then far enough away from the listening Fat Lady so that she couldn’t overhear. Hermione followed despite the frown on her face, the gleam in her eyes saying that her curiosity had been roused. Harry had been counting on that.

He faced her, and tried to sound as normal as possible as he said, “I need to use your Time Turner to go back in time and listen to a prophecy.”

Her face changed slowly, the scowl growing even more thunderous, her lips pursing. Harry winced in spite of himself. She looked sterner than McGonagall when the professor was angry, and that was saying something. But he held himself firm. There really was no option other than this. If this failed, then he knew of no way that he could learn Trelawney’s prophecy, short of tracking Connor or Ron down and ripping the words from their minds. Trelawney would have forgotten the prophecy the moment she made it; all true Seers did.

“You need to *what*.” The last word cracked like a house elf Apparating. Harry winced, and glanced at the parchment in his hands, but no new words had appeared. Apparently, the mysterious man, Peter or whoever he was, was willing to wait and listen to what happened.

“I need to use your Time Turner and go back in time to that day in Divination when Connor made you mad,” he said. Still he kept his voice calm, though he could feel the panic boiling and straining at its leash. “Please, Hermione. This is the only way that I can learn it, and I *need* to know it. I think Connor’s run off somewhere because he’s so convinced that the prophecy said something about me killing Sirius. But I don’t know that for certain.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “All right. But, Harry, I’ve only ever gone back as far as three hours. This will be going back... months.”

“I know,” said Harry simply. “I trust you to make the calculations.” They were both in Arithmancy, but Hermione was better at maths, no surprise there.

Hermione gave him a suspicious, sidelong glance. “You’re not going to go off on your own and try to use the Time Turner the moment you have the calculations, then?”

Harry frowned. “Of course not. I don’t know how to use it, and I wouldn’t trust myself to be careful right now even if I did.” He glanced at the gleaming chain just barely visible around Hermione’s neck. “I trust that the chain is long enough to loop around both of us, and can take both of us back? I think that you need to hear the prophecy, too. You deserve it.” *If only so that she can understand how dangerous this is, and she won’t argue with me when I have to leave her out of the final confrontation.*

Hermione studied him once, then nodded. “We go back one hour for every inversion of the glass,” she said. “Twenty-four

hours in a day, more than three months..." She turned away from Harry, muttering, and waved her wand in front of her. A bit of parchment flicked out of her robes, and a quill joined it, making rapid scratches as she calculated.

Harry blinked and stared for a moment before he shut his mouth. He sometimes forgot how powerful Hermione was, until he saw her in action. She didn't have a specific gift like Connor's compulsion or his Parseltongue; she eschewed flashy magic. But she could cast many small useful spells that all worked together much faster and more smoothly than any ordinary wizard could have achieved, and she could maintain them effortlessly while she began another spell. As Harry watched, beyond the levitation charms on both parchment and quill, and the enchantment that made the quill write, she levitated a small calendar from her robe pocket to check for sure and certain on the dates of the months, all the while with numbers rushing through her head.

Harry shook his head—he winced as that motion made him dizzy—and waited. The parchment in his hands rippled briefly. Harry looked down.

She is a clever witch. And I stand ready to help you, of course, if you need anything.

Harry swallowed. It truly, truly disturbed him how clearly he could imagine the laughter every time the letter-writer wrote something like that. But he did nod and mutter, while watching Hermione to make sure she had her back to him, "Yes. I need you to command Sirius to command the spider." He patted the spider that hung in his robe pocket. "I'm going to need it to attack someone."

Done.

Harry ground his teeth, though he tried to keep his expression as blank as possible, given the watching house elf. The writer was pleased that Harry was playing his game, and treating him like some clever pet. Harry loathed being treated that way, but since he had to rescue Sirius, he didn't think that he could spend a lot of time voicing doubts.

"There!"

Harry blinked as the calendar, parchment, and quill shot away from Hermione, and she turned, taking the Time Turner out of her robes and beckoning to him. Harry started towards her, and found himself staggering as he actually got there. The pain in his head and his gut was flaring again. Harry blinked, and saw white spots, and then saw Hermione's white face.

"Harry," Hermione whispered. "I could go back by myself, and then you could go to the hospital wing and rest—"

"No," Harry whispered. He didn't dare trust that. The letter-writer might think that Harry wasn't playing by the rules of the game if that happened. And worse, Hermione might accidentally forget a word of the prophecy, or misremember what it said. Harry couldn't take the chance. He needed to hear the prophecy for himself, and hear the exact intonation with which Trelawney had repeated it.

He folded the parchment so that Hermione couldn't look at the conversation he'd had with Peter or whoever was holding the quill, and met her eyes defiantly. "I wouldn't sleep anyway," he pointed out. "I think Connor's running headlong into danger. And you know how protective I still am of him."

Hermione sniffed. "Without reason, sometimes." But she didn't argue any longer, pulling out the chain of the Time Turner and looping it around his neck. Harry tried to breathe as normally as possible while she held the hourglass up between them.

"We'll have to be careful when we get there," Hermione warned him solemnly. "We don't dare be seen by ourselves while we're in the past."

Harry smiled slightly as he felt the spider come to life in his robe pocket, its legs swarming and scraping at the cloth. "I think I know exactly what to do."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, but began to invert the hourglass, chanting, "One. Two. Three..."

Harry joined the count, though he hated to hear how weak his voice had become. *Stupid body. It can't fall down on me now. I can't afford to let it.*

The world around them blurred and rippled like cloth. Harry didn't look too directly at it, since it made him dizzy and gave him a worse headache, but the voice riding behind his eyes seemed to enjoy it. *Oooo. I never traveled in time before. Look! There's someone we must have passed hours ago. Whee!*

They reached the last turn, and then Hermione gripped the hourglass and kept it from inverting again. Harry stood locked within the chain, panting. They hadn't traveled physically—they were still standing in the same stretch of empty Gryffindor Tower corridor as before—but he felt as tired as if they had.

“Harry?” Hermione’s whisper was nearly timid. “I really think that you should lie down and rest.”

Harry shook his head and smiled grimly at her. “No time. The prophecy happened ten minutes after the hour, and we’ve come just on it. We’ve got to move.” He began to do so, using his magic recklessly to feed his flagging strength when he had to. It wasn’t as though he had a better use for it.

Hermione trotted beside him with alacrity, and didn’t even flinch when Harry cast the Disillusionment Charm on both of them, despite the cold feeling that it produced. Harry found the cold invigorating. On they moved, and then they were in the North Tower corridor, and Harry saw Hermione storming down the hallway, her face set. Knowing now what Connor had said to her, Harry couldn’t blame her at all for being so disgusted. They watched her out of sight, and then shuffled forward.

Harry came on himself, staring in concern after Hermione. He took a deep breath, snatched a small stone from his robe pocket, and tossed it at his past self.

His past self focused on the stone, staring at it with a dark expression that Harry hadn’t realized was so frightening on his own face. Harry pulled the stone down the corridor with his magic, and saw his past self draw his wand. That was the moment at which he added the spider.

His past self immediately became more concerned with the spider, which scuttled towards him with lifted mandibles, than with any potentially Disillusioned people sneaking along the walls. Hermione wanted to linger and watch the fight, but Harry gripped her arm and steered her past with main force.

Climbing the ladder was the hardest part, since they had to do it invisibly, and in as much silence as possible, and while keeping the chain of the Time Turner around both of their necks. Harry finally levitated the both of them, hearing Hermione squeak when he used both wandless and wordless magic to do so. But they didn’t have time to wait. Beneath them came the blast of the “*Reducto!*” that had reduced the spider to smithereens, and past-Harry wouldn’t be far behind.

Harry kept up the levitation once they were in the Tower, and they skimmed until they settled into the classroom entrance. Even then, Harry feared they would be too late, but they ducked through the veiled arch just as Trelawney, in front of Connor and Ron, rolled her eyes back and began her recitation of the prophecy.

Harry leaned against the wall, keeping his panting silent, and *listened* as hard as he could. This was the prophecy that Connor had been willing to fight him to keep hidden. It must be important in some way, even if Harry wasn’t sure what that would be yet.

Trelawney’s voice was a grating moan, a sound that was hardly human, and one that should have been too male to come out of the fluttering woman’s throat.

*“Five weeks before the time of longest light
There comes one who puts lesser foes to flight,
Who has a soul and magic cold as ice.
Now comes the hour
Of the black one’s power,
And he shall die by the wand of the sacrifice.”*

Oh, Connor, Harry thought, his heart speeding fast enough to make him sick. *No wonder you thought that I was going to kill Sirius.*

*“Now comes the hour all truth is revealed,
Now comes the hour the gray one takes the field,
And first decision sets the path for all.
Now kindness is tested,
Now soft heart must be bested,
And on that test he will stand or fall.”*

Harry saw himself come charging through the classroom at that moment, and he gripped the Time Turner and began to turn

it. His past-self's head swung around, and Harry knew he had seen the gleam of silver that marked the place where his future-self and Hermione left.

Everything had gone as it was supposed to do, then, and now the prophecy bounced around in Harry's head, buzzing like an angry fly, even as he chanted the count of the Time Turner's inversions aloud with Hermione and the world warped and changed around them.

Five weeks before the time of longest light. That must mean five weeks before the summer solstice, the longest day of the year. And, well, this weekend is that. Approximately. No wonder Connor panicked when he thought I'd taken Sirius somewhere or done something with him today.

There comes one who puts lesser foes to flight... I don't understand that part. I know Connor thought it was me, though. And the part about having magic cold as ice fits as well. And what would my brother know about my soul?

The sadness of that thought threatened to distract him for a moment, from both the prophecy and the count of the Time Turner's inversions, but Harry turned his mind determinedly back.

The black one's power...no doubt Connor thought that meant Sirius, though I don't understand how he can be in power if he's a captive. And "die by the wand of the sacrifice" sounds pretty damn blunt. Either I'm going to kill him, or Peter will.

I don't understand the rest. I suppose that the gray one could be the gray Dementor, but if the Dementors had some reliable way of finding Peter, they would have used it by now, and then perhaps we wouldn't be in this mess.

They chanted the final number, and then Hermione gripped the Time Turner and held it still again. Harry blinked around the empty Divination classroom, then removed the Charm from both himself and Hermione. A glance out the window showed that it was still late afternoon, only slowly slanting towards sunset. Harry nodded. That meant he shouldn't meet many people on his way to...wherever it was that the letter-writer wanted him to go; they would be either lingering outside still, or heading to dinner.

The parchment rattled. Harry unfolded it and read it.

The place where Connor and Sirius practiced their lessons, Harry. The last safe place. Oh, yes, did I mention that I have your brother now, too?

Harry felt a flash of anger. Hermione gave a little shriek as the walls around them abruptly froze, and then she slipped on a patch of ice, and tugged on the Time Turner's chain. Harry ducked his head to get it over his neck, never removing his eyes from the parchment. So he had to rescue two captives instead of one. That wasn't such a huge change, and it would only give him more rage to take Peter, or whoever this was, down with him.

Without killing Sirius, if at all possible.

The parchment finished, *The Shrieking Shack*.

Harry nodded sharply. He liked that answer. He approved of that answer. He would be dealing with Peter off Hogwarts grounds, then, and in a place that most people still believed was haunted. He turned to leave.

"Harry!"

He paused and blinked back at Hermione, who was scrambling to her feet. She had her wand out and a look of confusion on her face.

"What was all that about?" she demanded. "Did the prophecy say what I think it said? Are you going to kill Sirius?"

Harry shook his head. "Prophecies are notoriously vague and hard to interpret," he lied smoothly. "I don't think that's what it means. And now I'm going to find Connor and tell him so. I think I know where he might have gone."

"I want to go with you," said Hermione. "You're not well enough to face him alone. Or get Draco, at least, though I would think I'm less likely to get angry and send a spell at Connor."

Harry let out a careful breath and shifted from side to side. It was only his imagination that his stomach was churning, he reminded himself. The voice in his head had said this wasn't the kind of pain that would make him sick. "Hermione, I can't.

This is something I have to do alone.”

“I *knew* it,” said Hermione, with the soft, vicious tone of a pouncing cat, and then her hand shot out and grabbed the parchment before Harry could stop her. She looked down at the writing, and her eyes widened as she read. Harry simply thanked Merlin that the whole conversation wasn’t there.

When she looked up, her eyes were still wide, and her face pale enough to make her gaze stand out as drowning dark. “Harry,” she breathed. “What is this?”

“Something bad,” said Harry shortly. He had to hope that the writer wouldn’t consider Hermione’s reading of his letter to be a betrayal of the game they had played so far. “Listen, Hermione, I’ve got to go.”

Hermione laughed, though it was more like a bark—short and unamused. “If you think I’m going to let you go into danger when you’re this sick, alone, you’re mad. I won’t insist that we tell any of the professors if you don’t want to, but we *are* going together.”

Harry shook his head. “*Consopio*,” he said, and Hermione fell asleep. “*Wingardium Leviosa*,” he added, and eased her to the floor.

Then he snatched up the parchment, scanning it anxiously. The writer hadn’t added anything. Harry began to walk out of the Divination classroom, but had to stop and lean against the wall, his face to the stone as he panted.

Could he really do this? The weakness in his body was growing, and the magic he poured into it drained out immediately, like water through a holed cloth. Could he really go and confront Sirius’s and Connor’s kidnapper on his own?

It isn’t a matter of ability, Harry thought, as he opened his eyes and straightened. It’s a matter of necessity. I have to go alone because Peter, or whoever this was, won’t let me bring any help.

You have me.

Harry jumped a bit before he realized that the voice was coming from inside his head. *Oh, yes, you*, he thought back, as he eased out of the Divination classroom and towards the ladder. *I don’t suppose you’ve remembered who you are.*

No. But I remember that I could see through Sirius’s eyes, too, because he had a connection to Voldemort in the form of the curse. I can’t right now. I don’t know why. Maybe Peter did something to keep me out. The voice sounded sulky. But if we get close enough to him, and I can break this barrier that prevents me from seeing, I might be able to help you. Or maybe I can even enter Peter’s mind and tell you what he plans to do next.

Thank you, Harry murmured.

He made his way out of the North Tower and carefully through the corridors towards the front entrance. He made liberal use of the Disillusionment Charm to hide from the people who passed him, despite the sickness swimming in his gut. He supposed he could have Apparated directly to the Shrieking Shack, as he had once before, but that kind of Apparition on Hogwarts grounds would definitely have attracted attention, from Dumbledore if no one else. Harry wanted to keep anyone else out of this. The more people got involved, the more loss of life there would be.

Harry reached the entrance hall and allowed himself to feel something like triumph. He would be out beyond the doors in a few moments, and from there he could make his way to the Whomping Willow. He knew from seeing Sirius do it earlier in the year how to open the tunnel that led to the Shack.

“*Impedimenta*.”

Harry let out an involuntary cry as his feet went out from under him, and then the Disillusionment Charm boiled away like so much steam. He turned his head, and saw Snape climbing the stairs from the dungeons, his wand out and a gleam in his eyes like some maddened hippogriff.

“You are not going anywhere,” Snape whispered, as he stalked closer. Harry shivered. The lower Snape’s voice went, the angrier he was, and this time it was so soft as to sound like rat’s paws on stone. “You are staying right here, and if I must bind you and knock you unconscious to keep you from risking your life, then I will. I am *tired* of this, Harry. You have given me no chance to act like a true guardian. I will protect you from the consequences of your own Gryffindor-like stupidity, if I must.”

“You don’t understand,” Harry whispered, struggling to stand. The jinx still wouldn’t let him go, and the knock he’d taken on the head when he fell, as well as the pain in his gut, was distracting him from his efforts to break the spell. “Connor and Sirius are at risk. They’ll probably die if I don’t get to them—“

“I don’t care!”

“Peter says that he’ll sacrifice Sirius to insure the Dark Lord’s return,” Harry hissed, as he found Snape standing right over him, and his anger came back. The stones beneath him froze. “Do you *really* want that? Voldemort, risen again and running around?” He glanced pointedly at Snape’s left arm.

Snape’s eyes flickered briefly, and then he said, “Dumbledore has more than enough power to face Voldemort, and more than enough reason to hunt Pettigrew, if his golden boys are captured. Tell me where they are, and I will alert him. After placing you in the hospital wing, of course.”

“No,” Harry said, even as the parchment rattled. He twisted his head to look at it, sprawled on the floor beside him, and saw new words appearing.

Where are you, Harry? Delayed? Oh, dear, I don’t think I like that. And I don’t think that your brother really needs two arms, does he?

Harry shrieked, but the voice in his head spoke quickly, before he could build up a true head of panic. *Let me.* Harry felt it drift away from him as it had once before.

The next moment, Snape staggered and clutched his head. He tried to focus his eyes, and Harry suspected he was using Occlumency, or Legilimency, or a combination of both, to try and throw the voice off. It wasn’t working, obviously. Harry couldn’t help a brief, twisted smile. *I did try to tell him that that voice doesn’t speak through any connection in his mind.*

Snape abruptly slipped to the floor, eyes blank. The voice slid back into Harry’s head and snorted. *He’ll be out until he manages to wake up from the memories that I gave him.*

You remember who you are now? Harry stood, and found that, yes, he could manage it. His legs wobbled, but he still stood straight. And he was not going to think about Peter cutting Connor’s arm off, because he *wasn’t*.

Not really, said the voice. *Only that I was once in a great deal of pain. I gave him some of the pain, not as much as I gave you. That ought to keep him busy for a while.* It sounded smug.

Harry shook his head, and hoped Snape would understand when he came back and woke him up and explained everything.

If he came back and woke him up and explained everything.

Harry let out a long, hissing breath and turned towards the doors out into the grounds. So he might die. He had accepted that from the time he was four. He shouldn’t be shaking in his shoes now at the thought of it.

And he wasn’t, he realized with some startlement, as he staggered out the doors and into the cool brightness of a spring evening. He was more upset at the thought of never being able to explain to Snape and Draco and Hermione why it had been necessary to hurt them, or ignore them, or insist they stay behind.

My priorities really are strange, he thought, as he maneuvered carefully across the grass towards the Whomping Willow. *I had my brother first for so long, and then things changed, and I don’t even know what I think of as most important any more.*

I could root around in your mind and find out for you, the voice offered, but Harry shook his head.

“We really don’t have time,” he whispered, as he shot wary glances off to the side, looking for anyone who might spot him and call out, or for some sign of Hagrid. The grass was empty, though, save for the grasping fingers of sunlight, and Hagrid was nowhere in sight. Harry relaxed marginally, but kept his caution up.

The Whomping Willow sprang into motion as Harry neared, the branches cutting through the air and slamming into the ground. Harry shook his head and reached out, carefully thickening the air near the knot on the willow’s trunk. When he thought it was thick enough, he shot it forward, and the knot pushed home. The willow’s branches froze, and Harry ducked

beneath them and towards the tunnel that he could see between the roots.

He knew the moment he pushed into the tunnel and began to creep forward that this was going to be hell.

The pain in his stomach grew worse the longer it was pressed against the ground. The pain in his brow blazed harder and faster and fiercer as he kept his head bowed so that he could scramble beneath the overhangs. Every muscle in his body ached and screamed with tension as he contorted himself into odd positions to get past the bumps and the jerks in the trail. Add the worry about Connor and Sirius, and by the time he arrived at the entrance to the Shrieking Shack, Harry was worried that he wouldn't be able to stand up and fight Peter properly.

He could feel strong magic humming beyond the door, waiting. If this wasn't a ritual to resurrect Voldemort, then it was something else damn close. Harry closed his eyes and wailed to himself.

I can't do this! I can barely stand upright.

Of course, the answer that came back was always the same, mingled with echoes of his mother's voice and his own.

You must do it because there is no one else. You must do it because you're the strongest, and it's the responsibility of the strongest to carry the burdens that no one else can. You must do it because it's necessary.

Harry began, gently, to breathe in a pattern that Lily had taught him. This, granted, was when she had been teaching him what to do if he was ever tortured, and the last time he had used it was when Quirrell's *Crucio* had hit him in first year. But it was still valuable, and it worked, letting him rise above the pain that plagued him in stomach and head. Even when his scar abruptly blazed with agony, he could look past it and see what had to be done, stretching like a path before him.

That's impressive, the voice said, in subdued tones. *Where did you learn it?* A rooting, shuffling sensation, and then the voice said, *Oh.* Harry had the sensation of it backing carefully out of a certain corner of his memories.

Harry smiled. He knew it was probably a grim smile, but no one was here to be frightened. "From my mother," he murmured, and stood. His legs did not shake. His resolve and his magic were one, now, and his magic was no longer trickling out of him, spent, the moment he sent it into his muscles. He only had to strengthen his will, and it did what he wanted, instead of the other way around. "I am still what she made me, even now."

Irony teased him for a moment, and then was gone. Harry called on his rage instead, and watched, detached, as the tunnel around him swelled with frost.

He was doing what had to be done, because there was no one else.

Connor and Sirius were waiting.

Harry reached out and pushed the door open.

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

Chapter Forty: Danse Macabre

Harry moved a step into the Shack. He saw the bed before him, the edge of a foot sticking out from beyond it, the marking of what could be a circle traced on the floor—

And then he felt powerful magic slam down in front of him and to the sides and behind, and the door slammed and sealed itself shut. Harry tensed. Quite apart from the strength of the magic, he didn't think that anyone else would be getting in behind him to help.

You are not alone, the voice in his head breathed, but it sounded distracted. *All of this...it feels familiar...*

Then Harry heard the clear, cold laughter he had been imagining while he held the letter, but it was a familiar voice that spoke the words, "Hold him. The dance is about to begin."

Harry felt the magic fall into place around him, gripping him as tightly as a full body-bind. Sick with rage, he watched Sirius step from beyond the bed, his eyes wide and quite mad, his smile bizarre. Harry's heart thumped and stuck in his throat, and the voice of his own thoughts whispered, *It wasn't Peter. It never was.*

Harry couldn't shake his head, he found when he tried to move, but he could still speak. "Why, Sirius?" he whispered. "I thought you were sane now, after the golden ornament managed to tame your thoughts."

Sirius clucked his tongue at him and lifted the ornament over his head. "Poor Potter," he said, voice almost familiar. The sound was Sirius's, but the intonations were someone else's, Harry knew. "Do you mean to tell me that you didn't figure it out? I was so sure you would." He tapped the golden ornament with his wand. "*Finite Incantatem!*"

The ornament shifted and shivered, and then an intricate illusion charm melted away from it. What was left was heavy and gold, and hung on the end of a chain, but was assuredly not the ruby-studded ball that Sirius had worn for months now. It was a locket instead, with a rusted clasp, marked with an ornate S that Harry recognized after a few moments of staring.

Slytherin's mark.

And now that the locket was free of what must have been powerful spells to disguise its magic as well as its shape, Harry could feel it. It was humming, all but snarling, shedding a cold aura. It felt...

It felt like the diary that Harry had held last year, the one that had contained a piece or memory of Voldemort.

Harry could feel himself stop breathing.

Sirius looked down fondly at the locket, shaking his head slightly. When he looked up, Harry could see Tom Riddle in his smile, though the intonations were not exactly the same as Tom Riddle's, and not the same as Harry had heard from Voldemort's mouth when he fought him as Quirrell, either. "This locket lay among the Black treasures for *years*. They never suspected what they had. And then your old godfather, in searching for weapons that he could use to train your precious brother, found it and picked it up." Sirius chuckled, a sound that, like his smile, was turned sideways from what it should have been. "And I was free. In his head, at least."

My nightmare, Harry thought. Something small destroying Sirius, and the pain I felt when it happened. Not a rat after all. That was the piece of Voldemort swallowing the last freedom of his mind.

He met Harry's eyes and smiled unpleasantly. "You'll have guessed that I'm part of Voldemort, of course, but no sixteen-year-old boy. I have forty years of his memories. And I'm far more experienced than Tom Riddle was, I think you'll find, and far more sane than my latest incarnation." A spasm of distaste crossed Sirius's borrowed face. "I shall have to make a special point of finding and killing him, when I've completed this ritual," he muttered.

And then we'll have two Voldemorts to face.

The thought terrified Harry as few other things could have. He began to struggle in earnest, his magic snapping and beating at the bindings. But they held him immobile, and Voldemort-in-Sirius didn't seem at all bothered by his fight. In fact, he cocked his head to the side, looking mildly puzzled, until he suddenly snapped his fingers.

"Oh, that's right," he said. "You didn't win the game. You didn't anticipate all my moves. You didn't guess about the locket, and you didn't guess what I was going to do once you got here. Well, really, Harry." More than anything he had done so far, Harry hated the chiding, playful tone his voice took on, as bad as the worse messages written on the parchment. "You should have. I was kind enough to tell you."

He looked at something on the other side of the bed. "Kreacher!"

A house elf came into view. Harry felt his face twist in disgust. The creature was beyond shabby, with knotted hair hanging down around its face and an expression full of fawning adoration as it looked up at Voldemort.

"Master Black is wanting something?" he asked. "The Master Black who became a true heir of the mistress is wanting something?"

"Move this boy into place in the circle," Voldemort instructed, striding around the bed. He leaned heavily to the left, Harry noticed, and hoped that that indicated a weakness he could exploit. Merlin knew he needed *something*. "The one I indicated to you earlier, mind, and not an inch to right or left."

"Master Black is being very good to Kreacher, letting him participate in important rituals," said the house elf, bowing from the waist and seizing Harry's arm with nails so long they drew blood. "Kreacher will not let Master Black down!"

He dragged Harry around the bed, and Harry could see the room fully now. There was a circle scratched on the floor, drawn in some thick liquid that did not look like either blood or ink to Harry. Kreacher positioned him carefully, still hopelessly bound, on the near side of the circle, with his heels treading on the dangling cover of the bed.

On the other side lay Connor. He was awake, his face ashen and his horrified eyes fixed on Sirius. They flicked to Harry for a moment, and Harry could see the terror in them briefly dim to shock. Then it turned to despair, and Connor turned his head away, tears trickling down his face.

Harry felt part of him ache with pity. It was only part, though; the rest of him was taking note of the fact that Connor could move, and thinking that it might be important.

I'm here, too, the voice in his head reminded him.

Can you do anything? Harry asked, watching as his godfather's body stooped down and gathered several small objects together into a heap. There was a knife, and a Pensieve, and a draped object that Voldemort treated more carefully than all the rest.

I don't know, said the voice unhappily. *I can't see into his mind—most of it. But there's a part I can read, and its thoughts make no sense. They're twisting and plotting to stop him. That doesn't make sense, does it?* The voice sounded as though it were appealing to Harry.

Harry swallowed. What he was about to think sounded mad and desperate, but if there was the slightest chance... *Sirius? Could that part be Sirius?*

The voice gave a squeal of the kind that it had when they were traveling through time. *Yes! Yes, it is! Thank you, Harry! It's him! There's part of him still alive and sane in there!* The voice turned puzzled. *But then, I don't understand why he's not attacking. Why is he just waiting?*

I don't think Voldemort knows he's there, or he wouldn't have let him remain, Harry decided. *He's waiting for the best moment.*

Part of him hoped that was it, and that Sirius wouldn't turn into a coward unable to face what he had done again. But since all he could do was wait, he decided he might as well wait and hope.

"You've given me a lot of trouble, you know," Voldemort went on conversationally, turning around and carefully setting the draped object in front of him. "I couldn't decide how best to take revenge on you, even when I knew that I was getting a body back, thanks to your dear godfather. I pumped your brother's ears full of poison, nonsense about Slytherins being evil and compulsion being good." Harry saw Connor flinch as if someone had driven needles into him. Voldemort didn't seem to notice, but his smile did turn a touch crueler, so perhaps he had. "But, of course, you gave me the best idea yourself, or your godfather did, thinking about what you'd done. So I decided to wait until the second prophecy was about to come true, and seize the chance to take revenge on you, turn the prophecy into what *I* wanted it to mean, and change your perceptions of those who have helped you all at once."

He waited to be sure he had Harry's absolute attention—as if he had a choice about facing forward with his head clasped by the magic, Harry thought—and then drew the cloth dramatically off the small object.

It was a dark container, made of what Harry thought was yew wood, the wood of death and resurrection. Despite the lack of rowan wood, he had no trouble recognizing it as a reparations box.

"But—you can't," he said, the first words to tumble through his thoughts. "The justice ritual can only be used on someone who's really wronged you."

Voldemort gave him a deep, jagged smile. "Oh, I think you have wronged me, Harry. But since when have you known me to use neutral or wholesome magic? I am going to use the magic of the ritual. It's that which holds you even now, and will prevent any human from entering this place. But I will twist it, and insure that it does what I want it to do." He stroked the yew box. "This will open to me again, unlike a rowan box, when I have completed the ritual and taken your magic, so that I might absorb your power. It's mine in the first place."

He smiled directly into Harry's eyes. "Always remember, you were the one who gave me this idea, with what you did to your mother." Harry saw Connor jump and flinch out of the corner of his eye again.

Harry rose above the panic, the terror, the guilt, and stared calmly at Voldemort. “I did the right thing,” he said. “You’re perverting the justice ritual to your own ends.”

Voldemort only laughed, as if not at all fazed by his failure to intimidate Harry, and turned to Kreacher, who had retreated off to the side, to stand with his head bowed. “Kreacher!”

“Master Black?” Kreacher looked up, eyes adoring.

“Bring me the knife.”

Kreacher hurried to scoop up the blade and bring it Voldemort’s hand. This close, Harry could make out that the hilt was ebony, the blade some dull metal he did not think was either silver or steel. A silver serpent was etched on the hilt, just above the words *Toujours pur*.

“The Blacks understand family,” said Voldemort softly, turning the knife over and over. “They always did, until this last generation, when both their sons turned traitor, in different ways.”

The voice in the back of Harry’s head made what sounded like an incoherent noise of protest.

“And they made magical items that could certainly affect family,” said Voldemort. “Polaris!”

The knife trembled and came alive, twitching, in Voldemort’s hand, which was Sirius’s hand. Harry stared. He knew now what the knife must be—a blade like the one Lucius had sent him, capable of severing ties of love and loyalty and magic between family members.

Voldemort began to walk towards Connor.

“No,” said Harry. He spoke calmly enough, but he could feel the bubble of rage building up inside of him, and wasn’t surprised when his magic went mad.

The invisible force flung Kreacher to the far side of the room, wringing a snarl out of him as he hit the wall. Sirius turned as if to face a strong wind, one that made him list more to the left than ever. He put one hand over his face and clucked his tongue at Harry, laughing mockingly.

“If you could have stopped this, then you would have done so the first time you called your magic,” he said. He raised his head and began to chant. “What you have done to me cannot be forgiven. I have no wish to face you in a duel, nor to arrange legal means of settling the insult.”

Harry felt his own magic settle, stilled, under the weight of the far greater power that the justice ritual called forth. Shadows flickered madly in the room, above the outline of the circle. Voldemort watched them with a smile for a moment, then put out one hand. It was Sirius’s broom-callused palm that was offered to the air, but Harry could not think of it as his hand again. He doubted that he would ever be able to, even if he somehow managed to separate Sirius and Voldemort out from each other’s minds. Voldemort had been possessing Sirius for *months*, and no one had *noticed*.

That must be driving Connor mad, Harry thought dimly.

“I demand this of the old powers,” Voldemort said, “for my will is strong, and my desire for justice firm.” He took two steps towards Connor and moved Polaris in a broad sweep. A shimmering line of connection sprang into being between Harry and Connor, a cord that manifested as a red glow. “With the power that comes from the connection between the one who has wronged me and his brother, I draw the magic, and I draw the will. *Corrumpto castimoniam!*”

He brought the knife down.

Harry screamed as he felt a binding he hadn’t known was there strain and leak and begin to *break*. Connor screamed in the same moment, a noise like the verbal equivalent of internal bleeding, and flung an arm over his face, or so Harry thought in the moment before his head bent back and he felt magic wash from him.

He could hear Voldemort repeating, every few moments, his voice as steady as rainfall, “*Corrumpto castimoniam! Corrumpto castimoniam!*”

Harry's mind translated the incantation, whether or not he wanted it to. *I corrupt the purity.*

Harry felt magic twist and writhe, buck and scream. The magic of the justice ritual was abruptly trying to flee, as though the ritual had sensed the danger it was in of being used wrongly.

Harry wrenched his eyes open, and could see dark red light trailing from the connection between him and Connor, attacking the shadows that danced above the circle. The circle itself came to life in the same instant, striking out with pale gray tendrils that reminded Harry uncomfortably of the silver fire on Walpurgis Night. Voldemort flung his own magic behind that, holding Slytherin's locket above his head and chanting the spell over and over again.

Harry's stolen magic, Connor's stolen magic, Voldemort's own Dark power—it was all too much for the ritual. Harry felt the nature of it overthrown, felt the very atmosphere in the room change. Now, the shadows that crouched and sidled nearer him looked dark, not as if they would burst into red-gold light the way that the shadows of his own justice ritual had. The circle was blazing. The hold that settled on Harry's body was not simply firm, preventing him from moving until justice had been done, but actively cruel, pinching his skin like chains.

Harry was reeling. He could feel hot tears slipping down his cheeks, and though Merlin knew he had plenty to cry about, he realized he was mourning the loss of the dance's purity. Voldemort could not change the nature of the justice ritual for anyone else, or permanently, but within this shack, something old and beautiful had died. Voldemort had perverted its intent and brought it back to life as a shambling corpse, ready to snatch the price he asked from an innocent. It was wrong. It was *obscene*.

Harry met Connor's eyes. He knew his brother was shocked and hurt and terrified beyond measure—

No, he didn't. He could guess it from his expression, but he didn't know it any more, the way he had always done with no more than a glance. That was the tie that Voldemort had cut, a connection to his twin that Harry hadn't even known was there.

This time, the bubble of anger didn't give him any warning that it was coming. Instead, Harry flung back his head, tossing off the weight that crowned it, and screamed, unleashing the full force of his magic for the first time since the storm last year.

The shack shuddered. The walls raced into ice in a moment, and Kreacher became a frozen statue between one step and the next. Harry felt the ritual clamp down on him, but he didn't care. He wanted nothing so much as he wanted to kill Voldemort in that moment, and as Sirius's body staggered and leaned to the left, it seemed his wish would be granted.

But Voldemort recovered in a moment, and made a negligent gesture. Harry's magic calmed, his ice turning into water. Kreacher shivered as the ice on his body cracked open like a nutshell, and gave Harry a baleful look. Voldemort chuckled through Sirius's voice, the laughter colder than it had been.

"I am very glad to see that your magic is so strong, Harry," he said cheerfully. "It gives me pleasure to imagine what I shall do when that power is mine."

Harry stared at him through narrowed eyes. Briefly, he wondered where his fear had gone, and then decided that it didn't matter. He felt at his magic. It was bound, but it was stirring under the surface, and he knew there was one thing he could do that might work. *Might* was the operative word, of course. He couldn't know that it would, especially when the justice ritual, perverted and broken though it had been, would probably still prevent him from using any magic to escape, the way it had prevented Lily from doing so when Harry used it on her.

Voldemort laid Polaris down and picked up the Pensieve. He gazed into it for a moment, Sirius's eyes contemplative the way they had been whenever he had spoken of the past, then shook his head and set it aside. "No," he said, as though speaking to someone else. "I do not think the time is right for that, yet. And if there is one way in which I am smarter than both my newest self and my sixteen-year-old one, it is knowing when the time is right."

He turned and smiled at Harry. "There will be plenty of time to show you the truth when I have stripped you of your power," he said. "In the meantime, before we begin that stripping, do you have any questions?"

The ritual loosened its fierce hold on Harry's chin and cheeks, and he could talk. He worked his jaw for a moment, eyes never moving from Voldemort's, and then said, "I don't understand why you wanted me to know the second prophecy."

Voldemort shrugged. "So that you could lose further hope, of course. You *do* know that it says you'll kill your dear godfather?"

Harry nodded tightly. He heard Connor's sobs coming from the corner, but couldn't turn his attention from Voldemort to comfort his brother. He just didn't have *time* right now.

"I wanted you to brood on that," Voldemort said, and smiled widely. "Just as I wanted you to think that Peter was writing to you to break your hope. You cannot suffer enough for what you have done to me."

"What do you care?" Harry snarled, playing for time. He needed to gain as much strength as he could before he struck, and to gauge it. Under all the imprisoning layers of ritual, his magic was moving, but he knew if he simply unleashed it now, Connor would be hurt as well as Voldemort. "What I did was to your old self and Tom Riddle, not you."

"I would have become much more powerful the moment I manifested, if not for you," said Voldemort, losing his smile for the first time. "And I would never have had to go to the trouble of arranging this ritual." He shook his head. "You are going to have to pay for the inconvenience that you caused me."

He turned and snapped his fingers. "Kreacher!"

"Master Black," said the house elf, hastening forward.

"Help me disrobe," said Voldemort, and held out Sirius's arms.

Kreacher, bowing and fluttering, began to pull his clothes off. Voldemort looked back over his shoulder at Harry.

"Everything I wrote you in the letter was quite true," he said casually. "Sirius has been betraying you for months, whenever my old self's presence in his mind became too much for him. And then he picked me up, in the locket, and was foolish enough to put me on to see what he did. And that was the end. He'd managed to withstand or undermine my old self's attempts to hurt you; he chose to send that snake, for example, because he knew you were a Parselmouth and had a decent chance of stopping it. The spiders were mine, though I only meant their poison to weaken you. That was when I knew that I had complete control over this body and mind. Sirius was not able to object when I chose the spiders." He smiled.

"You were the one writing the letters to Lucius Malfoy," said Harry.

"Only the last one." Voldemort shrugged, and the robes came off his chest. "Sirius wrote the ones before, when the pressure of the curse, and Fenrir Greyback's and Walden Macnair's persuasions, became too much. Imagine, Harry. Your godfather might have been free of the curse long before I possessed him, only he was too proud to tell anyone."

Connor gave another sob. Harry suspected the barriers were falling in his mind, leaving him vulnerable to all sorts of truths.

Kreacher drew the robes almost completely off.

Harry gagged. There was a gray *lump* growing from Sirius's left side, pulsing gently in patterns of light and darkness. It looked like an egg, or at least mostly like an egg, since part of it was obviously still under Sirius's skin. It glistened with thick wetness, dark enough to look like blood, but obviously not it. Harry flicked a glance at the circle. He knew what it was made of, now.

"This will be ready in a moment." Voldemort stroked the egg's opaque side. "Your magic will enable me to hatch out a new body. Then I'll arrange for your godfather to die by your wand, and show you the truth, and depart." He looked at Harry with his head cocked on one side as Kreacher eased him down in the middle of the circle, his hands tender.

"Do you know what I will do first, Harry?" he breathed.

Harry stared stonily at him.

"What I gave Severus Snape was only a taste of what I will give him when we are done here." Voldemort's eyes glittered. "Not only is he a traitor, he dared to aid *you*. He will be flayed alive, inch by inch. There are spells that can do that. I will leave him no skin but that which bears my Dark Mark, and cast the Mark on every inch of his skinless flesh. The Mark will keep him alive, but it will also prevent any healing magic.

"Then I will go after those you are so fond of, the young Mudblood witch and the Malfoy boy. The Mudblood may have a fairly quick death, I think, with only a few broken limbs and mutilations first. After all, she did help you to learn the second prophecy, and indirectly to play my game.

“Draco Malfoy...” Voldemort’s eyes were feral now. “He will stay alive, and come with me. I will send him back to his father, a piece at a time, over many years. The Prometheus Curse will do.”

Harry shuddered in spite of himself. The Prometheus Curse renewed every part of a body the moment it was cut off, in the way that Prometheus’s liver renewed itself every day after being eaten by an eagle. The thought of Draco, suffering, unable to die, nearly made Harry launch his best weapon right then. But he refrained, and asked, quietly, “What will you do with my brother?”

Voldemort glanced in Connor’s direction. “Why, I have been training him these past three months,” he said. “It would be a shame to let such a well-trained and natural compeller go to waste. *Imperio* should remove any obstinate moral fixations he has, and then I have a follower skilled in doing Dark magic.”

Harry nodded, calmly. It was what he needed to hear. It gave him the final bit of anger he needed in order to act as he had to, and it held out a promise, a faint hope, that if he failed here, then the Boy-Who-Lived might yet keep close to Voldemort’s side and one day fell him.

If he failed.

I am not going to fail.

Voldemort held up one hand. “*Mors Mordre!*” he said clearly.

A glowing green Dark Mark appeared above his head, casting sparks down into the center of the circle. The magic of the corrupted ritual tightened in anticipation, and Harry supposed Voldemort had spoken to it silently.

Voldemort faced him, that same faint smile on his face. “I will take a payment from you,” he said, “a weregild for all 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.” His smile twisted at the edges. “Last time pays for all.”

The magic of the ritual reached down, and Harry saw the immense hand form, a sickly dark gray this time, coasting towards his body to remove his magic.

He unleashed his ability to eat magic.

It chewed its way out from the inside, through the layers of ritual and Voldemort’s binding spells, swallowing all the powerful magic that lay on top of it. It consumed them, and Harry felt his body swell with the rush of power as it handed that magic to him instead. He concentrated. He wanted to break free of this spell, and stop Voldemort, blast away the gray lump emerging from his side.

Voldemort roared, a wordless sound of protest, and closed his eyes in concentration. The sickly gray hand drifted a little nearer.

Harry envisioned his power as a snake, and sent it crawling out in front of him, eating everything in its path, working its jaws wider and wider. The hold on his body abruptly eased, and he dropped to the floor. He felt the power around him surging wildly as the snake ate and ate, consumed and devoured, snapped and tore, and he grew steadily more and more powerful, feeling his eyes bulge in his head.

A small movement off to the side distracted him. Harry blinked as he saw a gray rat dart along the wall, rolling a slender stick in front of it with a paw. Peter, Harry knew, and he’d brought along his wand.

His snake began eating the gray lump in Sirius’s side, and Harry gagged. He felt as though he were drowning in filth. For the first time, it occurred to him that siphoning off Dark magic might not be a good idea.

“*No!*” Voldemort cried, and chanted once again, “*Corrumpto castimoniam!*”

Harry felt the ritual begin fighting him. This was still mighty magic, stronger than he was even with all he had swallowed. The sickly gray hand formed anew, and reached out for him. Harry felt the chill brush of its fingers like the touch of flaying knives.

Then his snake turned and lunged at Connor's and Peter's magic, and Kreacher landed on his back with a spitting snarl.

Harry dropped to his knees, trying to wrestle the house elf off. It wasn't working. His magic snapped around him wildly, out of control. Harry tried to restrain it, to turn it away from eating Connor's power or Peter's. He might as well have tried to stop a waterfall. Strength pounded through him, useless as that waterfall to someone who only wanted a drink. He could neither halt nor master it.

Dirty fingers found and locked around his throat, and nails scored it. Harry tried to force power into his hands to tear them off, and nearly drained Connor of magic entirely, and nearly let the gray hand of the corrupted ritual through. He gasped, sobbed, and pulled back, trying to decide what he should do—risk killing Kreacher, risk draining his brother or Peter, risk being stripped of magic entirely and resurrecting Voldemort—

He's doing it!

Harry could hear the voice in his head, its clear, ringing tones cutting through all the other nonsense there, the desperate whirl of fears and plans. He forced his eyes up when the voice urged him, *Look at Voldemort! Look, look, look!*

Voldemort was clutching his head, which shook wildly. His eyes bulged, and he appeared to be wearing two different expressions at once.

Harry dragged his magic back from feeding on Connor again, and pushed Kreacher back from tearing his throat open again, and shouted, *What's happening?*

The voice replied at once. *Sirius is charging! Sirius is fighting! This is what he was waiting for, what he was harboring all his strength for! I can see him, like a great black dog springing on a wolf! He's wrestling him, he's drowning him, he's taking his mind back—*

Voldemort's groping hand abruptly hit Sirius's wand, and Harry thought he would lift it and strike at himself. Then his fingers spasmed, and he knocked it away. Harry supposed one of his selves didn't want to risk the other using it.

And Harry knew Voldemort would win in the end. There was the locket around his neck, and Voldemort was a skilled Legilimens. It could only end one way.

Yes, it could.

Understanding of the prophecy flooded into Harry's head, and he felt calmer than he had in a long time, even as his magic bucked wildly against its reins, growing stronger with every second that passed, as he swallowed more and more of it, and that in turn fed his ability to swallow more and more. He whistled sharply, and that caught the snake's attention. Harry pointed out, helpfully, how powerful the magic in the locket around Voldemort's neck must be.

His magic lunged forward and grabbed the locket—and yes, it was familiar, the same kind of power that it had swallowed when it destroyed the diary. It tore it open, snacking, feasting, glutting itself. Harry heard Voldemort scream.

And then Sirius's eyes were looking at him, and they were his godfather's, flashing gray and apologetic for a moment.

Harry used a bit of his magic to send Kreacher flying entirely free, and then shouted, "Peter! Roll the wand to me!"

He could feel the wand when it settled against his hand. There was no doubt that Peter had brought it for him, had intended for him to use it against Voldemort, and Harry was a bit sorry to disappoint him.

He tossed it underhanded to Sirius.

He heard Peter's squeak and Connor's wail, but they didn't understand. Neither of them understood. Neither of them had been battle-trained in the way Harry had, and neither of them understood the prophecy as he did in that instant, watching Sirius catch Peter's wand and stand.

Already, his face was flickering, showing signs of Voldemort returning. But, as it turned out, he did have time to say six words.

"Goodbye, Harry." He smiled slightly, and his eyes turned to the side. "Goodbye, Connor." His gaze faced forward again, fixing on the wand he held. Harry saw the bright Gryffindor courage there, the bravery in the face of death that the other

Houses considered them mad for.

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

And as the green light struck, killing Sirius, killing Voldemort with him, as Sirius died by the wand of the sacrifice, Harry brought his magic down in a *Reducto* that broke Voldemort’s yew reparations box to pieces.

The justice ritual twisted a final time, and smashed free. Mightier magic than Harry’s shoved his own magic back into his body, burned the circle away, tore the gray egg emerging from Sirius’s side to shreds, ate the Dark Mark, and vented itself on Kreacher’s body until the house elf was a series of small and bloody pieces, destroying everything that had been used to confine it and perpetrate injustice. Harry’s snake had to vomit up most of the power it had swallowed. And Harry found that he could control what was left, so long as he thought, in utter determination, about not hurting anyone.

The dance broke apart, Voldemort’s spell of corruption ceasing, and the shack shuddered a final time as the ritual fled. Sirius’s body shook, too, a faint tendril of red-gold light caressing it. Harry nodded as the light flickered out. The ritual was simply making sure there was no more justice to be done, but there was not.

Last time pays for all, Harry thought.

Then the light was gone, and they were left—Peter crouching as a rat in the corner, Connor sobbing near the remains of the circle, and Harry kneeling on the floor with his throat bleeding—in utter silence.

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

Chapter Forty-One: October 31, 1981

When he could breathe, and when he had felt, with one hand, that the wound on his throat was not about to tear open any further, the first thing Harry did was crawl over to his brother.

Connor lay on his side, one arm still wrapped around his face as he cried, though he cried without sound. Harry hesitated for a moment. He could no longer sense his brother’s emotions as he once had, but other bonds were still there. He still felt as though Connor were his twin. He still felt loyalty, and he still felt love.

Relieved that Polaris had not cut *all* their bonds, Harry held out his arms and whispered, “Connor?”

Connor didn’t hesitate, but turned around and embraced him, one arm locking around his shoulders and one around his waist. Harry bowed his head carefully onto his brother’s shoulder in return and closed his eyes.

I am sorry that he had to grow up this way, he thought. *At least the most painful part is done, and he got to hear Sirius say goodbye, and he knows why Sirius died.* Harry thought he would have never been able to explain himself to Connor’s satisfaction if he had gone alone to the Shrieking Shack and come back with a dead Sirius, or only Peter’s word that he had not killed him.

Harry heard a scurry, and saw that Peter, in rat form, had come up beside them. He sat up on his haunches to touch his whiskers gently to Harry’s elbow, then retreated towards his wand. Harry was grateful for the privacy, and went back to rubbing his brother’s neck and spine, murmuring nonsense words that Connor could choose to take heed of if he wanted.

“Harry?” Connor whispered at last, when the sobbing had calmed enough to let him speak.

Harry murmured his attention.

“I—“ Connor’s voice cracked for a moment, then grew stronger. “I’m sorry.”

Harry blinked. He had expected an apology, but not so soon. He sat back and tried to look into his twin’s eyes, but he couldn’t. Connor had pushed his face into the crook of Harry’s neck and shoulder, and kept it there even as he whispered. Harry was surprised that his words were so clear, when cloth had to be muffling his mouth.

“I should have known,” Connor whispered. “He acted so strangely. He didn’t seem to love you at all in these last few months, as though your being put in Slytherin made him not your godfather any more. Before that, he always ranted and raved against Slytherins. These last few months, he just told me calmly all about their evil, and especially yours.” He shuddered.

Harry couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he kept silent, other than the faint sound his hand made as it passed through his brother's hair.

"And I—I was so desperate to think that he would stay alive past May, and that my compulsion was good, that I listened to him," Connor whispered. "I'm sorry, Harry. I should have come to you with the prophecy."

You should have, Harry thought, but that was not the proper thing to say now, not that or any other variation of "I told you so." He had a chance to heal Connor's bleeding wound and let Connor heal his, but only if he was careful.

"I understand why you didn't," he said instead. "It seemed pretty clear when it said Sirius was going to die."

Connor nodded, a miserable motion accompanied by sniffing. He finally sat back enough for Harry to see his face. He looked half-destroyed, his eyes narrowed by the puffy red skin around them, his skin blotchy, his nose smeared with snot.

"And that's what happened," he whispered.

"It is." Harry glanced at Sirius's body, and felt the first touch of mourning for the man who had been his godfather, who had died so bravely, like a Gryffindor. He squeezed his eyes shut. He couldn't afford to cry, not right now. His headache was surging back, and the voice in his head was suspiciously silent, and he could not collapse yet, not when his brother needed him. "He died bravely."

"But he's still dead."

Harry blinked. He would have thought the reassurance of bravery would calm his brother. Perhaps Connor was not quite as far gone into the Gryffindor mentality as he thought, or perhaps he just didn't want that kind of comfort right now.

"Yes, he is," he said.

Connor closed his eyes. His lips, pressed together, trembled. Harry didn't touch him. He thought this was something his brother needed to work through on his own. And Connor didn't break down into tears, but visibly pulled himself together, with a resilience that Harry hadn't known he possessed. He opened his eyes and gave Harry a faint smile.

"You were telling the truth all along," he said.

"Well, not about Sirius being possessed," Harry said. "I didn't know about that. But about him not having your best interests at heart, and about Mum and the phoenix web, and about my intentions towards you." He took a deep breath. "Yes."

"I'm sorry," Connor whispered again.

Harry held still. Connor had that hitch in the back of his voice that said he wasn't finished speaking yet, and the last thing Harry wanted to do was interrupt him. He had to admit, part of him thought he deserved the speech that Connor was about to come out with, the one that wouldn't ever have emerged if Connor hadn't been here and watched the shattering of his childhood in front of his eyes.

Connor began speaking, hardly above a whisper and with his words all running together, but Harry had had ears mostly tuned to his voice for years. He could make out what his brother was saying, and he didn't need it to be any louder or clearer. This was about saying things, not saying them in some dramatic manner.

"I started suspecting you were telling me the truth with a letter Mum wrote me in February," Connor said to his hands. "She said that I had to keep fighting you, had to get you back under control. Why would she use *that* phrase? She'd always said before that she just loved you, and you were the one who turned on her. But that phrase made it sound like you were right, and she'd controlled you, and she just couldn't stand it that you'd broken the control and run away.

"And then the prophecy came, and I was so frightened that you would kill Sirius." Connor laughed unhappily, though for a moment it sounded like he would break down in tears again. "I started feeling your power. You're so strong, Harry. You could have killed Sirius at any moment you wanted to. I thought I had to protect him, and so I started fighting you more often. I thought you wouldn't want to fight and kill him if you were paying attention to me and trying to kill me."

Harry had to close his eyes. *How many sacrifices are there going to be in my family?*

"I was more stubborn than ever," said Connor. "Sometimes I was stupid, and sometimes I acted stupid. Sometimes I really

believed everything Mum and Sirius told me, and sometimes I didn't. But when I really did, then I was comfortable in what I was doing, and when I didn't, then I thought at least you would hurt me and not Sirius.

"And by then, he must have been possessed." Connor turned his head to stare at Sirius's body. "He was telling me that compulsion had always been a Light gift, except when a Slytherin used it."

Harry bit his lip, thought about not asking, and then decided he had to. If he didn't, then it would linger between them, a poisoned fang like one from the basilisk's mouth, and corrupt everything that followed. There had to be absolute honesty between them, now. "Is that why you tried to compel me in the Owlery?"

Connor nodded. "I couldn't think of anything else to do. I thought that maybe, just maybe, you would feel sorry for what you did to Mum and reconcile with us, but you didn't, and by then it was a full month after I heard the prophecy. I was getting frantic. I thought that if I could compel you to become part of the family again, then you wouldn't have any reason to hurt *anybody*, not Sirius and not Mum and not me."

"What did you believe, out of what I said to you that day?" Harry asked.

Connor's eyes slid away from him.

"Connor?"

"Everything," Connor whispered. "I believed everything. And I hated it. I thought I would start to hate Mum if I listened to you. I thought I would start to think that you were right and she was wrong. Do you know what it's like to have your world shatter around you, Harry?"

"Intimately," said Harry, before he could stop himself.

Connor's gaze darted towards him, and then dropped away. He gave a small nod to acknowledge Harry's words. "So I demanded that you come back to us. I told myself I was offering you a chance. And when you refused, I told myself that compulsion was the only choice, even though I knew it wasn't, because I couldn't think of anything else to do. It was vernal equinox. The time the prophecy was talking about was just a few weeks away. If I couldn't convince you, then I thought I could bend you or break you."

"So you were willing to sacrifice me for Sirius," Harry summed up.

Connor nodded.

Harry took a deep breath, which felt as though there was anger hanging off the end of it. "I hate that," he said, finally. "I hate being sacrificed. I don't mind if I choose to give up my own life or free time, but I hate it that you tried to do it to me, Connor."

Connor nodded. "I know. I'm sorry."

Harry watched him in silence for a few moments, then said, "Go on."

"That failed," said Connor. "So I tried to spread rumors that you were going to murder me, thinking that maybe the Headmaster would have to expel you from school if you were thought to be a dangerous lunatic. But that didn't work. And then you started the lessons, and it seemed as though that was my chance to make you so mad at me that you would never think about Sirius again." He squeezed his eyes shut. "But you kept mentioning Sirius. You kept *talking* about him. I thought you were taunting me, that you had some plan to get rid of him, and you wanted me to know that there was nothing I could do about it."

"And when I confronted you this afternoon—"

"I thought you'd put a plan in motion," Connor admitted. "I was wrong to compel Draco. I know that now. But I'd rather compel him than lose Sirius." He looked over at Sirius's body and seemed to forget what he was going to say next.

"Draco's the one you're going to have to apologize to about that," Harry reminded him, "not me."

Connor nodded distractedly. His eyes were tearing up again, but he swatted at the corners of them to take the moisture away. "I can't believe he's really gone," he whispered.

Harry held out his arms, and his brother climbed into them again. Harry held him tightly as he cried, and wondered where his own tears had gone. Burned off by exhaustion and pain and the need to concentrate on other things, perhaps.

Connor's second bout of weeping was shorter, and he sat away from Harry, looking a bit embarrassed about it. "Thanks," he whispered. "Harry, I don't even know how to say sorry other than—well, sorry. And I hate that I was trying to protect someone who didn't deserve it, and I hate that Voldemort corrupted me again, like he did last year, and this time I didn't even know it was him. But I'll do what I can to change things." His face was set and determined.

Harry nodded. "We'll have to talk to lots of people," he said. "We'll have to talk a lot. But I think we can do it."

Connor gave him a tentative smile.

"Harry. Connor."

Harry started. He had actually forgotten that Peter was there, and he hadn't heard the sudden inrush of air that usually accompanied Peter's Animagus transformation. He turned around to see Peter sitting solemnly beside Voldemort's Pensieve. Polaris, Harry was glad to see, was nowhere in sight.

"I'm sorry," said Peter softly. He waved his wand, and *Lumos* took fire at the tip, lighting up the cabin better than the faint beams of afternoon light still creeping through the boards on the windows. "But there are some things we need to talk about, and we don't have much time to talk about them."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?"

Peter smiled at him sadly. "I thought you knew the truth already, Harry," he said, "and the phoenix web was just preventing you from viewing it in the right light, or thinking it mattered. It turns out that you don't, that you must not. I saw your face when V-Voldemort said some of the things he did. You still believe the story your parents told you about that night at Godric's Hollow when he attacked. You should have reacted to the things he said differently, now that you're free of the phoenix web, if you knew the truth."

Harry blinked, and felt his heart begin to stutter. He and Snape had suspected, but not *known*...

"But why not much time?" he whispered.

Peter glanced at the windows of the shack. "I've stayed in one place for too long," he said. "The Dementors will be hunting me. And, more than that..." He rolled his wand gently between his fingers. "You know the Aurors have spells that will let them see the last round of spells a wand cast?"

Harry nodded, then stopped. Peter smiled gently at him. "You get it," he said.

"But you didn't cast the *Avada Kedavra*," Harry insisted. "Sirius did. We can tell them that."

"I'm not sure that you would be allowed to," Peter said quietly. "It's still an Unforgivable Curse, Harry, and I'm still a fugitive from Azkaban. I don't think that Dumbledore would let me tell them the truth, either. The phoenix web in my head hasn't moved on the surface in a long time. I think it's sinking deeper. Dumbledore is saving it for something other than my telling you the truth, this time, or I would never have been able to say even this much. But my talking to the Aurors and revealing *everything*? Yes, I think he was saving it for that. He must have decided that the possible damage to him from that was even greater than the possible damage if I told you about the attack on Godric's Hollow."

His eyes turned flinty, and flashed. "I am *never* going back to Azkaban. I want to make sure that the two of you know the truth, all of it, and then I'll leave."

"But where will you go?" Harry asked, feeling helpless.

"I don't know yet," said Peter, and then paused with a faint smile. "Well. There is one place I might go and be welcome, though I haven't ever taken advantage of the invitation." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter, Harry. What matters is you knowing the truth. It's been kept from you for too long."

He dragged Voldemort's Pensieve forward. Harry eyed it warily. "If that contains memories of him possessing Sirius, I don't think we need to see it." He moved sideways until his shoulder bumped his twin's, and felt Connor nod in agreement.

“It doesn’t,” said Peter softly. “It contains memories of *that* night. The attack. I think even Voldemort was growing tired of you not knowing the truth, though in his case he intended to take away your magic and then make you despair of what you saw in here.”

He glanced at both of them. “Ready?”

Harry knew a fine tremor was shaking Connor, and knew his brother was not ready. But it wouldn’t get any easier if they waited—and if what Peter said was true, they *couldn’t* wait. He held Connor’s hand and nodded.

Peter bent down towards the silvery liquid. Harry followed, shuddering slightly as the coolness crept over him, but he didn’t duck fully beneath the surface until he had made sure that Connor was following him. He wasn’t going to see his brother left behind again. This time, they would face whatever shattering truths might be waiting together.

They landed in the middle of a place that it took Harry a moment to recognize as Godric’s Hollow. For one thing, it was night, without a moon, thanks to the rushing clouds overhead. For another, the house looked different. And for a third, the gleam of the isolation wards that had protected their home for as long as he could remember was gone. He shivered. They must be seeing the moment in which Voldemort had breached the wards. The Fidelius Charm was already broken.

A dark-cloaked shape moved on the lawn, striding rapidly towards the doors. Harry shuddered. Even in the memory, he could feel the power that traveled with Voldemort. It was stronger than it had been when he faced Voldemort as Quirrell, or Tom Riddle, or this latest version of him. Harry shook his head. How could Dumbledore have thought a baby would survive an attack by a wizard that powerful?

“There I am,” said Peter, pointing out a plump figure, low to the ground, scurrying behind the Dark Lord. “I can tell you what happens afterwards. This memory only goes to the point when Voldemort was destroyed, of course.”

Harry glanced at Connor. His brother’s jaw gaped open, and he shook his head slowly back and forth, as if he were trying to envision some way of dealing with this. When he saw Harry watching him, he slammed his jaw shut and tried to lift his head high, though his face was working with violent emotions. Harry took his hand, and they walked into the house behind Voldemort and Peter.

Voldemort glanced around the empty house and laughed, the same high, cold laugh Harry had learned to associate with his enemy in other incarnations. “Where are the children, Wormtail?”

“Up-upstairs, my l-lord.” Harry hardly recognized Peter’s voice. It was a broken, obsequious stammer. Harry wondered if it was an act, if Peter had always been this strong man who waited beside them now with a solemn expression on his face, or if his fear of Voldemort had prompted fear in truth.

Voldemort crossed to the stairs and began to climb them. Harry, Connor, and Peter followed behind, shivering. The memory-Peter scuttled even behind them, as if he did not want to witness what was about to happen.

Well, come to that, Harry thought, *I don’t, either.* Suspicion made his heart knock heavily in his chest, and his breath came short, as if he were backing up to another cliff of the kind that Draco and Snape had shoved him off in Malfoy Manor.

They reached a bedroom door that looked substantially different from the one that Harry knew. Voldemort studied it for a moment, then laughed again and moved his wand twice. One muttered spell broke the wards on the door, and another shattered it entirely. Harry heard bedclothes rustle in the aftermath of that shattering, and then an unhappy, wailing cry.

Voldemort stepped through the door. The memory-Peter peered over his shoulder. Now-Peter motioned, and Harry and Connor stepped around Voldemort so that they could see better.

Two young boys lay in twin cots a good distance back from the door, under a high, peaked roof. Harry was startled to see how much alike they looked. *Of course, we didn’t have the scars then,* he thought, *and we’re squinting so hard that you can’t really see our eyes.*

Voldemort was still a moment; when Harry looked at his face, he saw red eyes narrowed. “Wormtail!” he said abruptly.

Memory-Peter flinched and scurried up to his side. “My lord?”

“You are sure that you know no more of the prophecy?” Voldemort asked. “You are sure that you do not know for certain

which child will defeat me?”

Memory-Peter shook his head. Harry found himself beyond impressed. Somehow, Peter had broken in just the right ways to convince Voldemort that he knew where his friends were living and was willing to betray them, but not enough to reveal that he also knew the prophecy that said the younger of the two twins would be the one to defeat him. “No, my lord. Only what S-Severus told you.”

Voldemort nodded. “Best to take care of them all at once, then,” he murmured. “By now, Bellatrix should have destroyed the other candidate.” He held his wand high. “*Avada Kedavra!*”

The bolt of green light shot forth—

And towards Harry’s cot.

Harry found himself staggering backward and sitting down, hard, as the light struck him in the forehead, as Voldemort turned and sent another bolt of green light at Connor—

And a deep, shattering roar filled the room, accompanied by the familiar feeling of magic boiling over, and green light inundated Harry’s vision, and Voldemort screamed and screamed and screamed, and cold, powerful magic claimed a victim—

And then they were back outside the Pensieve, sprawled on the floor of the Shrieking Shack.

Harry, shaking, buried his head in his hands. Sometime along the route, he had let go of Connor’s wrist. He could hear his brother’s soft sobs, aching noises of disbelief and confusion.

“That was what happened,” Peter whispered. “I was behind the Dark Lord, and I could see. He cast the Killing Curse at you, Harry, then turned and cast it at your brother. While the green light still bound him and Connor, your reflected Killing Curse struck him. I’ve never seen anything like it. I suppose that was because Voldemort had taken so many protections against losing his own life, trying to gain immortality, and the curse had to fight that as well as actually kill him. It *struggled* with him before it pulled him from his body, and the light that bound him and Connor flickered out. Then it reduced his body to ash. His spirit fled, of course,” Peter added, a deep, bitter sound in his voice. “I know that now.”

“I don’t understand,” Connor whispered. Harry managed to lift his head and look at his brother, whose face was not only pale, but streaming with tears. “If Harry reflected the Killing Curse back at Voldemort, does that mean he’s the Boy-Who-Lived?”

Peter shook his head slowly. “He’s the one who killed Voldemort with a reflected Killing Curse, yes,” he said, and gestured at Harry’s forehead. “That scar is a curse scar. But yours is as well, Connor. Voldemort was busy trying to kill you when Harry hit him. I think the second *Avada Kedavra* had a chance to leave a mark on you, but nothing else. It got interrupted in the middle.”

Connor blinked and swallowed and swiped at his forehead. “But—I don’t understand. Mum and Dumbledore would have been able to tell that Harry’s scar was a curse scar. Why didn’t they think he was the Boy-Who-Lived, too?”

Nearly numb with shock, Harry saw Peter’s face harden. “Ah,” he said. “That’s to do with the part that I don’t think even Dumbledore knows I saw.

“After I ran, I came back. I had nowhere else to go, not that night, though I was meant to be found and go to Azkaban the next morning. And I have to admit, I was curious. I didn’t know what I’d expected when I went into the house at Godric’s Hollow, but that wasn’t it.

“I came back, and crouched outside the window. That house was half-destroyed,” he added to Harry. “That’s why they had to rebuild it. I saw your parents and Dumbledore come back and run to the nursery. They came down the stairs with both of you in their arms, your foreheads bleeding. You were both crying.” Peter spoke with his eyes fixed on the distance, as if that would make the memory easier to bear.

“Lily used a healing spell, and I heard them gasp when the spell finished. The blood had cleared, but left behind scars.

“Understand,” Peter said, “that wasn’t supposed to happen. The prophecy said there would be one savior, clearly marked.”

“Can you recite the prophecy?” Harry asked. His voice was flat and hoarse, and did not sound as if it belonged to him.

Peter nodded, then closed his eyes and began to chant. *“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...He is the younger of two, and he shall have the power the Dark Lord knows not...For the elder is power, but the younger is power united with love...O guard him, O shield him, for the darkness through which he passes otherwise is vicious and hideous, and love has but a scant chance of surviving...The elder will stand at his right shoulder, loving him, but the younger will love the whole of the wizarding world...The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, and in so doing mark his heart... The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born as the seventh month dies...”*

His voice faded, and Harry stared at the wall, and tried to think. Thoughts chased themselves in small pieces around his whirling mind, assaulting him and then flicking away again before he could fully grasp them.

It seemed as though Dumbledore and his parents had interpreted the prophecy correctly. Connor was born at the end of July. He was the younger of the two of them. Lily had always said that Connor’s power was love, and that Harry needed to guard him, because otherwise that love would perish. Harry’s love for Connor was deeper and truer than any other he felt—

Or had been.

Harry shoved that thought away, and went back to concentrating.

Connor’s scar was in the shape of a heart. Yes, everything fit. Or everything *should* have fit. Harry didn’t know how to explain the memory in the Pensieve.

He shook his head, finally, and turned back to Peter, deciding that he couldn’t possibly know the truth with the information he had right now. “And what did Dumbledore and our parents do?”

“I heard them speaking,” said Peter softly. “I will not forget what they said, not until I die. I certainly had enough time to remember their words in Azkaban.

“Lily said, ‘This wasn’t supposed to happen. Albus, what *happened*? Why do they both have scars? And why does Harry’s magic feel like—like that? It’s unnatural.’ She started to cry.”

Peter darted a swift glance at Harry. “You’d always been a magically normal baby, Harry—strong, but well within the bounds of normality. Until Voldemort came. Lying in Lily’s arms that night, you would have been a beacon, or a siren, to anyone who wanted to look or listen. I was having a hard time restraining myself from going into the house, just to be nearer the magic.

“Dumbledore sighed. It was a sigh that seemed to come from his bones. ‘Lily, James,’ he said. ‘What I am telling you must not go beyond the walls of this house. Voldemort used the Killing Curse on both boys. He must have used it on Harry after he used it on Connor, or Harry would not be alive, but the fact remains that he used it. And the curse broke a barrier in Harry that all normal wizards have. He has access to a level of power that most wizards can’t use, because calling on that much magic at once would kill them.’

“‘Then why is he still alive?’ It was James who asked that. I’ll never forget how he looked, Harry, holding you. Small and fragile, and helpless. It was the first time I ever saw James look that way.

“‘Because,’ said Dumbledore, and pinched the bridge of his nose, ‘he is a child, and he can grow used to using that level of power in a way that he could not if he were older. His body is still flexible enough to accept the change. Even if he were four or five, I do not believe he would have survived the breaking of his barriers.’ He hesitated for a long time, looking down at you, Harry.

“Then he said, ‘And Voldemort has transferred a good portion of his powers to him. That accounts for the rest of his strength, and the unnaturalness that you sense, Lily. I felt it as we climbed the stairs. There should still have been much ambient magic left in the air, enough that I could have cast a spell to see what happened in that room, what the walls remembered. Instead, there was almost none, except that which emanated from Harry himself. He has Voldemort’s ability to feed on magic. Once he had the ability, he ate Voldemort’s remaining power, including whatever was left of the two Killing Curses Voldemort must have used.’”

Harry bowed his head, and tried to keep his breathing deeper than it wanted to be. He felt Connor take his hand. He squeezed desperately. His brother winced, but squeezed back.

“That is why they think your magic unnatural, Harry,” Peter whispered. “Not only did V-Voldemort open your barriers and give you access to more magic than you should have had, he gifted you with a good deal of Dark power. In essence, he made you his magical heir, the way some pureblood families do when they transfer powers from parents to children at the moment of death. You have abilities that he does, *because* he had them when he attacked you that night, not because you were born with them.” Peter gave a dusty little laugh. “You know, things would have turned out differently if you or Voldemort were just a little weaker. If you were, then you couldn’t have survived the Killing Curse for the moment it took to smash the barriers and let your deeper magic out. If he was, then he wouldn’t have had the strength to smash the barriers at all, or leave his magic behind for you to swallow. You would simply have died, or he would have died and taken all his power with him. Instead, he made you the most formidable enemy he possibly could have.”

Harry made himself breathe. *Deep breaths. I am not going to panic. I am not going to panic. I will not let myself panic.*

He lifted his head. “What did Dumbledore say then?”

“Nothing immediately,” said Peter softly. “Your parents were crying by then. And then—well, then Sirius and Remus came in, and Dumbledore didn’t trust them enough to reveal his full plan in front of them. He told Sirius and Remus that Connor had been marked by the prophecy, just as they suspected, and sent them away with him and James to try and make the curse scar stop bleeding, since it had broken open again. That left him with Lily and you, Harry.

“He told Lily, ‘You must make sure that he loves his brother, that he is his guardian, that all that immense power is trained and bent to a good purpose. You know that otherwise, the prophecy may shift. We cannot afford to have the next Dark Lord, someone with unnatural magic, as our only savior from Voldemort. Harry *must* be the elder, and Connor *must* be the younger.’”

Harry tried to speak. He had no saliva left in his throat. He was grateful when Connor murmured, “I don’t understand. Surely I’m the younger, and Harry the elder?”

Harry opened his eyes far enough to see the savage look on Peter’s face.

“Prophecies are the wildest form of Divination magic,” he breathed. “Prophecies can *shift*.”

Harry felt the words touch a spring in his memory. His mother’s words last year, just after the phoenix web had been tripped and Remus had found out about it, came back to him.

“But prophecies are the wildest form of Divination magic...There’s a chance that it might mean different things. It would still come true, but it could turn out meaning something different from what it seemed to say the night it was made...And we had to do everything we could to lock you into that role, to sculpt you that way, so that the prophecy couldn’t possibly wander off and mean someone else, someone we wouldn’t know in time to protect, someone that Voldemort could perhaps kill. Everything in the prophecy had to come true. You had to love Connor, and before everything else. We couldn’t take the chance that it would be otherwise. Do you understand?”

Harry had half-forgotten the words, but they slammed home to him now. Lily had told him the truth then, though he had been too stupefied by pain and exhaustion and his commitment to obedience to see it.

“The prophecy could have meant someone else,” he whispered.

Peter nodded, slowly. “It could have, indeed. That’s why Voldemort sent the Lestranges to attack the Longbottoms, because their son Neville was also born at the end of July, and it could also have been him. If Voldemort had gone along in Bellatrix’s place or with her, if Voldemort had marked him...” Peter spread his hands.

“But the prophecy says that the one with the power to defy the Dark Lord is the younger of two,” said Connor. “I don’t understand.”

“The younger of two,” Peter pointed out. “It says nothing about the younger of two *brothers*, or the younger of two *twins*. It doesn’t even say that both people in the prophecy need to have been born at the end of July.”

Harry buried his head in his hands.

So many things in my life have been a lie.

“A prophecy always comes true,” said Peter softly. “But we usually can’t know how or why beforehand. It can shift in midair. It can take the likeliest person. Human choice works to influence it, though, if we understand it enough, and we can try to make the prophecy more certain. Its very wildness grants us a little more free will.

“Dumbledore knew he could convince Lily to sacrifice one of her sons. He wasn’t sure about anyone else. And he *wanted* to be sure. More than anything in the world, Dumbledore fears uncertainty. He fears waking up one day to find that the wizarding world he’s labored to save for a century has exploded around his ears. If he had control of the savior, then he had the assurance that tomorrow would be pretty much like today, that the future would be pretty much like the past.

“So he influenced Voldemort as much as he could, to try and insure that the Dark Lord would mark Connor his equal.” Peter took a deep breath. “And he influenced us, too. He focused on me, played on my love of my friends, to insure that I would agree to break the Fidelius Charm and make your parents a more tempting target than the Longbottoms. He performed the Soul Strength Spell to show your parents that you were the one who had to play guardian, Harry—“

“You can’t perform that on an infant,” Harry cut in, his voice tight. His eyes burned. He felt as though the walls of the shack had been torn away and they stood on an open plain, under black stars.

Peter looked startled for only a moment. Then he nodded, his face tightening. “So he lied to us, then. He nudged the prophecy along. And I think he thought everything was going smoothly up until the point when he realized you had more power, Harry. If you were the savior the prophecy mentioned, the one with the power Voldemort knew not, then that meant the elder, the one who would stand at your right shoulder and love you, was still somewhere else—somewhere out of his control. He wouldn’t have a clue who it was. He could not stand that.

“So he told Lily to sculpt you and train you to love Connor. If you were his guardian, if you loved only him, then you would be the best candidate for at least two lines of the prophecy—the one that said Connor needed to be shielded, and the one that said the elder would love the younger. That made the prophecy all the more unlikely to shift, and to choose Connor as its savior instead. And, of course, it made you extremely unlikely to use your power for any other purpose than protecting your brother.”

Harry sat there. The dark stars were wheeling above him now, cutting across the sky in black streaks.

He heard Connor ask, his voice soft and timid, “What does that mean, then?”

“It means that we’re up in the air,” said Peter. “We were from the moment Harry broke his phoenix web, I think. Dumbledore could no longer trust that he would only love you. His power is free, and he might be the one the prophecy will choose. On the other hand, perhaps it *will* choose you, and Harry will be the elder who has to love you. Or the elder could be someone else who loves you. Or the younger will be Harry, and his elder someone else. Since you both do bear marks from the Dark Lord, then I think the choices have narrowed, and it can’t really be anyone but one of the two of you. But Dumbledore’s neat plans are all smashed.” There was a vicious glee in Peter’s voice that Harry thought he couldn’t really blame him for.

Harry sat in silence for a moment. He couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, was falling if he thought too much about it—

And then he grasped himself, and yanked himself forward.

What is this? Living in fear of change? What, do you want to be like Dumbledore and your mother?

This doesn’t change everything. It means that you could be the Boy-Who-Lived, and you’ll have to think about that. But it also means that Connor could be the Boy-Who-Lived, and he’ll need your help and your training. He’s not power united with love right now; he’s not anything like it. The world might need him, and he would falter.

It’s not over. It’s not anything like over. Both of you were wronged. Both of you might be needed, or at least one. Now, stand up and do something about it.

Harry shifted towards Connor. Connor, his face pale and his eyes seemingly permanently wide, stared at him.

“I couldn’t blame you if you hated me,” he whispered. “They made you give up your life for me.”

“They’re to blame,” said Harry. “Not you. I won’t let you go live with Lily again, Connor.”

Connor considered him, then dipped his head once. “And what else are we going to do?” he asked.

“I am going to help you learn,” said Harry, startled by the steel in his own voice. “Voldemort’s not going to get us. He’s never going to kill either one of us. And I refuse to live in fear of what *might* happen. We’re going to *make* things happen. We’re going to have our own freedom, which should have happened all along. We’re going to fucking *fight*.” He held out his hand.

Connor took a deep breath, and clasped it.

Harry thought he heard Peter utter a long sigh, half of surprise, half of soul-deep relief. Harry braced himself for how his head would ache when he stood, then stood, and clasped Connor’s hand more firmly.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said softly, and turned towards the door, and the future that waited beyond it.

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

Chapter Forty-Two: Stand or Fall

Harry froze as he reached the end of the tunnel under the Whomping Willow. He heard Connor make an inquiring noise behind him, but he didn’t move, instead staring forward and reaching out as much as he could with his dulled senses. They throbbed with magical exhaustion, and he couldn’t be sure that what he felt was really there.

“What is it, Harry?” Peter asked from behind Connor.

Harry shook his head slowly. “I don’t know,” he whispered.

I do, said the voice in his head, abruptly returning from wherever it had been. *Bad things.*

How do you know? Harry thought back, continuing to strain his senses. He still heard nothing, but enemies didn’t have to make noise to be dangerous. That was one of the first things his mother had taught him.

I know pain, said the voice simply. *And there’s pain waiting for us outside this tree.* It took on a whining tone. *There’s always pain. Why is there always pain? I don’t like it. I can’t escape it. And you can’t escape it. Why can’t it just go away?*

Harry sighed and banished the voice to the back of his head, seeing he would get no help from it. He went on listening, since he could see nothing but the usual calm evening in front of him, and hear nothing but the whisper of wind in the grass, and smell or taste or feel nothing out of the ordinary.

“Fuck,” said Peter abruptly.

Harry turned to look back at him. “What is it?” He would trust Peter’s senses more than his own right now, and Peter was a better wizard than Connor, and trained in recognizing Dark magic besides.

“The air,” Peter whispered. “Doesn’t it feel heavy to you?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know.” He had to lean against the side of the tunnel just to keep on his feet. He hoped neither Connor nor Peter could see that, since they would probably insist on him going to sleep the moment they saw it, perhaps even carrying him back to the school. Harry didn’t think it a wise decision. If there was evil here, then he had to be ready to meet it.

Peter smiled, but the smile was strained. “I’ve only felt it this heavy once before,” he said, still in a whisper. “When I went into Godric’s Hollow behind V-Voldemort. There’s a prophecy getting ready to come true, Harry. *Damn* it.”

Harry closed his eyes and tilted his head back. Now that he concentrated, he thought he *could* feel it, a weight in the air that slid down his face like melted marmalade. He shuddered and opened his eyes again.

“Well,” he said, his voice hoarse with what he hoped they would think was anger and not weariness, “we still have to leave this tree. You said that the Aurors aren’t going to give you time to explain, Peter, and running into Dumbledore would be even worse.” He shuddered to think of what Dumbledore would say about the knowledge he and Connor now possessed.

“Yes, we’ve got to leave,” Connor agreed. “Harry needs to get to the hospital wing.”

Harry looked at him sharply. His brother gave him an irritated glance back. “What?” he asked. “Anyone can see that you

need to rest, Harry. You're not doing a good job of hiding it."

Harry shuffled from foot to foot, muttered in his throat, and looked to the entrance. Still nothing moved beyond it, and Harry heard no voices, raised in either laughter or threat. He thought they should be able to get back to Hogwarts relatively unobserved; most people would be at dinner, and he hoped that Snape would still be stunned by whatever pain the voice in his head had shared with him.

He tried to think about the second half of the prophecy, but the words warped and blurred and slid away from him. All Harry really wanted was to go put his head down on something soft and close his eyes.

He took a deep breath "Let's go, then," he said, and stepped out of the way, so that Connor could duck past him and press the knot in the Willow's trunk to calm it. Peter took Harry's arm and helped him up the slight slope out. Harry accepted the hold, grudgingly, since it was obvious that Peter wouldn't let him simply walk out on his own.

And, damn it, he was tired, even though he couldn't afford to be. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, and told himself it would be better when he reached Hogwarts and had some healing potions.

And then the late sun darkened, and the air turned cold, and Dementors were everywhere, turning the world gray.

Peter let out a faint scream, overwhelmed by the presence of so many of them, and crumpled to the ground. Harry shouted, but it was a faint and strangled sound. Connor didn't cry out at all, though his eyes grew wider and wider in his increasingly pale face.

A dark figure floated towards Peter, drawing its hood back from its face. Harry saw the yawning, distended mouth, and knew the thing was about to try and suck Peter's soul out in the Kiss.

"No, damn it!" he managed. "Where is your leader? The gray one?" He let his magic flare around him, calling the Dementors' attention. "I spoke with him once before. He released my magic. I want to know where he is!"

Here, vates.

Harry shivered as he felt the voice drill into his head, like ice spikes through his ears. It hurt less this time than it had, though. He wondered why.

I am keeping it out, said the voice in the back of his head. *This is my territory. I don't want to share it with any more pain, thank you.*

Harry blinked and nodded shortly, then forced himself to his feet as the Dementors parted like a thunderhead and let the gray one glide down an aisle in the middle of them. Harry felt its freezing not-gaze, and flinched. His thoughts and eyes were still trying to slide sideways. He could sleep *later*, he told himself. He didn't have *time* to be exhausted right now.

It didn't seem to be working. As far as his body was concerned, the plea that Harry had used to such good effect when he was dashing out of Hogwarts and rescuing Connor was so much air. He had done his part, rescued Connor and defeated Voldemort and seen the truth and resolved to struggle in the future. Now he needed to *rest*.

Not yet, Harry thought, and used some of the stolen magic that he had gotten from Voldemort to stiffen his legs and spine. He grimaced. It felt as though raw shit was pouring through his veins when he did that, but it did was supposed to do, and kept him upright as the gray Dementor floated to a halt in front of him. The one hovering above Peter hadn't moved, but Harry was grateful to see that it hadn't stooped and sucked out Peter's soul, either.

You are among us again, vates. The gray Dementor's voice was thick in his head, like condensation, like fog—or maybe it was just that combining with his tiredness. *And your magic is free, and so are your thoughts. You have learned of your duties and the path of choice. Will you choose to free us?*

Harry blinked. That did not sound like such a horrible price. Why had the Dementors come up as if they were attacking, then?

Probably because they wanted Peter, he thought, his gaze sliding sideways to the motionless wizard. *And the black ones don't seem to be as smart as their leader.*

He looked back at the gray Dementor. "You're bound like all the other magical creatures, aren't you?" he asked.

The gray Dementor inclined its head. *We want to be free, vates.*

And then, just as Harry supposed Dementors could pour despair into the victims of Azkaban, the gray leader poured longing into him. Harry could feel the clinging chains of the web that the Dementors labored under, how they longed to rest and reproduce and feed and live as normal magical creatures would, but how they could not do that until the chain was removed.

They enslave us, the gray Dementor said, its voice causing a faint rime of ice to form on Harry's face. *We cannot breed, vates. There will never be more of us until the chains are removed. There have not been more of us in centuries. And we cannot eat, not truly eat, and we cannot sleep. We cannot dream. Can you imagine what it would be like, never to dream, vates?*

Harry's first thought was, *It would be heaven,* and he found himself wanting to giggle as if he were drunk. But he restrained himself. Just because his dreams were usually nightmares induced by Voldemort didn't mean that the dreams of all creatures were like that.

And he could certainly understand the plea for rest right now. And to be free of a certain weary, bothersome, burdensome duty that hounded him, or rested on his shoulders. The Dementors, all of them, had been chained to Azkaban for centuries, guarding human prisoners. It was no existence for magical creatures.

That was horrible, what the wizards did to you, he thought dimly, but the gray Dementor picked up on it and inclined its head.

We have helped you, vates. We freed you under the hope that someday we would be free ourselves. And now that time has come.

Harry considered that, as clearly as he could in his current state. It seemed reasonable to him. Why not? The Dementors had freed him, and certainly they deserved to be free. And they seemed to be as good a candidate for the fulfillment of the prophecy as any other. The gray one was before him. He had even thought the line in the prophecy might mean the gray Dementor when he was traveling through time with Hermione. And what was the line about his decision this evening setting the path for them all? That must mean that his first action as *vates*, to free the Dementors, would mean setting the precedent to free other creatures from their magical nets. Harry remembered how wonderful he had felt when freed from the phoenix web. Surely it could not be a bad thing, for others to feel that surge of joy and completion.

Can you show me the web? he asked the gray Dementor, not without embarrassment. *I'm not feeling as well as I should be right now, and I'm afraid that I can't see it on my own.*

The Dementor gestured once, and a glowing ice-blue web sprang into being, writhing among the Dementors and trailing away into the distance. Harry studied it for a moment. *There are other Dementors still at Azkaban?*

The gray head inclined.

Harry blinked. Well, he thought it would be hard, but not too hard. The web was large, yes, and ancient, but also clumsily stitched. The wizards who wove it had done nothing more than cast the ice-blue coils of the incantation around each Dementor's core, the thrumming black thing at the center of all of them. It was impossible for the Dementors to remove, of course, without tearing themselves apart, and most wizards wouldn't have the power or inclination to touch it, but it required only raw strength to shred the web itself, and leave everything that was not it untouched.

Harry started to reach out, concentrating on marshaling the stolen power, even the filthy Dark magic. He could find a good use for it.

Then he paused. There was something he was forgetting. What was it?

The prophecy? No, as much as he could understand the prophecy, Harry was sure he understood it.

Peter? No, the black Dementors had not touched him, and though Connor looked on the edge of fainting, they had not touched him, either. They were waiting patiently for their freedom, eyeless not-gazes fixed on him.

A part of his task as *vates*?

Yes.

Harry abruptly shuddered and lowered his hand and his magic. He swallowed thickly a few times, trying to push the horrified insight in his brain into words. He felt the gray Dementor's cold curiosity, and the voice in the back of his head whispered, *Are you sure you should be doing this, when they're right there?*

Shock had cleared Harry's head for a moment, though, and he knew this was the right thing to do.

He looked up and studied the gray Dementor. "You said," he managed, and paused. *Merlin, I want to go to bed.* He told himself to stop whining like a child and act like a *vates*. "You said that if you were free, you would dream and reproduce and feed. What did you mean, feed? Who are you going to eat?"

The Dementors went motionless. Harry knew they really couldn't have, since after all their robes were still drifting in the wind, and some of them were shifting around near the back of their crowd, but he felt as if it had happened, anyway. His heart knocked against his ribs, and adrenaline rose to chase away the blurriness. He stood a little straighter.

Connor whispered, "If they were free, wouldn't they just Kiss everyone, not only the Azkaban prisoners?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," Harry whispered back. "Hush."

The gray Dementor waited long moments before it spoke. Harry wondered if that was because it had to consider its words so carefully, or whether it had hoped to use the pause to impress him or wear him down. If the latter was the intention, it didn't work. Harry only felt more and more tense as the moments passed. He could feel his head lifting, his nostrils flaring, his eyes narrowing. He was trained for battle, and he knew there might be another battle coming.

His childish side tried to wail a protest at that. Harry squashed it without much effort. He had known when he trained that there might come days with more than one battle—in fact, a running skirmish would be more usual than one enormous battle in a day, and no more. He had to keep moving, had to call up energy multiple times, had to be ready to face whatever appeared.

The gray Dementor said, *We would feed as we always have, on happy memories and sometimes souls. The Kiss is necessary for us to breed.*

"But you would feed on whoever you wanted?" Harry asked. "Not only criminals condemned to Azkaban?"

We would no longer be bound by wizarding notions of morality.

"So you would feed on whoever you wished?"

We would confine our hunting mostly to the Muggle world. They cannot see us. They would not hunt us. They would not know what killed them. We would be willing to leave your family and friends alone, vates.

Harry closed his eyes. Yes, this was the part of the *vates* name that he almost forgotten. He was responsible for his decisions, all of them, both the good and the bad ones. If he made one, then he had to know why he had made it, how it would affect his future decisions—and what consequences it would mean for others.

"How can I let you go free, when you will destroy others and leave soulless bodies behind you?" he whispered.

Think of it as justice, vates, the gray Dementor suggested. Your kind has held us prisoner for centuries. We will only be visiting on them the same terror and frustration they have visited on us.

"That's *vengeance*, not justice," Harry said.

The Dementors stirred around him like a trembling candle flame. The gray Dementor said, *And is it justice to leave us confined in the web? A true vates cannot abide compulsion, neither for himself nor for anyone else. If you are not a true vates, perhaps we have made a mistake, and we then owe you nothing, neither obedience nor safety.*

"You wouldn't owe me obedience anyway," Harry muttered, but he was thinking hard. Was there some way that he could free the Dementors and insure that they didn't feed on anyone else? He could see why those ancient wizards had taken the compromise of binding the Dementors to Azkaban. Those they fed on were already considered guilty, not worthy of protection from the Dementors, unlike the innocents outside the prison.

I cannot destroy them. That would be against their will. I cannot Transfigure them into something that does not need to feed on souls or memories. That would be immoral, when they are intelligent and know the world around them.

Harry clenched his fists, spat for the first time by one of the thorns on his path, and hating it.

And I cannot leave them bound.

And, just to add to everything, the prophecy said that his first decision as vates would set the path for them all. And he was so tired that he could barely think straight, and growing in the back of his mind was the increasingly urgent need to get Connor and Peter away from the Dementors.

No pressure, of course.

Harry swallowed. Well, when in doubt, turn to the source. Perhaps the Dementors themselves could give him some idea of what they might do, what bargains they would be willing to enter, so that freeing them would not linger so heavily on his conscience. Their offer to hunt in the Muggle world and spare his friends and family was unacceptable.

He lifted his head and stared at the gray Dementor. "I cannot free you without others suffering," he said. "Can you think of any way that you could be free and not cause others suffering?"

The gray Dementor did not speak for long moments, but eddied from side to side. Harry watched, and held his breath, and waited.

Then the gray Dementor said, *Is this something that you will ask of all the bound magical creatures, vates?*

"Probably not," said Harry. "Some of the bound creatures, like the unicorns, probably won't cause others to hurt when they're free. But the others—" He shrugged. "Yes."

It is a restriction of our free will.

"It is not," Harry pointed out. "I asked you what you're willing to do. If you enter into a bargain like this because you say you want to, then that's not a restriction of anything. You'll have chosen."

Even choice is a restriction.

Harry folded his arms. "You're not the whole of the wizarding world," he said, surprised for a moment by the irritation in his tone. Then he remembered that he had sounded this way as a six-year-old when he'd stayed up too late. The recollection almost made him smile, but the gray Dementor was there, and Harry was not sure how it would interpret the gesture. He kept his face blank. "You're not more important than anyone else. You're just as important as the wizards, and the house elves, and the unicorns, and not *more* important." He shook his head slightly when he realized he'd repeated that sentiment twice. Fatigue was affecting his eloquence. "I can't free you if it would hurt everyone else."

The gray Dementor was silent for long moments. Then it said, *We came from nightmares, long ago, from the dark shadows that lurk at the edge of human souls. It is why we can feed on happy memories, and on souls themselves. We were called out, and lived in the daylight world, and did not want to return to nightmares. But, if need be, we could go back. We could live in that half-world, that dream-world, taking our food from human minds just like any other breed of nightmares.*

Harry frowned uneasily. "That would mean you were still hurting people, wouldn't it?"

And would you stop every bad dream in the world, vates? For the first time, the gray Dementor sounded amused with him.

"If I could. Yes."

There as silence, and then the gray Dementor said, in tones of wonder, *Yes, I do believe you would.* It went on before Harry could spend much of his time being surprised about a Dementor experiencing wonder. *You could consider yourself setting right the balance of nature and magic in sending us back. We were called into the open by a wizard who wished to use us against his enemies, and we adapted to the night. I am the only one still of the twilight, the only one who still remembers that we came from the dream-world. Yes, vates, send us back. Send us home.*

"Do I have your word that you'll go to the dream-world and nowhere else if I release your web, then?" Harry demanded.

You have my word, and the others answer to me, vates.

Harry let his breath out in a deep wash. "Very well," he said, and then reached out and broke the ice-blue web with a twist of his power.

It was actually a good thing that he was so tired, or he might not have done it the right way. The web was too thick to be cut, too sticky to be freed one Dementor at a time. Harry just grabbed it and yanked it away from the gray Dementor, flushing out his tainted, stolen magic in a flood over it, and the web dissolved and rotted away. It was gone from every other Dementor in sight the moment it was gone from the gray one.

Harry was aware of the Dementors' oppressive aura increasing. There was no longer any barrier between him and the fear. But he stood straight under it, and looked at the gray one.

He had kept his part of the promise. It was up to them to keep theirs.

The gray Dementor held its arms wide and began to whirl. The others were swept towards it like leaves in a windstorm. The gray Dementor spun them all into a rotting, dark web of its own, and then into a funnel cloud with itself at the bottom. Harry saw it rise, soaring straight up the middle of the funnel. Ahead of it, the sky ripped open, but Harry saw no twilight-marked clouds or stars. Instead, he was staring at a sky the color of rotting muscle, a sky that it seemed he had seen in some of his nightmares.

Goodbye, vates.

The sky closed with a thunderclap behind them, and Harry and Connor stood alone on the grass, beside a just-barely-stirring Peter.

Peter sat up and stared at Harry.

"I don't think *they*'ll be bothering you any more, at least," Harry muttered, swaying on his feet. He blinked, then added, "And I think you should go, before someone sees you with us and Dumbledore calls the Aurors."

Peter did not move for long moments, despite his earlier urgency. His eyes scanned Harry intently for a moment, and then he nodded, his teeth flashing briefly in a fierce, feral grin.

"The next few years should be *interesting*," he muttered, as he stood.

Harry gave him what he knew was a faint smile. He hoped Peter would understand that the faintness came from his weariness, and not his lack of sincere emotion. "Goodbye, Peter. I hope that you have a safe journey. Write to me to let me know you're safe."

Peter nodded once. "I am sure I will, Harry. I do not want to lose contact with you. You have done so much for me."

Tired or no, Harry couldn't let that one pass. "You did a lot for me, too," he protested.

"Not as much, I think." Peter only shook his head when Harry would have argued, and held out a hand. Harry clasped it.

Peter turned and looked hesitantly at Connor. Connor stared back at him. Harry could read nothing on his brother's face at all.

"Goodbye, Connor," said Peter. "I am sorry about Sirius. He was my friend, once."

"I know," said Connor softly. "It wasn't your fault." He hesitated, then added, "Goodbye."

Peter nodded, and made the nod into part of the motion that carried him into his Animagus form. He scurried towards the Forbidden Forest, barely a movement in the thick grass, and quickly vanished. Harry found himself hoping absently that none of the rat-eating creatures in the Forest would be abroad tonight.

"What are we going to do now?" Connor asked, when a few moments had passed in silence.

Harry blinked, and came back to himself. He really was stupefied, he thought, if he'd just stood there and stared at nothing. "We go inside," he said firmly. "We find Snape. We get him to do...things with Sirius's body, and Voldemort's Pensieve,

and that damn knife.” Peter had retrieved his wand as they left the Shrieking Shack, a fact for which Harry was profoundly grateful. “And then we get Madam Pomfrey to check us both over.” He glanced at his brother, searching for the signs of blood for the first time. “Did Voldemort hurt you?”

“A few cuts, that’s all,” said Connor. “Nothing like as bad as you got.” But he seemed distracted, glancing around. “Harry,” he said slowly. “That heaviness is still in the air.”

Harry rubbed his cheek. “What heaviness?” Merlin, he was slow tonight. He knew, vaguely, that he had changed the world by freeing the Dementors, but he could not seem to care.

“The one that means a prophecy is coming true,” said Connor. “It’s still here.” He turned to Harry, his eyes appealing. “I thought it was supposed to be done with? I thought freeing the Dementors was what the lines about the gray one and the decision were about?”

“What about the second half of the second half?” Harry found himself dropping to one knee in the grass. It would be soft enough to rest in, wouldn’t it? Connor could run and fetch Snape by himself, couldn’t he? Snape could get the information from Connor’s mind himself, with Legilimency, if Connor couldn’t tell him. That sounded like a *wonderful* idea, since it would allow Harry to *rest*.

Connor drew breath to answer, but his words were drowned by a furious voice.

“*Harry!*”

Harry lifted his head, and blinked drowsily as a black-clad figure swept towards them. “Oh, good,” he said. “Snape’s here. We don’t have to find him.”

Connor made a small squeaking sound of distress, but didn’t get a chance to run away before Snape was upon them. Snape speared Connor with a glance, then turned to Harry and said, “I see that you have once again come back exhausted and half-dead from a mission to rescue your brother that you should have left up to older and more experienced wizards.”

“Shut it, Snape,” Harry muttered, hardly registering what he was saying. “Sirius is dead, and it wasn’t Peter, and we defeated Voldemort again. I think I deserve a nap before you start yelling at me.” He curled up on his side and closed his eyes.

Of course, he hadn’t even fallen properly asleep before the vision of a circle of dark figures closing flashed behind his eyes, and he jerked himself up, gasping as a sharp pain cut into his side. Snape crouched down beside him, running his fingers over his ribs and hissing under his breath.

“You’ve sustained several nasty injuries, Harry,” he murmured. “What—“

Harry turned his head blindly back and forth, closing his eyes, until the vision of the circle of shadows aligned with a particular direction. When he opened his eyes again, he was staring straight across the lake.

He breathed, “There,” at the same moment as Snape swung his head and snarled, “The anti-Apparition wards are down!”

“And only the members of the Order of the Phoenix know how to disable them,” said Harry. He was barely conscious again, but he knew this was important. “And Voldemort controlled Sirius’s mind for the past several months, and had his memories. He could have passed the knowledge on to the Death Eaters.”

As if in answer, a mad, cackling laugh that he knew well rode the wind. Harry pushed his eyes open, and saw Bellatrix Lestrange hurrying forward, her cloak billowing. Behind her came four other Death Eaters, all men from the way they were walking. Harry shuddered. One of them flared with such foul Dark magic that he could feel it from here. He thought it quite as bad as the power that his magic-eating snake had swallowed.

He looked at Snape, his tired mind jolted into motion again. “You could pretend that you’re loyal to Voldemort, and that you’ve captured me—“ he suggested.

“I have chosen my side,” said Snape, his voice deliberate, and rose to his feet, moving behind Harry as he drew his wand. “I choose again, and again, and that side is yours, Harry.”

Bellatrix laughed again, and increased her stride. “Come to offer yourself and the babies up on a platter, Severus?” she asked shrilly. “Our Lord told us all about you, and I must say, I look forward to having you in a nice quiet room, with nothing but

Crucios between us.”

“You always did have a stunning lack of imagination, Bellatrix,” Snape answered coolly, and aimed his wand. “*Sectumsempra!*”

Bellatrix sang out a defensive spell as the curse aimed at her, and then fired back a hex whose pronunciation Harry missed under the sudden roaring in his ears. The four male Death Eaters were spreading out next to Bellatrix, one of them nearly in the lake, and the magic was overcoming his senses.

Two of them were preparing complicated spells. One wore an intricate glamour, so deep and old that Harry wasn’t sure what it could possibly be hiding. And the one who flared with foul magic went on flaring with it, the scent growing into the stink of raw sewage until Harry saw the Death Eater’s face.

It was Rodolphus Lestrage, from all the descriptions he had heard, but he had faced the man before, and knew him to be slow and rather stupid next to his brilliant, insane wife. Now, his eyes were wide, his mouth distended in a smile that Harry had last seen on Sirius’s face.

“No,” Harry whispered.

“You did not destroy all of me, Harry,” said Voldemort’s voice, calm and patient, through Rodolphus’s lips. “The locket, but not the bit of my soul within it. It fled, and sought out my loyal Death Eaters. That is what comes of playing with your food.” He smiled more widely, a grotesque gesture, animated by rage and hatred. Harry wondered then how much Voldemort must hate him, given that he would have known all along that Harry was the one who had bounced back the Killing Curse at him. “This arrangement does have its disadvantages, of course, namely the lack of power and the time it will take to grow a new body, but I am fresh, and I have magic that I know how to use. Unlike you, Harry.” He clucked his tongue.

Then he aimed his wand. “*Caeco!*”

Harry heard Connor’s wild cry from beside him, and whirled, even though he already knew what he would see; he knew the effects of *Caeco*. His brother was groping at his face, his eyes wide and staring. He was blind.

Harry turned back. His tiredness was still present, and his limbs felt like bags of sand. He knew that his rage would stop fueling him in a moment, but for now he could speak. “Blind me instead, you bastard!”

“Why should I?” Voldemort asked, smiling through Rodolphus’s lips. “I want you to see what will happen to your brother, Harry.” He nodded to one of the Death Eaters who stood beside him, one of the two who did not wear the glamour. “Your turn, Mulciber.”

Harry shivered. Mulciber was an Imperius Curse specialist, renowned for his control of the mind, and he was aiming his wand at Connor now. Harry gave Snape a hopeless look, but Snape was locked in a duel with Bellatrix and did not even have time to look away from the spells he was firing.

“*Imperio!*”

Harry saw his brother stiffen, and knew what he would be feeling, the soft and coaxing voice that would be invading his mind, whispering to him what to do. Connor grasped his left hand with his right and began to bend his middle finger towards the back of his hand.

Harry sobbed. He didn’t think he could do anything about it. If he unleashed a wash of magic right now, it would simply strike out at everyone in sight, so tired was he and so weak was his control.

He didn’t think he could do that. How could he? He would prefer to just use defensive magic and get everyone out of here alive, shield Snape and Connor from the Death Eaters, deliver some stinging blows but no more than that.

His eyes locked on Rodolphus’s face, Voldemort’s cruel gaze and crueler smile. *If I let them go, I’m letting Voldemort go.*

There are some times I can’t do what I want to do.

He heard the *snap* as Connor’s finger broke, and the silence of someone under *Imperio* that was even more painful than a shriek would have been.

Sobbing, Harry lashed out, not using his magic as a snake this time, but simply draining, pulling, sucking all the magic away from the Death Eaters. He took their spells. He saw the glamour on the Death Eater on the far left shimmer and fade, revealing a different face and features, but he didn't care. He felt the magic of their bodies struggle for a moment and then remain intact—he wasn't pulling enough to drain their inner strength, only that floating loose around them—but he didn't care. He heard Snape shout in anger as his own dueling spells vanished, but he didn't care.

He let the magic flood away like high tide, and then brought it back around in a wave, directing all the force at Rodolphus-Voldemort, not trying to be coordinated, not trying to be controlled, all the desires of his mind focused on one thought: *I want it to stop. I want him to go away.*

The magic hit Rodolphus, and sent him flying. For a moment, Harry saw a slight dark shape in flight over the lake, like a moth.

Then he burst into flame, inside and out, fire that consumed him. Harry felt the bit of Voldemort's soul struggling madly, trying to fly free, and then felt it wither. Rodolphus's magic departed in the same moment.

He was dying. Ashes fell into the water.

He was dead. Bones and skin and flesh followed the ashes in an obscene rain.

Harry dropped his face into his hands and wept, collapsing as exhaustion and grief and the wash of the magic fell onto him. His body was entirely free of the magic he had swallowed in the Shrieking Shack now.

He heard Bellatrix give a long, descending wail, with no hint of sanity anywhere in it. Harry was open even to her pain just then, raw and bleeding, with no defenses. She had lost her husband and her risen lord in the same moment. Harry didn't know which one she might have loved more, but he wasn't surprised to roll over and see her staring at him with hatred in her eyes, the desire for vengeance written on her face.

"Wait, baby," she breathed. "Wait, and I'll come for you."

Then she turned and began to run, back around the lake and in the direction they had come from. The other Death Eaters followed her, Mulciber and a man who was probably Rabastan.

The last man, the one who had worn the glamour, lingered a moment to stare at Harry, as though he knew that no magic was left in the area to strike at him. His true face was heavy-featured, his eyes large and dark and intelligent behind the madness that Azkaban had induced. He cocked his head as Snape knelt behind Harry and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Chosen a good one, Severus," he said, sounding almost cheerful.

"Rosier," Snape snarled back, his anger not quite hiding his surprise. "Didn't die after all, did you?"

"No, Dolohov did," said the man Harry knew must be Evan Rosier, sounding quite unconcerned. "But everyone thought they saw me die, and, well, it seemed prudent to keep it that way." His face wore a smile so sudden it seemed to have simply appeared there from somewhere else, and he nodded to Harry. "That your future Lord?"

"My magic is returning, Rosier," Snape said, softly, dangerously, and aimed his wand.

"Can't stay, I'm afraid," said Rosier. "For I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep." He chuckled when he finished, and then turned and began to speed around the lake.

Harry turned to Connor. His brother blinked, one hand feeling at his eyes. He could see again, from the way he stared at Harry. Then he looked down at his broken finger, blinked again, and fainted.

Harry felt like doing the same thing, but he had things to do first. He turned to Snape.

"Read the memory of what happened from my mind," he said.

"I saw it, Harry."

Snape's voice was desperate with pity, which Harry didn't want. He reached out, bracing himself with one hand on his guardian's shoulder, and whispered, "No, not that. Before."

He dropped his barriers, and felt Snape slip in, fast and easy, so used to working with his mind that he found the memory of Sirius's death and what had happened in the Shrieking Shack the moment Harry willed him to see it. Harry felt Snape draw in a sharp breath, felt him shudder, and nodded wearily.

"Yes," he muttered. "Take care of his body and the Pensieve and the knife, won't you?"

"I will." Snape sounded shaken for the first time that Harry could remember. "Get some rest." He paused, and then added, "It was not your fault, Harry, you realize. You *had* to kill him."

"Rest sounds good," said Harry, and dropped away into a blackness that was far less confusing than the world he had just made for himself.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Chapter Forty-Three: Starborn

Snape looked down at Harry in his bed in the hospital wing and shook his head. No. It had been three days, and still his fury—that Harry had been so badly hurt, that Harry had felt compelled to go after Voldemort and Black alone, that Harry had had to fight and kill a Death Eater—had not eased. All the Houses except Slytherin had lost nearly a hundred points in Potions, and McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout were giving him significant looks. Snape did not care.

His ward had almost died for the fifth and sixth times this year, even if one counted only the werewolf, his journey home, the spiders, and the bout of pain that had knocked him unconscious for a week. Voldemort had nearly killed him, and then Voldemort had nearly killed him *again*. Snape had been too far away to help the first time, and useless the next, locked in a duel with Bellatrix as he had been.

He had been *helpless*. In a sense, he still was, as Harry hadn't awakened in the last three days.

It made him *furious*.

And Harry had done it all for the sake of Black and his brother, who had spent two days asleep in the hospital wing, his broken finger healed almost at once by Madam Pomfrey, before he was awakened and sent back to Gryffindor Tower. He had come and sat by Harry's bedside in silence several times in the day since, his eyes haunted and his face pale. Snape supposed he was facing his own demons.

He did not *care*. Things could have turned out so much darker, and he, Severus Snape, Potions Master and Head of Slytherin and former Death Eater, had not made one damn bit of difference.

The door of the hospital wing creaked open. Snape turned sharply. It was the Potter brat, who came over and sat in a chair at Harry's bedside without a word.

Snape glared at him. Potter turned his head away and concentrated on Harry.

For this *boy*, Harry had nearly given up everything.

And for Black, Snape reminded himself, but he almost instantly turned his mind away from that unpleasant subject. He did not like thinking about Black. He had cast several preservation spells on the body and moved it to a quiet, unused classroom, until whatever funeral arrangements that Dumbledore—presumably—would make. The werewolf had no money, and certainly neither Pettigrew nor James Potter had shown any sign of wanting to come forward and claim their dead friend.

Snape had envied the peaceful expression on Black's face. In the end, he had died doing what he knew was right, just like any other self-righteous, boneheaded Gryffindor.

And if his mind had been kept further unbalanced by Snape's empathy potions, making him easier prey for Voldemort and Voldemort more able to go after Harry, so that Snape had endangered his own ward, there was no way to know.

Snape wondered if he should discuss that with Harry. He wondered if he was capable of having a discussion with Harry about Black and not making some disparaging remark. He hadn't been able to keep the sarcasm out of his voice when he had clashed with Dumbledore. Of course, Dumbledore had ordered Snape to turn over the Dark Lord's Pensieve and the Black family knife he had used as well as Sirius's body. Snape had refused. There had been...some words.

But for you, Snape thought, his eyes lingering on Harry, his mind oddly mingling the vision of the sleeping boy with the memory of the crying baby from the Pensieve and the exhausted child-adult who had let him peer into his mind before collapsing, *I will try*.

As long as you wake up. Wake up, Harry.

Harry came awake slowly.

He had the feeling that he should hurt more than he did. Instead, he blinked and put a hand over his face, and though his hand trembled with weakness and did not quite manage to block out the sunshine, it was only weakness, and not pain. Harry felt his chest hitch with the depth of his sigh. *Good*. He'd had quite enough pain to last him a while.

"Harry."

Harry lowered his hand and met Snape's eyes. The professor was the only one in the hospital wing, which comforted Harry. *Let me take these confrontations one at a time. I don't think I can face them more populated than that.*

"Professor?" he whispered, and blinked. His voice actually sounded halfway normal.

"You have been asleep since Saturday evening, and today is Thursday morning, Harry," said Snape, correctly anticipating his next question. "And Poppy has kept you regularly supplied with water." He waved his wand and charmed a glass of it to float towards Harry, anyway, then helped him sit up so he could drink it. Harry obliged, carefully sipping so that the cold liquid would help settle his stomach instead of disturb it. The longer he drank, the longer he thought he could avoid the probing questions that Snape was likely to ask.

Not for long, said the voice in the back of his head, in admiring tones. *He's a hard one, he is.*

And sure enough, Snape said, in the soft whisper that indicated his true anger, "When are you planning to put down the cup and face me, Harry?"

Harry sighed and tried to stretch to put the cup back on the table beside the bed. Snape's magic seized control of it and floated it away instead. Harry settled back on his pillows and gave Snape a look. "You won't even let me reach that far?" he asked.

"You suffered enormous damage," said Snape. "Magical exhaustion, scratches from the house elf on your throat and shoulders, injuries from where the justice ritual held you in place, and mental and emotional scars." He leaned forward. "This time, Harry, your mind is not in imminent danger of collapse, as it was after the debacle in the Chamber of Secrets. And this time, you actively *refused* help."

Harry braced himself for a yelling session, for all that he'd never heard Snape raise his voice.

Snape watched him in silence for a long moment, then shook his head. "What do you believe would have happened if you died?" he asked.

"Uh." Harry blinked. This wasn't the way he had expected the interrogation to go. "Well, Voldemort would have tortured you and Hermione and Draco, and taken Connor with him. He told me so, and I don't believe he had any reason to lie. He knew the truth would cause me more despair." Harry shuddered. Now that he was out of it, he had time to think about his terror, and how much he had feared that what Voldemort predicted would come true.

"And what else?" Snape's voice had descended an inch or two towards ice.

"Voldemort would have killed Sirius, too," said Harry, trying to think of what else. "And the Death Eaters would probably have inflicted a lot of damage on Hogwarts before anyone could stop them. And the Dementors would probably have killed Peter."

"And what else?" Snape urged him.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "I know what you want me to say, sir, and it's impossible."

“Why?”

“Because,” said Harry, opening his eyes and focusing on Snape with a frown, “you wouldn’t have had time to mourn me, or be angry with me. Voldemort would be too busy torturing you. You’d feel pain instead.”

Snape briefly raked a hand down his face. Harry wasn’t sure what the gesture indicated, anger or weariness. Perhaps both.

“Harry,” Snape whispered, “we would have helped you.” He fixed his gaze on Harry’s face. “Has it occurred to you that the Dark Lord took Black and your brother to lure *you* into a trap? That *you* were the one he wanted to destroy? I have seen the memory in the Pensieve. I understand why.”

Harry glanced away from him. Once again, as when he had been in Draco’s mind, as when he had first come to suspect that he might be the Boy-Who-Lived, he could feel a gulf yawning beneath him. He did not want to step into it. “But it didn’t happen,” he said. “And if it had, then you would have been busy suffering.”

Snape gave a mutter that Harry couldn’t quite make out, except for the words “blunt” and “utterly serious.” Then he said, “Harry, your life matters to me beyond what would have happened to me, or anyone else, if you had not lived. Your life matters *for itself*. You are not a sacrifice, not to me. In fact, I would prefer that you stopped regarding yourself that way, and associating with your brother altogether.” His voice sharpened. “If you had taken me along as help, then you might not have suffered quite so much.”

Harry winced, and regret briefly flooded him, before he shook his head. “And you probably would not have lived, sir,” he said. “I barely did, and I think Connor only did because Voldemort wasn’t really concentrating on him.”

“That was the wrong tack, then,” said Snape. “Harry—*look at me*.”

Harry did, reluctantly. Snape met his eyes fiercely.

“You *matter*,” he said. “You *do*. You are not only a weapon, not only a shield or defense or sacrifice. You told me once to stop treating you as a child, and it is true that I should not do so. However, you are also my ward.” He took a deep breath, as though he were dredging up courage from under a dark lake. “I would appreciate it if you stopped thinking I was lying when I told you these things. And if you have no more need of me as a guardian, then perhaps it is time that we owed the Ministry and turned you back over to your father, who has expressed an interest in visiting you in a few weeks, when you are fully recovered, and he is out of the maze he is in.”

Harry experienced an immediate flash of panic. *No! I don’t want Snape to stop being my guardian—*

And he blinked, and sat there staring at nothing, as the fact that he had felt those things broke over him like a storm.

He did like mattering to Snape. He wanted the guardianship to be deeper than a mere legal pretense to fool the Ministry. He liked the thought that Snape had tried to come after him, had tried to stop him from facing Voldemort alone, had come to him at Christmas and badgered him into accepting the guardianship again, had done all he could to protect and train Harry in Occlumency and Legilimency and Potions and other arts he thought Harry might need.

And if he liked mattering to Snape, he could hardly let Snape think he did not matter to Harry.

He met Snape’s eyes. “My life matters to you,” he said, testing.

Snape nodded, a tense little motion that hardly bent his neck. His eyes never left Harry’s.

“You would have been upset if I died, and not just because of the consequences to you or the wizarding world.”

Snape bared his teeth, as if to say that one didn’t deserve an answer.

“You like being my guardian, and not just to spite my father or the Ministry or Dumbledore.”

“If that was all I wanted,” Snape snarled, “I could have thought of many, many other ways to obtain it, ways that are less likely to make me die of rage and terror.”

Harry closed his eyes. Damn it, he was going to cry, and he didn’t want to. He wasn’t run-down any more, he wasn’t

exhausted any more, he wasn't fragile and shaky any more, he shouldn't cry, crying was something babies or children did, it was all right when Connor did it, *oh shit no here came the tears—*

Snape reached out and put a hand gently on his shoulder. Harry leaned into the touch, and then scooted closer and snaked out an arm around Snape's waist. Snape returned the embrace fiercely.

Somewhere in the middle of the tears, it occurred to Harry that Snape had never intended to stop being his guardian, and had used a sneaky, underhanded, Slytherin tactic to force this epiphany on him.

He didn't much care.

His life *mattered* to someone. He, himself, mattered to Snape because he was Harry, and not because of what he could do. He finally believed it.

As if I won't seize that with both hands.

Draco came prepared. He knew what Harry's confrontation with Snape had been like, because Snape had told him. He knew that it was going to be different with him. Harry had been forced to see that Snape's affection for him was genuine. He had, however, heard Connor compel Draco, and been in his mind, and tried to believe—Draco had felt him trying to believe—that all those emotions were only the result of compulsion.

It was an easy excuse. It was a way out for Harry, if he thought that only one person liked him for who he was. He could let Snape in, but go right back to treating Draco as if he were someone who needed to be left behind in safety.

Fuck that, Draco decided, and strolled in and sat down in the chair beside Harry's bed. Snape was occupying Harry's prat of a brother with a detention. No one would disturb them.

Draco had a very simple plan.

He was not going to *let* Harry ignore him. And before he left tonight, he was going to extract some promises that Harry would never do certain stupid things again.

Harry welcomed him with a reserved smile. He had a bowl of porridge in his lap, and was scooping spoonfuls of it into his mouth. Draco sniffed. Porridge was nothing compared to what they'd had in the Great Hall the last two days. He would be glad when Harry was up and about and could eat proper meals again. They were bland and boring without him. No one appreciated his wit when he tried to use it.

"Hello, Draco," said Harry softly, and put the spoon back in the bowl. "Come to have your say about me running off into danger?"

"I don't think I need to *say* a lot," said Draco, adopting the posture his mother always used when they were visiting people she considered their social inferiors. "A few very simple words. The affection you saw in my mind when you thought Connor compelled me? That was real."

Harry blinked at him, then shook his head, a faint smile appearing in the place of the reserved one. "No, Draco," he said, in the patient tone that normally made Draco want to scream. "I *felt* it. It was preventing the passage of normal thoughts into your mind. It was—"

"It was a barrier made of what was already there," Draco said. It was simple after all, this clear, direct, Gryffindor-like honesty. "What was always there."

Harry licked his lips, then shook his head. "It can't—"

"Yes, it can," said Draco. Another part of the plan was not to let Harry talk what was clearly nonsense. "You're my friend, Harry. That's it."

"But what I felt there wasn't the kind of friendship that Connor has for Ron," Harry argued.

Draco curled his lip before he could stop himself. "I would thank you not to compare me to *Weasley*," he said, and played his

trump card. Perhaps it was a bit too soon, but clearly, if he was going about comparing Draco to Weasley, Harry needed the help. “Malfoys have always done things better than Weasleys. We outfly them, we’re better than they are at Quidditch, we’re better wizards, we’re not a disgrace to the name of pureblood and they are. And we outlove them, too.”

Harry’s smile froze. “Draco,” he said, voice gone small and helpless.

Draco snorted. “Come off it, Harry. I was conscious most of the time you were in my mind, you know. I know what you felt. I love you. Not enough to keep from hexing you if you deny it, either.”

Harry shook his head desperately, his hair falling over his scar. The scar had gone back to being a normal pale lightning bolt, Draco was pleased to see, without the bloody color that had limned it while Harry lay unconscious. “But, Draco—compulsion played some part in it, it had to—“

“It did *not*,” said Draco. “It only dragged what was there to the surface, and kept it there long enough that you had to see it.” He met Harry’s eyes. “You can cast *Legilimens* on me now if you like, and it will still be there.”

“You can’t love me like that!” Harry yelled.

Draco laughed. Harry actually looked indignant. “Why not? I know that you love me as protectively, and your brother, and probably Snape, too.”

“But—that’s what I do, that’s what I was *raised* to do,” said Harry, his voice nearly a wail. “That strength of love has to be unnatural, doesn’t it, if it comes from my training? And anyway,” he added, “how could it apply to *me*?”

“Because it does,” said Draco.

“It has to be the result of compulsion.”

“It isn’t.”

“Then it’s the result of—“

“No.”

“Then you must only imagine—“

“*No*.” Draco leaned forward and clasped Harry’s hand. “I’ve given you sight of this before, Harry. What do you think your serpent shows? You should look at it more often,” he couldn’t help adding. While the bottle Harry had given him showing his emotions was important to *him*, the glass serpent Draco had bonded with the same enchantment for Harry’s birthday didn’t seem all that important to Harry, and that did hurt. “I told you that I didn’t like you going away. I would have been perfectly happy to have you at Malfoy Manor for the entire holiday last summer. I tried to keep you from going after your brother and godfather, because I didn’t care that you loved them, too. I was practically shouting it from the *rooftops*, undignified as that would be for a Malfoy. I’ve tried and tried and tried to make you see it, and you wouldn’t, you stubborn prat. So now you don’t have a choice,” he finished severely.

Harry simply stared at him, then turned his head away. Draco grabbed his chin and turned his face back.

Draco didn’t have to be a Legilimens himself to see the stunned disbelief in those eyes slowly melting into acceptance. Harry knew that Draco wasn’t lying. He had probably had ground for the revelation prepared by being forced to acknowledge that his life mattered to Snape.

Well, fuck that, too, Draco decided. This was his victory, and he was going to claim it as such.

“This is so strange,” Harry whispered. “I don’t think this is supposed to be happening. I don’t find out my best friend loves me a few days after my godfather dies and Voldemort has to leave yet *again*.”

“When has anything around you ever been normal?” Draco shoved his chair closer to the bed. “Do you believe me now?”

Harry nodded, as if hypnotized.

“Good,” said Draco. “This is the part where I get to be bossy and demanding.” He felt a vicious delight flood him as Harry

simply blinked. *Merlin, I love this part.* “First, if you start mourning over *anything* that happened to you, come and find me. Immediately. I want to hear it.”

“Why?” Harry whispered.

Draco shook his shoulder. “Harry,” he said warningly. “I don’t tolerate idiocy, not when you believe me.”

Harry swallowed. “All right.”

“Second,” said Draco, “once you leave the hospital wing, you’re either with me or Snape for the rest of the school year. I know that Snape is planning to keep you here for the summer. We’ll see about that.” Privately, he was trying to work out a bargain wherein Harry would stay at the Manor for four weeks. So far, Snape wasn’t willing, but Draco was determined. “If you really feel that you have to be alone, you have to tell us where you’re going.”

Harry hesitated, then said, “All right.”

“Third,” said Draco, “if you get angry at me, you tell me. If you want an apology, demand it.”

“That’s going to be hard work,” Harry murmured. He seemed to be somewhere between pleasure and shock.

“I know. I don’t care. Do it.”

Harry nodded.

“Finally,” said Draco, “you stop with this nonsense about compulsion, or whatever other excuse you find to deny that people love you. I really will hex you if you say something about it again, or if I look up and think you’re thinking about it.”

“All right,” said Harry.

His eyes were starting to get a little glassy. Draco gently removed the porridge bowl from his lap and put it on the table, then arranged the pillows so Harry could lie down. Harry stifled a yawn. “Why am I still here?” he muttered. “I know that Madam Pomfrey fixed everything physically wrong with me.”

“Shock and magical exhaustion, Harry,” said Draco. “Madam Pomfrey doesn’t think you should have to deal with other students right now, and I agree. And you could sleep for about two months and still not recover all the rest you need. That’s the fifth promise,” he added. “You have to sleep a lot.”

“That one will be no trouble to keep.” Still and all, Harry fought the closing of his eyes. *Stubborn prat*, Draco thought, brushing his hair off his scar. “Did Connor apologize to you yet?”

Draco frowned. “For what?”

“Compelling you.” Harry stared at him searchingly.

A tiny flame surged to life in Draco’s heart, driving his satisfaction even higher. *Harry wants his brother to apologize to me. He thinks of that even though he has every right to think that what happened to them excuses Connor that duty.*

“He hasn’t yet,” he said, and watched as Harry’s eyes glittered.

“I’ll tell him,” Harry muttered, closing his eyes. “He should have already. He’s dumb not to have.”

His muttering ceased, and his brow relaxed under Draco’s fingers. Draco watched as his breathing smoothed out into sleep.

Then, and only then, did he allow himself to close his eyes and spend a few minutes just listening to Harry breathe, reassuring himself, with each drawn breath, that his best friend was still alive.

“That’s the last of them, I think,” Draco said.

Harry nodded as he watched the last strand of silver squirm off his wand and plunk into the Pensieve. He could still

remember what had happened in the Shrieking Shack, perfectly well—he hadn't wanted the wand to take all his emotions and memories of that—but now they had a third back-up Pensieve, in addition to the two that Snape had already hidden, containing his vision of that night. If Dumbledore tried to *Oblivate* either him or Connor, or, for that matter, Snape, they were safe.

He leaned back against the pillows, shrugging when Draco fluffed them for him, but making no move to stop him. Draco still seemed to need the reassurance that Harry was alive to have pillows fluffed, and Harry was hardly going to deny him that.

“So,” he said, when Draco had carefully set the Pensieve under his chair. “You were going to tell me what the rest of the school thinks, now that it's been a week.”

Draco shot him an irritated look with touches of anxiety visible around the straining eyes.

“It's been a week,” Harry repeated softly. “I can bear this, Draco. I *can*.”

Draco nodded. “All right,” he said. “It didn't take the Headmaster long to make up a story how Voldemort kidnapped both you and your brother with the help of Death Eaters, because he wanted to use the magic that flows between twins to aid in his resurrection. Black fought him and died, heroically.”

“Well, that part's true,” said Harry. *Why did Draco say it with disdain? This is his own cousin he's talking about, and my godfather.*

Draco snorted. “He died to make up for his mistake, Harry. That's a better reason, and it's one that the Headmaster will never admit to.”

Harry concealed his sigh. “And the other parts of it?”

“That the Death Eaters retreated before you, taking Voldemort's half-resurrected body with them,” said Draco, his voice a low drone. Harry wondered if he was practicing to keep emotions out of his voice, or if he'd merely heard the story so many times that he didn't care about it any more. “They got interrupted by the Dementors, who came after them because they were escaped Azkaban prisoners. The Dementors sucked out Voldemort's soul, and destroyed Rodolphus LeStrange in the process. Then the Death Eaters fled, and the Dementors went after them.” He sat back and lifted his eyes to Harry's face, and Harry knew without a doubt that Draco was not bored. He looked furious. “*Nothing* about the role you played, Harry. *Nothing*.”

Harry smiled faintly. “I didn't really expect him to say anything about it.”

“But aren't you *outraged*?” Draco demanded.

Harry shook his head. “Dumbledore worked so hard to keep me from finding out the truth. The least he can do now is keep others from finding out a shred of it. And he wouldn't want anyone to know that the one of the teachers he most favored and protected was possessed by Voldemort. He'll give up a chance at promoting Connor's heroism to protect Sirius's reputation.”

Draco snorted. “He might have saved his breath. No one believes him.”

Harry blinked. *That* was a surprise. The Headmaster was still the Headmaster, after all, with the power of a Light Lord and a heroic reputation and the ability to push his ideas by compulsion when all else failed. “No one?”

Draco shook his head. “Too many people saw Snape dash out of Hogwarts as if his cloak was on fire. Too many people know that Granger spent some time unconscious up in the North Tower. Too many people realize that the Dementors haven't returned to Hogwarts grounds at all, even to hunt for Pettigrew. And too many people felt the utter explosion of magic when you freed the justice ritual and destroyed the Dark Lord's new body, even though they don't know what it means.”

Harry gnawed his lip. “I'm not sure what we ought to do,” he said finally. “I don't want anyone to think that Sirius was a traitor, either, and having too many people know about the prophecy is dangerous.”

“Don't you want the credit for what you did, though?” Draco said, a whine entering his voice. “You are driving me *mad* with this, Harry. How can you not want people to know who you really are?”

Harry smiled faintly. “You told me once that I was a Slytherin in every possible way,” he reminded Draco. “And I said that I wasn't, because I lacked ambition. I still do. Or, at least, I don't care if everyone knows about what I did.”

“I thought I’d cured you of that,” said Draco. “I really should have. Perhaps I should try again.”

“Harry?”

Harry turned his head, blinking. Hermione stood at the door of the hospital wing, one hand clenched around it. “Madam Pomfrey said that I’d find you here,” she muttered. “And that you could have visitors now.”

“Where else would you have expected to find him, Granger?” Draco was sneering again. Harry shook his head. *He sneers when he has no reason, as well as when he has plenty of reason.* “And he can have one visitor at a time, and I’m here. Go away.”

“That’s not what Madam Pomfrey said,” Hermione countered, and came forward even when Draco leaped to his feet. She looked directly into Harry’s eyes. “Maybe we should ask Harry if he wants me to stay.”

Harry sighed. He suspected he was in for a scolding, thanks to knocking Hermione unconscious and leaving her on the floor, but he couldn’t avoid it forever. “Sit down, Hermione,” he said, and Transfigured the table next to the bed into a chair. His magic was growing bored with nothing to do again, and this was a harmless use of it, no matter how Draco glared.

“Thank you,” said Hermione primly. She sat and smoothed her skirt over her knees, then looked expectantly at him.

Harry waited.

“What you did was *stupid*,” Hermione began. “You put me so thoroughly to sleep that I couldn’t even wake up and inform someone else where you’d gone. Like Professor McGonagall. She would have helped you, Harry, you know she would.”

Harry nodded. “I know. And I didn’t want her help, and I didn’t want yours. I wanted to go into this on my own.”

“So I suppose I’m good enough to ask for help with a Time Turner, but not anything else?” Hermione asked, her voice rising slightly.

“That was what I needed your help for, yes,” said Harry. “I couldn’t have done that part of it without you. Thank you.”

“But the rest?” Hermione leaned forward, chin set.

Harry shook his head. “I can’t apologize, Hermione. I didn’t take *anyone* along. I’d already stunned Draco by that point, and I stunned Snape when he came after me again. I was as careful as I could be, and two people still died.” His voice cracked, and he blinked hard, Sirius’s death coming back to strike him unexpectedly. “What if one of them had been you? Or what if there’d been a third death because you wanted to come along? I couldn’t risk it.”

“It was my choice,” said Hermione.

“She’s making a lot of sense,” said Draco, unhelpfully.

Harry glared at both of them. “And it was my choice to leave you both behind,” he said. “If we start looking at it from this angle, we can find all sorts of choices to contradict each other’s.”

“I’m willing to forgive and forget, Harry James Potter,” said Hermione loftily. “*If* you never do that again.”

Harry winced. He couldn’t imagine that it wouldn’t be necessary to do that again. Hermione was clever, and even if he tried to leave her out of things, she would find her way into them. And it was true that he’d asked her for an awful lot of help this year, with the phoenix web if nothing else, and might need to do it again. If he made a promise not to leave her out of things or behind...

Then he got an idea. Perhaps Hermione was so determined to come because she’d heard only the Headmaster’s false story and not seen the truth. He nodded to Draco. “Let Hermione look into the Pensieve,” he said. “Then she’ll know what we faced.”

He saw Hermione’s expression brighten. *Well, she did always want knowledge,* Harry thought, leaning back. *And if the choice is giving her a few bad dreams or risking her life... I’ll take the bad dreams.*

He closed his eyes while Hermione put her face into the Pensieve and watched the memories. He had several things to do,

and he wanted to arrange them carefully in his mind, so he didn't forget any of them. He had to make sure Connor had apologized to Draco. He had to decide, with Connor, on what they were going to say to Dumbledore. He had to think about what sort of story they would spread to explain what had happened that night, as well as the absence of the Dementors. He had to make it quite, quite clear that Connor was staying with him for the summer, and not with Lily.

He had to settle that last with Snape, who was not being rational about the thought of Harry staying with Lupin, or some other place that was more welcoming to Connor, but didn't want Connor with Harry, either.

The twins had spent enough time together in the last few days, private time, that Harry knew Connor would agree (though so far he had either not agreed to apologize to Draco, or Draco was lying when he said Connor had not). They had talked nearly nonstop for hours, and then sat in silence again for the same length of time. Connor was recovering slowly from Sirius's loss, and from what he called the sickening experience of having *Imperio* in his head and being blind for a short time. He could put on a good blank face to fool everyone else who looked at him. It saddened Harry to realize that he was the only one who knew his brother well enough to look beneath the surface and see how false that mask was. At least Harry had Snape and Draco, both, to recognize the same truths about him.

He opened his eyes and asked Draco, "Did Connor apologize to you for compelling you?"

"No," said Draco, but his eyes flickered to the right.

Harry frowned. "He did *so*."

"I don't have to talk about that if I don't want to," said Draco, folding his arms. "It's a private matter between me and Connor Potter."

"Draco—"

Hermione abruptly jerked her head out of the Pensieve with a gasp. Harry glanced at her, expecting to see shock and horror in her eyes. And there was some of each there, but there was also a Gryffindor's golden, gleaming courage.

"How could I possibly let you face that alone?" she asked Harry. "Either you or Connor? I'll take that promise that you won't leave me behind, now."

Harry groaned and looked to Draco, but Draco only looked rather thoroughly entertained. Sighing, Harry reached out, put his hand on Hermione's, and gave his promise, in the name of Merlin and his magic.

Should have remembered she was a Gryffindor, he thought darkly. *Showing them danger only makes them more eager to jump into it.*

Harry woke slowly. He knew it was late, probably late Sunday evening, though he was still given to sleeping long stretches without warning, and it might be early Monday morning. There was no one else in the hospital wing with him, by the sound. *Early Monday morning, then*, Harry thought as he stretched. If it was before midnight, Madam Pomfrey would have been bustling around.

He glanced to the side, and blinked when he saw a letter lying on the table beside his bed. It hadn't been there when he went to sleep, and he thought any owl would have woken him. But he picked up his glasses, cast a small *Lumos* to add to the faint light spells that had sprung into being when he opened his eyes, and opened the letter. The paper was slowly turning purple, he saw.

The writing was familiar, or rather, familiar in its lack of familiarity.

Dear Harry:

I have left a charm on this letter. If it is turning purple, it has been an hour since I have visited you. If it is turning gold, two hours. If it is turning orange, three hours. Past that, the parchment will resume its normal color. It is not safe for me to linger here longer than that.

Harry's eyes darted around the hospital wing, but he saw no one, not even the faint shimmer that would have marked a Disillusionment Charm or an Invisibility Cloak. He looked back at the letter.

I have failed you.

I have failed you in all the ways that matter. I have given you information you already had, and not explained the import of new information. I have promised you protection, and not fulfilled the promise. I have tested you, trying to see how strong a leader you were, when I should have aided you outright, and never doubted you. You killed for the first time last Saturday. The part of me that thought you could never kill, even to protect those dearest to you, is at peace.

I owe you three debts now—one in the name of my first family, one in the name of my second, and one in my own name, for failing to protect you. I will understand if you do not wish to speak to me. If that is so, burn this letter, and I will know, and depart.

If you wish to know who I am, and to accept that I mean to make up for my broken promises, despite my lack of doing so in the past, then lay the letter on the table, face the door of the hospital wing, and ask me to enter.

Starborn.

Harry let out a sharp little breath and laid the letter down. He had considered burning it, but only for the barest moment. He did want to know who Starborn was. And allies were never to be disdained. This ally had taken risks for him. Merlin knew how he had managed to learn that Sirius was still the heir of the Black family, or how his parents had switched Secret-Keepers. If nothing else, Harry thought he should learn that in turn, so that Starborn couldn't be used against him.

"Enter," he called.

The door of the hospital wing slowly swung open, and a slender, hooded figure stepped through. Harry held his wand high enough that the *Lumos* glittered on the shadows under the hood.

"Show your face," he said. "Who *are* you?"

"I thought the wording in the last letter would have let you know, Harry," said a familiar voice, as a pair of hands rose and threw back the hood. "But perhaps not. I have never hinted clearly enough."

Narcissa Malfoy walked calmly over to him and took the chair beside his bed, watching him, while Harry stared at her.

Starborn. Born of the house of Black, but not named after a star. Of course. I should have known.

He recovered his voice after a moment. "Millicent said that you were a man."

Narcissa chuckled, a faint, polite sound. "I wrote to Adalrico under the name Starborn. He assumed that I was a man, and passed the assumption on to his daughter." She paused for a moment. "Hawthorn Parkinson knew the truth."

Harry blinked, then nodded, remembering his second conversation with her, when he had delivered her first vial of Wolfsbane Potion. Hawthorn had smiled a bit, oddly, when Harry spoke of Starborn as "he," but had gone along with it, apparently seeing no reason to disillusion him.

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"Because you were not taking on the leadership duties that you would need to," said Narcissa. "You knew me already, and you would weigh any words out of my mouth, about Lords and compulsion and those who are not Lords, more lightly than you would weigh them from a seemingly objective outside source. If I could tell you these things, someone who was not the mother of your best friend, then you might accept them and become the wizard we need, the powerful one who is not a Lord." Her eyes glittered. "You do have a problem with that, you know, Harry—deciding that those closest to you cannot speak the truth because they are blinded by their regard for you."

Harry inclined his head. "I know. But could you not have simply told me the truth about the Dark wizards you were contacting? About Sirius?"

"I did not know the whole truth about Sirius myself," Narcissa said simply. "I took a chance sneaking into 12 Grimmauld Place, the chance that Sirius would not have simply shut the wards against me—as he could have, being heir, did he but think of it. There, I found the Pensieves full of the memories he had removed from his head, presumably so he would not have to spend his nights thinking of his brother and Pettigrew." She paused. "And it did not work."

Harry shook his head, thinking of the nightmares of two dark figures, Sirius and Regulus, that he had had, the nightmares Sirius had had for years. Harry's mind had tried to warn him, but it had done it in no language he could understand.

"And then I saw the tapestry," Narcissa whispered. "Up until then, I had not thought of what it meant that Sirius could slip so freely into and out of the Black estates. I had simply assumed the estate was in legal limbo, with Sirius disowned, Regulus dead, Bellatrix in Azkaban, Andromeda blasted off the tapestry for marrying a Muggleborn wizard, and the inheritance never formally assigned to me. I was not the heir, either, but I thought the wards might accept me, for I was never cast out of the Black family. Then I realized Sirius was the heir, and something was badly wrong. Dumbledore wanted access to my family's treasures. And, of course, Dark artifacts of the kind that had attacked my son could have come from our family."

"Then you could have written to me then," Harry insisted. "You could have told me the truth. Perhaps this would have been avoided."

Narcissa's mouth twisted as if she'd bitten into a lime. "I let my pride blind me," she said. "I observed Sirius closely, and decided at last that the golden ornament around his neck really had tamed his thoughts, the way that everyone insisted that it had. I examined the letters to Lucius, and convinced myself they were not in Sirius's handwriting. I know now, of course," she added softly, "that his handwriting was already wavering, controlled by Voldemort in his mind."

"How did you know about that in detail?" Harry asked.

"I have spoken with Severus and with Draco," said Narcissa. "Neither knew I was Starborn, of course.

"I examined the wards on 12 Grimmauld Place again, and found them in an advanced state of decay. I returned to what had been my original hypothesis, when I first advised you to watch out for Sirius—that he had been involved, somehow, in the passage of Black heirlooms to other hands and in the attack of the Lestranges in your first year, but that it was probably negligence, failure to keep up the wards on the house that had let thieves in, and failure to protect key information in his mind from a Legilimens. I thought he might even have sold artifacts to pay off gambling debts, and not realized whom he was selling them to." Narcissa closed her eyes tightly and shook her head. "I spoke with both Fenrir Greyback and Walden Macnair, pretending to be a reclusive Dark witch interested in the Dark Lord's service, and both of them hinted at a strong ally inside Hogwarts, but my every glimpse of Sirius convinced me that they could not mean *him*. *He* was not strong. I trusted my own conclusions over the evidence, and this is where it led me, with your life in danger multiple times."

She opened her eyes and fixed them on Harry. "I owe you the debt of my failure," she said. "I owe you a debt from the family I married into, because you have protected my son at the near-cost of your own life. And I owe you a debt from the family I was born into. The Blacks have wronged you very greatly, Harry—I by my negligence, and Sirius by his. I would understand if you wished to have nothing more to do with me, or even to claim my life."

She was prepared to give it, Harry realized with a start. Of course, the Blacks were one of the few families that had kept up most of the pureblood dances, even the most extreme, and one of the dances said that only blood could wash away the stain of breaking one's word. Narcissa had promised to protect him, then played a dangerous game that could have ended with him dead, and certainly had ended with his life and her son's life in danger. The Black customs would have dictated that she die for putting Draco in danger, even if not Harry.

Unless the one the debt was owed to chose otherwise.

Harry shook his head. "I want you to live," he said.

Narcissa relaxed minutely, but inclined her head, as much to say that she knew he was not finished and should go on.

"I need you as an ally among the Dark wizards," said Harry. "I assume that's why you became Starborn in the first place, because there are wizards and witches who won't listen to Narcissa Malfoy?"

Narcissa nodded. "I have information from my son, and through Lucius, that only someone who was a Death Eater or inside Hogwarts could apparently have. I trade it for their wary promises to consider alliance. Many of them would turn on me in an instant if they knew who I was, for lying to them if nothing else."

She's just put her life in my hands again, Harry realized. *I could write to people like Adalrico and tell them she's Starborn, and even if he forgave her, others wouldn't.*

It was not even a temptation. Harry had much more use for Narcissa alive than dead, and he was fond of her, both as Draco's

mother and for her own sake. If nothing else, she was different from Lily in that she was sorry for making him a sacrifice, and willing to make up for it.

“I still need you,” he said. “I want you to keep making alliances with the other purebloods, and especially the Dark wizards and former Death Eaters who won’t listen to a child. That’s how you can pay the debt that you owe me as yourself.”

Narcissa nodded, eyes intent on his face.

“I want you to promise that you won’t ever put Draco’s life in danger again, for any reason,” Harry said. “That’s the Malfoy debt.”

“Very well,” said Narcissa. “And done. And the debt as a Black?”

Harry fussed with his hands a moment. He knew what he wanted to ask, but it might very well go over the line. He stalled by asking, “What’s going to happen to 12 Grimmauld Place and the like now that Sirius is dead? Do they pass to you?”

Narcissa’s mouth tightened in exasperation. “There is a loophole, or a problem, in the inheritance magic,” she murmured. “The wards on all the houses have sealed tight now. I visited 12 Grimmauld Place yesterday, and it would not let me in. I have no idea why. For the moment, all the Black treasures are locked away beyond our reach.”

Harry nodded. He was actually relieved. He didn’t want to search among Dark magical weapons, but if he had access to them, he would have felt compelled to, just in case there was something there that could help in the course of the war. “Very well. Then I want you to take charge of Sirius’s body. Give him a Black funeral.”

Narcissa sat back hard in the chair, staring at him. “He was a blood traitor,” she whispered. “He used false inheritance magic to stay heir to the family. And then he betrayed his new allegiances, too, not even having the courage to stand by his convictions.”

“He died a hero, fighting for those convictions,” said Harry. “And no one else has done anything for him. Dumbledore is too busy doing damage control. My father is Merlin knows where. Peter Pettigrew can’t for obvious reasons, and Remus Lupin doesn’t have the money—or, probably by now, the legal standing—to be the director of a funeral for a pureblood wizard.” He met her eyes. “I want you to do it.”

Narcissa watched him in calm silence, all her emotions vanished behind a cool mask. Harry waited. He knew that what he asked was profound, perhaps more than what the debt would grant him. He didn’t care. He was asking for it, and he intended to go on asking for it until Narcissa either gave in or told him flat out to choose another option.

Then she nodded and stood. “Come with me, Harry, if you can walk,” she said, extending a hand. “I will help you if you cannot. I think you should see this.”

Harry blinked. What reading he’d done on the Blacks indicated their funerals had always been intensely private, restricted to blood or married family. “I was only his godson—“

“You are the one who asked for this,” Narcissa cut in, her voice sharp as Polaris. “You are the reason he is having a funeral like this at all. And it will be done now. Tonight. This is your last chance to say farewell.”

Harry watched her face. It stayed exactly the same. He was asking for something high and old, he realized slowly.

And she was returning something high and old—the honor to come along and see how the funeral was done.

Harry reached for his robes.

It hadn’t taken them long to find Sirius’s body. Narcissa had walked straight to it the moment they were out of the hospital wing. When Harry asked her how, she said simply that she could feel it. She was a Black, and he was a Black, and the connection was always strongest between those who were born into the family, rather than married into it. Draco might have felt it, too, but Draco did not know the Black funeral customs, and would probably not have recognized the subtle tugging on his senses.

Now they were out of the school, Narcissa pausing courteously to rest whenever Harry needed to. The night was deeply dark,

the moon hidden by clouds, and the only true light came from the *Lumos* on the end of Narcissa's wand. Sirius's body floated behind them.

Narcissa made for the shore of the lake, and Harry wondered if the Black funeral customs involved drowning. But it seemed Narcissa only sought a clear, flat spot to lay Sirius down, because she nodded at last and let his body drift to rest.

Then she drew Harry back a short distance. Harry found himself staring at his godfather, whose black hair was cast over his face. Thanks to the preservation spells Snape had cast, he looked as he had when he died. His gray eyes were shut, his face still in the same peaceful expression it had been.

Narcissa raised her head, her eyes seeking out the sky. Harry looked up, but still saw only clouds.

Then, to his shock, the clouds rolled smoothly back as though a hand had parted them, revealing a small expanse of stars. At the same moment, heavy, old magic settled around them. Harry struggled to breathe. The air reeked of dust, of bones, of the tomb. This was magic at least as ancient as the justice ritual, and as powerful. It turned around him, tolerating his presence, but focused on Narcissa.

"All the others," Narcissa said, voice gone unexpectedly high and unexpectedly clear, "say that they came from the earth or the sea, and they will return to the earth or the sea when they die. Only the Blacks have retained the core truth, the truth older than all the earths and all the seas. It was the stars that bore us in the beginning." She raised her wand. White light coursed along her arms, dazzlingly bright. Harry had to put a hand over his eyes as he squinted.

"Accept this one," Narcissa said, her voice growing loud enough to make the earth appear to shake, "Sirius Black, elder child of Canopus Black and Capella Black, elder brother of Regulus Black, proper heir of the Black line." The white light around her twitched, but Narcissa showed no sign of noticing. "Pureblood wizard, member of Gryffindor House, Auror, godfather of Harry Potter, who died with the courage of his convictions. *Accept him now.*"

Harry felt as if he stood next to a blazing sun—or a star. The world around them had turned brilliant, in a way that somehow left room and space for intense shadows.

Then the light turned flaring blue-white with a touch of silver, and Narcissa's voice soared in triumph.

"From fire we come, to fire we return," she said, and gestured with her wand. "*Sirius abscondit!*"

A flash of white lightning struck down from the stars, and hit Sirius's body. It went up with a roar, as if he had been oil-soaked tinder. Harry took a step back, the magic around him surging forward like the tide to join with the white lightning in a whirling flow. For a moment, Sirius was the center of a ring of bowing, dancing flames that seemed to move like actual, human dancers, to have feet and heads and robes.

Then the heat coalesced into whiteness in the middle, and Harry saw an enormous dog rear there, like a mirror image of the Padfoot he remembered, with silvery fur and eyes dark as coals.

The dog melted into Sirius's face, and then into an image that Harry supposed must be the younger Sirius, running hard as though to escape from an unseen enemy. Fire melted around him, dripped off like molten metal falling into a trough, and reshaped itself into the Black coat of arms, marked with the words *Toujours pur*.

Then the white fire gathered into itself, a whirling ball of spears, and shot back towards the stars. Harry tilted his head back to watch it go, blinking away the burning afterimages. He staggered, his weariness catching up with him, as all the old magic surged after it.

Narcissa's hand caught him, and she murmured, as though she wanted Harry and no one else to overhear her, "Named for fire, born in fire, given to fire. Let the fire end him."

The stars blazed brilliantly for a moment. His head tilted so far back that his neck hurt, Harry saw the lightning dart among them for a moment, seeming to touch each of them with extra light. Then the clouds rolled back over them, and a loud crack announced the end of the ritual.

Harry closed his eyes. Tears were burning under his eyelids again, but they seemed to be tears of fierce gladness as much as any sorrow.

"Thank you for allowing me to witness this," he murmured.

Narcissa's hand passed briefly along the back of his neck. "You asked," she murmured. "The fire accepted him. The Blacks' debt is repaid." Her voice changed, becoming more that of the witch Harry remembered. "And if I don't have you back to the hospital wing soon, a number of people will kill me." She tugged him gently in the direction of Hogwarts.

Harry went. His mind was still stirring with the images he had seen, of Sirius as Padfoot and an adult and a child, and the fire, and the old magic...

His thoughts felt, oddly, scrubbed clean, as though the fire had purified them, too. It was the only explanation for why he came up the bargain he would offer Dumbledore on the walk back.

He climbed into bed, barely remembering to take his glasses off and put them on the table next to the bed, and heard Narcissa whisper farewell. Harry muttered something back; it must have been polite enough, because she left.

He went to sleep smiling.

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

Chapter Forty-Four: A Voice in the Darkness

"Are you certain?" Connor's eyes were wide, and the hand he clenched on the edge of the bed shook slightly. "He managed to arrange everything in our lives so far. I don't think that he would just back down and give in because we go to him with a plan."

"I know," said Harry. He swung his legs out of bed and gingerly tested how well he could stand. Fine, as it turned out, as long as he stretched out a few cramps before he tried to walk. The journey outside with Narcissa last night had been a test of his strength, and his mind still retained the purified feeling, which did him more good than any amount of bodily rest. "But I'm going to offer him some poisoned bait that he won't be able to resist taking."

Connor shuddered. "You frighten me when you talk like a Slytherin." But he stood up and followed Harry towards the door of the hospital wing.

"Sometimes I frighten myself," Harry admitted. He paused at the door and smiled at his brother. "Ready to go see Dumbledore?"

"You *were* planning to stop by the dungeons on your way, I suppose, Harry?" a voice asked from behind him.

Startled, Harry turned, and then had to brace himself on the wall. He lifted his chin. "Professor Snape, sir. I thought that you were at dinner."

"I knew about the promise that you made Mr. Malfoy, Harry." Snape's face was utterly devoid of amusement. "Not to go anywhere without me or him."

"I was going with Connor—" Harry began.

Snape's eyes pierced him. Harry lowered his head, and felt his cheeks flush. He had already broken the promise last night when he left with Narcissa, and not thought much about it, in truth. He had known he was perfectly safe with Narcissa, and why should Draco or Snape object when his companion was his brother?

He couldn't lie to himself for very long about that, though. Snape wasn't objecting because Harry was with Connor. He would object to Harry going to see the Headmaster without him or Draco at his side, though.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I—I *did* think you were at dinner."

"If I was, then the Headmaster was likely to be at dinner also," Snape reminded him. "I am certain that he has just now returned to his office, in fact." He cocked his head to the side. Harry saw his eyes flicker over Connor with easy contempt. That bothered him. *Snape will have to get used to thinking of my brother as a probable Boy-Who-Lived, soon. I'll need his help to train him.* "The Headmaster and I argued when last I saw him. I will not entrust your safety to him."

Harry let out his breath. *Well, if he insists on coming along, the least he could do is be a guardian to both of us.*

“Very well, sir,” he said. “I am grateful that you want to keep both me and Connor safe.”

Snape frowned at him.

Harry ignored him. Sooner or later, Snape would learn that Harry came along with his brother, and it was no use trying to separate them. Harry glanced back at Connor, and did his best to coax back the brave smile that Snape’s presence seemed to have banished.

“Ready, Connor?” he asked.

Connor nodded slowly. “I think so. As ready as I can be.”

“Which isn’t very,” Snape said, just loudly enough that Harry heard him.

Harry put his head up, but kept an eye on Snape as he marched out of the room. *If he loves me, then he won’t care when I ask small things of him. And one of those small things will be to stop disparaging Connor’s intelligence. Honestly, he’s a grown man, a professor, a former Death Eater who’s seen far more of the world than Connor has. Isn’t it about time for him to get over his grudges?*

Albus started when the knock came on the office door. He had been expecting it, of course, ever since Severus had swept into the school holding Harry in his arms, with Connor limping behind him, and a terrible expression on his face. In fact, he had felt the magical auras of the wizards in question as they rode up his moving staircase. But nothing could quite prepare him for this confrontation, it seemed.

He dashed a hand over his beard and sighed. “Come in.” It was no use trying to look like the picture of grandfatherly wisdom with these three. Connor was the only one who might believe the pretense, and his brother and Severus would disabuse him of the notion soon enough.

The door opened. Severus came first, his eyes and stride both sharp. He didn’t bother with anything but a cold scowl. Albus accepted that, was resigned to it by now. Since their argument over Sirius the night he died, he had known that any claim he might have had on the younger wizard’s loyalty was forever and irrevocably gone.

Connor Potter came next. Albus examined him as neutrally as he could. The Boy-Who-Lived was pale, and still did not look entirely well.

Behind him came his brother.

The magic that entered the room with Harry was not to be believed. Rationally, Albus knew he had not grown stronger; though Harry had eaten magic the night of Voldemort’s return, he had not made it part of himself as he had last year, but thrown it all back out again before it could become so thoroughly integrated.

But he *felt* stronger, because this time, he was determined to have his way. If not for his own power, Albus was sure that he would have felt inclined to agree with Harry. The siren song of his magic was incredibly attractive, and if Harry had been out of the hospital wing before this, he would have drawn far more stares and attention than he already had.

Albus knew he faced an incipient Lord, and more than that, a young *vates*. The Dementors were gone, and incredibly, there had come no reports of attacks from anywhere in Britain.

Somehow, Harry had done the impossible.

Albus would have to make peace and truce with him, for the sake of the future of the wizarding world.

“Headmaster,” said Harry, taking the central chair in front of the desk. Severus and Connor sat on either side of him. Albus had conjured three chairs, all of the proper sizes. There was no use pretending that he did not know they were coming, or playing the subtler games he might have tried, forcing them to scramble and look awkward.

Harry, of course, still addressed him by title, but Albus had expected no less. That was the Slytherin way, the serpent’s fang folded back until it was needed.

He met Harry's eyes steadily. "Harry."

Harry cocked his head to the side, and a faint smile appeared on his face. Albus blinked before he could stop himself. He had expected a flat list of demands, not this almost coy look.

"You haven't seen Voldemort's Pensieve, have you?" Harry asked.

Albus kept his face blank as he said, "Severus has not seen fit to entrust the information in the Pensieve to me." Severus looked smug at that. It was only a small gesture, but Severus never *had* learned to stop the lines around his mouth from pulling tight when he was trying to suppress a smirk. Albus had no intention of enlightening him about it, either. First, it hadn't been important, and now, it was one of a few advantages that he had.

If he allowed himself to think about it, Albus knew, he would be frightened at how few advantages he had in this situation. Not even Harry's youth was one of them, as it would have been with any other child.

He rose above the fear, forced it away, shut it out. He had made bad decisions earlier in the year when he merely reacted. This time, too much hung on what he did to surrender to emotions. He waited.

"The Pensieve shows the night Voldemort attacked our home," said Harry bluntly. "He cast two Killing Curses, as you surmised, but the first one hit me. I reflected it back at him while he was still busy casting the Killing Curse at Connor. The second one had time to carve my brother's scar, but nothing more."

Albus's eyes closed involuntarily.

He had told himself he had not hoped, not after he knew that Harry and Connor had learned the whole truth, but he knew now that was a lie. Some distant part of him had hoped that the prophecy was still a trustworthy guide, was still pursuing the path that meant the best outcome for the wizarding world. And now he knew it was not. Harry was the one who had defied Voldemort, the one Voldemort had marked.

Perhaps not, his impatient thoughts whispered. There is still the line about the heart being marked. And Harry's scar is assuredly not a heart.

But even if that was true, it was not the certainty that it had been when Harry was under the influence of the phoenix web and fulfilling multiple lines of the prophecy. It was a faint and slender thread on which to hang the hope of the wizarding world.

Perhaps it is no more than I deserve, however, since I failed to rid the world of Tom myself, and have always looked to a child to do so.

Albus forced his eyes open, and looked at Connor. "And you saw this, as well?" he asked. "You agree to this?"

He saw the flash of longing in the boy's eyes. He *wanted* to deny this, oh yes, and turn his back on the truth. It would have been easier. It would have meant that he could go on being the Boy-Who-Lived, and not confront what Lily and Albus had done. It would have accorded with the interpretation of events that he had known all his life. For a moment, Albus even held his breath. A crack between the twins now might prove the final shattering of their relationship. It was not ideal, but if Albus could get Connor away from his brother's influence and insure that he spent time training in the spells that Light wizards used, then he might yet make Connor the prophecy's lodestone.

And then Connor Potter proved why he had been Sorted into Gryffindor.

"Yes," he said, soft, but entirely clear. "I know what I saw. I agree with Harry that he—that he was the one who reflected the Killing Curse." He swallowed. "Peter told us that either of us might be the one the prophecy meant, and I agree. It was too vague." He looked up at Albus, and there was the first spark of betrayal in his gaze. "I never knew it was that vague. Mum always told me that it was settled. I never knew that there were so many words that might mean two different things."

Albus caught Harry's eyes, and saw the pride and pleasure and triumph on his face as he looked at his brother. He also saw the disgust on Severus's face, but he knew better than to think of it as a weapon. For the moment, at least, Severus was slavishly devoted to Harry, and would do whatever the boy asked of him—including putting up with a twin in Gryffindor.

"And you put our lives in danger," said Connor abruptly, leaning forward. "How could you *do* that? Powerful wizards aren't supposed to put babies in danger. Light wizards don't *do* that."

Albus blinked. He had not thought Connor would make the leap to this level of accusation so quickly. In retrospect, he supposed, he had been foolish not to see it. Connor had been quick to accept what was taught him in the past by adults he trusted. Now it seemed there might be no adults he trusted left any more, and he would accept what Harry had told him.

“It was necessary,” he said. “We had to know who the prophecy would choose. This was our best way of limiting it to only two candidates, not three or more.” His gaze came back to Harry, and he remembered again what it had been like to enter that half-shattered room, and feel the power howling around the twin with the lightning scar. “And there are circumstances that you do not know—“

“We do so,” said Harry, narrowing his eyes. “Peter overheard your conversation, later, with Mum, when you thought it was safe, and he told us about it. I know that I took in some of Voldemort’s powers, or at least his magic-eating ability and *then* some of his other powers, and that’s the reason I am the way I am. I know I’m a Parselmouth because he was, and able to feed on other wizards because he could. I know *everything*, Headmaster. I know that you planned to raise me as a guardian to my brother because you feared me. It was the same reason you put the phoenix web on me, in the end. I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

Terror such as he had not known in a long time flashed through Albus’s body. He had trusted in Harry’s essential character, chancy as that might have been, even after he had taken Lily’s magic away with the justice ritual. But the boy looking at him now through cold, considering eyes might as well have been Tom Riddle come again.

He reached out with his compulsion, trying instinctively to soothe that anger and turn it away from him.

He met shields piled on shields, raw magic and Occlumency and a series of wards that the boy seemed to have woven into the very surface of his skin. Then a great, sliding serpent opened one eye, and Albus felt the boy’s magic-eating ability coiling about his body. In this mood, he knew, Harry would not simply get rid of the power he swallowed, vomiting it back up when he had an immediate use for it. He would absorb it into himself, the way he had done earlier in the year. Harry could become the most powerful wizard in the world that way, if he wanted to.

“*Don’t try that again,*” said Harry, his voice gone cold and distant. “I don’t want to drain you, Headmaster, but try to control me or my brother, and I will.”

There were the serpent’s fangs, then, unfolded. Albus knew he could expect no help. This was a *vates*. This was a wizard come fully into his power, and into his independence, and much too young.

This is the bane we forged, he thought, gaze locked on Harry’s face, *Lily and I.*

And he saw the same realization in Harry’s eyes, mingled with no horror, simply acceptance, and knew then why Harry had handed him the truth. Harry was herding him, showing him the possible paths of the future and closing them off one by one. He intended to block Albus against a cliff, and then make him choose between jumping or alliance.

I will choose alliance, Albus thought. *If he is the Boy-Who-Lived, I have no choice. If he is a Dark Lord, I must know him well enough to fight him. If he is a Light Lord, I must be his mentor. And if he is vates...*

If he is vates, I must be ready to ride the windstorm.

“You have my word, Harry, in the name of Merlin, that it shall not happen again,” he said aloud. “Of course, you know that your mother is frantic for you, and wishes to have her sons back again.”

“It will not happen again.” Harry’s voice was calm and assured, without a trace of mockery. “Connor is going to stay with me for the summer. He needs an education in things he should have learned long since.”

It is rational, Albus thought, as another gate slammed shut, *and who could object to it? We trained him so well. Of course he is the one who can best train his brother, the one who best understands the challenges that his brother is facing.*

“Can you be sure it will be safe?” Albus asked, because, shutting off paths or not, he would play this game to the bitter end. Harry was still young, and might not have thought of everything. One deadly weakness that many Slytherins had was the urge to demonstrate their own cleverness, their own subtlety. Caught up in the desire to do so, Harry might have left openings he assumed his enemy was too stupid to find. “There could still be many dangers. The Dementors, for example, now that they are free from the chains tying them to Azkaban—“

“The Dementors came from nightmares in the beginning,” Harry interrupted. “They told me so. I sent them back into

nightmares. I sent them home.”

Albus felt his eyes close again, but this time he restrained himself to a long, slow blink. “They are gone?”

“They are gone,” said Harry firmly. “Forever. The Ministry is going to have to find some new way of guarding Azkaban.” He smiled at Albus, all teeth showing, in a way that said he understood the full consequences for the future, and did not care.

Albus reached for news he had intended to save. Now, while the game was in motion, might be the one chance he would ever have to throw Harry off-balance. “The Ministry will not be happy with you, Harry,” he said. “They are in a mood to crack down on Dark creatures, not see them free. They have passed the anti-werewolf legislation, did you know? As of summer solstice, no werewolf will be able to hold a paying job, have custody of a child, own property, vote, or do many other things.”

Harry’s balance never even wavered. “Then I shall be working to change that, as well,” he said. “But I am sure, Headmaster. The Dementors are as gone as my mother’s magic is, as irretrievable.”

Albus narrowed his eyes. *Time to strike at his wording.* He ignored his old mentor’s voice in his head, the one that said attacking an enemy’s wording was the last refuge of the desperate. “You say they told you they came from nightmares. Could they have been lying?”

“They spoke to me as *vates*,” said Harry. “And they certainly vanished quickly enough when I released them.”

“Released them?”

“Tore their web apart.”

He can see the webs. He can see the bindings. Albus could hardly breathe for fear. *What web might he decide to tear apart next, just because he can?*

Harry lifted his lips slightly, not quite a curl, but an expressive gesture of scorn nonetheless. “You need not worry, Headmaster,” he said. “I know there are other webs in the wizarding world, but I do not intend to simply tear them away from their owners without properly considering the consequences. That includes the webs on house elves, on phoenixes, on unicorns, on dragons, on all other creatures. If I could remember to consider the consequences when I was half-dead of exhaustion, then I can remember to consider the consequences at other times.”

He removed the Dementors’ web when he was half-dead of exhaustion.

And Albus turned the corner, and found the truth waiting for him, the truth he had never been able to run from for very long.

Harry wasn’t just a *vates*, he was someone who had a very good chance to be a *successful vates*.

He had a chance to succeed where Albus had failed.

The light Albus had considered an inferno in the distance might well be a sunrise.

He met Harry’s eyes, and this time saw the infernal child *smiling*, as if he could read the truth out of the Headmaster’s face. For all Albus knew, that was something Severus had taught him.

And of course Harry had not left a weakness in his arguments that depended on his own desire to show off. From the very first, Lily had cultivated a desire in him not to show off, and that meant Harry had little ambition for himself. But when it came to ambition for others, he would fling all his considerable power in the direction of one goal—carefully.

If he had not struggled to prevent this very occurrence for so long, Albus thought that he might even have welcomed the slender hope as a strong one.

At any rate, he had made a mistake, the equivalent of several dozen mistakes, in treating Harry as an enemy. That had to end now, and not only because Albus wanted access to both boys. He had once killed a Dark Lord for the love he bore the wizarding world. He wanted to be part of its future, and, like it or not, Harry was going to be an enormous part of that future.

“I am inclined to trust your judgment on this matter, Harry,” he said, making sure to keep his voice grave. “What do you want from me?”

“Little that you won’t want to give.” Harry’s eyes were direct, his voice brisk. “I don’t want you to tell anyone about the possible truth of the prophecy, not yet. We don’t *know* yet which one of us it’s going to be. But I do want you to tell everyone that the Dementors are assuredly not coming back. I want you to help us make peace with the Ministry over that. I want you to tell Mum that neither of us are coming back unless she manages to gain control of her insanity, and I want you to stop trying to compel us or force us back under her control—legal or mental. I want you to stop threatening Connor, and me, and Professor Snape, and any other of our allies. I want you to take the phoenix web you put on Peter off him. I want you to stop encouraging subtle prejudices against Slytherin House. I want you to research why the Voldemort we faced could have memories of the night his older self attacked Godric’s Hollow.” He drew in a deep breath. “That will do for a start.”

Albus nodded slowly. Here was the list of demands that he had expected, but they were more reasonable than he had thought they would be. “And in return?” he asked quietly.

“I will work with you to understand the bindings on the wizarding world, and what the consequences are of being a *vates*,” said Harry, his gaze open, and calm, and clear. “I will work to use legal means of achieving freedom where I can, and not openly antagonize the Ministry; we need them to win this war. I’ll help train Connor. If and when Mum ever regains control of herself, I’ll try to be open to a reconciliation with her. I won’t threaten you or your allies, and will fight to defend you. I will keep certain things that you want to stay secret—the phoenix webs, and the truth about what happened to Sirius—silent.” He tilted his head. “If it comes down to it, I’ll be the Boy-Who-Lived, or the guardian of the Boy-Who-Lived, and a warrior against Voldemort, and I’ll die in the battles against him. If it comes to that. I plan to *fight*.”

Severus shifted. Albus’s eyes flicked to him, and he saw the disgruntled expression on the man’s face. Harry had not talked to his guardian before coming up with this list, then, and Severus did not like it. Severus always had hated to be left out of anything important.

That might be a weakness I can use later, then, Albus thought, but for now he would commit to going ahead. “I agree,” he said aloud. “And, as it happens, I can answer one of your terms immediately.”

“*Can you?*” Harry sounded wary, but interested.

“Yes,” said Albus, trying to ignore how much Harry sounded like a classically educated pureblood wizard, and how much that disturbed him. *We made him into this, Lily and I*. “I believe I know why Voldemort’s younger selves could draw on his memories. Tom Riddle, as I knew him, always had much more facility with aggressive probes into others’ minds—Legilimency—than with Occlumency. It is one reason that Severus was able to survive as a spy, because he was the better Occlumens.” On Harry’s right side, Severus nodded grudging agreement. “It is entirely possible that his older self, as he is right now, would not sense his other selves reaching out to him and leaching bits of information from his mind. They would have the mental skills to do so, and the connection necessary to allow it.” He leaned forward and met Harry’s eyes, because this was another thing he had to know. “Do you have such a connection to him with your scar, Harry?”

A brief flicker of his eyes to the right. *It is good to know the boy can still be startled*, Albus thought. “Yes,” said Harry. “Prophetic dreams, mostly. Nightmares.”

Albus had the feeling Harry wasn’t telling the whole truth, but decided not to push him. He nodded. “I am not surprised. If and when Voldemort becomes aware of the link between you, he will use it to good effect, but a passive draining from his mind is unlikely to be noticed for some time to come.” He let out a breath. “We have a valuable weapon in the war.”

“*Harry is not a weapon.*”

Albus jumped. He had never heard Severus sound so angry. The words were barely on the edge of hearing.

“I said I’d fight,” Harry reminded his guardian.

“You are not a weapon,” said Snape. His eyes had not left Albus. “You are a fighter, a leader. There is a difference. And I know how difficult and dangerous fighting on a mental battlefield is. *I will be the one to make the final decision on how you use this link between yourself and Voldemort, if at all.*”

Albus inclined his head. *Not such a weakness. I will have to watch out for him*. “I quite agree, Severus,” he said mildly. “As you will be watching out for Harry this summer, you may make such decisions then.”

Severus subsided back into his chair with a viciously triumphant expression.

“That isn’t settled yet,” Harry protested, sounding fretful for the first time. “And I’m a fighter, sir. Not a leader.”

Albus cursed himself for not seeing it before. *There* was his weakness.

For now, he would go along with Harry. The terms Harry set were reasonable. He was unlikely to relinquish control of himself or his brother, and both were necessary for the future of the wizarding world. Albus had played a part in making him what he was, and in repentance for that, it was only fair that he listen to Harry. There was even the hope that Harry might be exactly what the Ministry, Hogwarts, the pureblooded wizards, and everyone else needed.

But if he was not...

Harry had an unusual strength in not caring if he was out in front, in the collective gaze and worship of the wizarding world.

It was also a natural flaw. Press on it hard enough, and Albus thought he could gain control if he ever needed it.

Better not to advertise it, he advised himself, as Harry and he swore vows to each other in the name of Merlin. *Much better to subtly encourage Harry back into the shadows—should I need to.*

Harry paused and eyed the portrait of the Fat Lady. "I know that Hermione forgave me," he said, "but how do the rest of your Housemates feel about me right now, Connor? I don't want to be walking into a nest of Gryffindors convinced that all Slytherins are slimy snakes."

Connor snorted and shook his head. "Someone said that the other day, and Hermione scolded them until they shut up." He tugged on Harry's arm. "Come on. Snape said I could spend some time with you." Connor frowned at that, and Harry did, too. Snape was still being utterly unreasonable, and saying that he wanted Harry to spend the summer with him, and Draco at most, while Connor went away—where didn't matter, as long as it wasn't Hogwarts. "And I don't feel as comfortable in the dungeons or the hospital wing as I do in Gryffindor Tower."

Well, that was understandable. Harry nodded, and Connor whispered, "Honeybee!" to the portrait, which swung open.

It quickly became apparent, as they stepped into the middle of the Gryffindor common room, that a lone Slytherin would be of no concern. Instead, most of the Gryffindors were watching in fascination as the Weasley family apparently attacked itself.

"How *could* you do that, Percy!" Ron's face was as red as his hair. "You *know* that Dad tried so hard to get that position for you, and—"

"That position isn't worth what he would have paid for it, if he actually had money," Percy interrupted. Harry had never heard his voice so cold and distant. Admittedly, he didn't know the third Weasley brother that well, but Percy had always sounded passionate when he scolded people for breaking the rules. This sounded as though he were trying to imitate Draco. "Mr. Crouch has offered me a *very* good position. Testing the thickness of cauldron bottoms is *very* important."

"You're a self-important bastard for accepting it when you turned down Dad's job!" Ron howled, and his face turned redder yet.

It seemed as if he would lunge at Percy, but the twins got there first. A whispered charm from the twin whom Harry thought was Fred Weasley, and a bright purple light limned Percy's body and shrunk his robes. From the slightly cross-eyed expression on Percy's face, they'd shrunk absolutely *everywhere*.

"I don't have time to argue with you," said Percy, in a lofty tone ruined a bit by his breathlessness. "I didn't expect you to understand, Ron, or you either, Fred and George." He turned and looked across the common room. "I thought Ginny might."

Harry turned to look at the youngest Weasley, who was sitting at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the girls' rooms. She lifted her chin at all the attention focused on her, but, surprisingly, didn't blush.

"Family matters to me, Percy," she said quietly. "I don't see how you can turn your back on Dad."

"That's only because no one understands the brilliance of the position I've been offered!" Percy's fingers were shaking as he fumbled with his Head Boy badge. "D'you see this? I've got the chance to do things that no one else in the family has ever done before, climb to heights that Dad never will, stuck in Misuse of Muggle Artifacts the rest of his life—"

“You sound like a *Slytherin*, Percy,” Ginny said.

Percy’s face went pale, then flushed red, and then he slammed his mouth shut. He turned his back and stalked out of the room, shoving the portrait open to an indignant squeal from the Fat Lady. Harry heard the clipped sound of his footsteps up the hall for a moment before they faded.

Harry half-closed his eyes. Percy *had* sounded like a *Slytherin*, but he had also sounded as if he were under strain, as if pursuing his ambition were costing him something, which was something a *Slytherin* wouldn’t do.

“I’m going to go after him,” he murmured to Connor.

“But—“ Connor protested.

Harry gestured to Ron, who looked as if he were about to put his fist through the wall. “I think Ron needs you right now,” he said. “I’ll come right back after I’ve talked to Percy, I promise. But something’s not right.”

Connor nodded reluctantly, and then went to comfort Ron. Harry strode out the portrait hole, taking the time to apologize to the Fat Lady for the rough way he’d opened it, and then looked up and down the hall.

He saw Percy’s shadow vanishing around the right-hand corner, and hurried after it. He caught up with him on a turn of the staircase. Percy was walking rapidly, his head down and his cheeks burning, and his hands clenched hard enough at his sides that his nails were drawing blood from his palms.

Pitching his voice to sound loud, Harry said, “I don’t know if anyone else will think about it, but I’m not convinced by your performance in there.”

Percy jumped, flinched, and slowly turned around. His face was so distraught that Harry nodded. That was a performance, nothing else. Of course, then he had to think why a Weasley would wish to alienate his family.

Harry knew the answer as soon as he recalled the way that Dumbledore had trusted Percy to spy on him last year, and the way that Percy had effortlessly brought him to the Headmaster’s office the moment he suspected Harry of wrongdoing.

“Dumbledore asked you to do this, didn’t he.”

Perhaps because he didn’t make it a question, Percy simply gave in. His body sagged against the wall, and he ran his hand through his hair, a disordered gesture that Ron was more accustomed to making, in Harry’s experience. “Yes,” he whispered, looking away.

Harry shook his head slightly. “Why?”

“The Ministry’s cracking down on *everyone*,” Percy whispered. “Dumbledore saw the first signs of it last year, even the summer before last year, and started sending me post. He asked me if I would be willing to pretend to abandon my family for the sake of a post in the Ministry, if they offered it to me. And they did.” He laughed humorlessly. “My father has a reputation there, you know, and no one else would ever think of me as anything other than a Weasley if I didn’t detach myself from him. No one would ever trust me, ever spill secrets around me. But a Weasley who wants to make a name for himself...well, of course that’s understandable. My family’s poor. Of course they would think that I might want to be wealthier, and to give up a name that doesn’t mean anything but a foolish reputation for courage and honor.” Percy closed his eyes tightly. “And being an assistant to Mr. Crouch is a plausible first step for a young man who wants to make a name for himself. He has a reputation, too, and it used to be a good one. And it’s a plausible first step for a deep-cover spy for the Order of the Phoenix, which Dumbledore has asked me to be.”

Harry felt anger lash to life in him. *Another sacrifice. Does Dumbledore never stop?*

“You could tell your family what’s really going on,” he suggested. “I’m sure they’d understand.”

Percy shook his head at once. “The twins, Ron, and Ginny are too young to understand why it’s necessary,” he whispered. “And my mum—I know you only met her the once, Harry, but can you *honestly* see her agree to treat me coldly when it looks like I’ve never done anything to hurt her? Can you see her agree to stop sending me jumpers for Christmas, or inviting me home for the holidays?”

Harry had, reluctantly, to shake his head. It was true that he had met Mrs. Weasley only the once, but she hadn’t struck him

as a good actor.

“My father is as transparent as ice,” said Percy. “He can’t keep *any* emotion off his face. It’s one reason he hasn’t advanced. He wouldn’t be able to stop grinning and winking at me.

“Bill and Charlie might understand, and I might be able to tell them, but I’ll have to wait and see. If nothing else, being in communication with them too much might damage my reputation. They’re still Weasleys.” Percy sighed and rubbed at his eyes, which were marked with too many sleepless nights. “So, for now, I tell no one. I go deep-cover, and seem utterly and entirely trustworthy, so that Dumbledore can have eyes in the Ministry.”

Harry took a deep breath. He had to know. “Percy, did Dumbledore ever use a phoenix web on you?”

Percy shook his head at once. “No. Only persuasion. That’s why it took me so long. I had to debate for almost two years before I could convince myself to abandon my family for the Order’s cause.” He smiled sadly. “That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? But it’s what I’ve decided to do.”

He looked directly at Harry. “Don’t tell them, please.”

Harry nodded. He understood why Percy had stomped out at Ginny’s Slytherin comment. He *was* being a Gryffindor, choosing a lonely path out of the courage of his convictions, but he couldn’t tell his family that.

Percy turned and started down the stairs again, then paused. “You’ve seen V-Voldemort,” he said, forcing the name out. “He’s coming back, isn’t he?”

Harry nodded again.

Percy glanced at him over his shoulder. “Well, then,” he said. “I’m hardly some great battle wizard. My greatest skill is observing. If I can help the Second War by being a spy, I will.”

He went down the stairs.

Harry leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment. He was wondering what he should do with the new knowledge. On the one hand, he had promised not to interfere with or threaten Dumbledore’s allies, and this definitely fell under that category. And Harry had no reason to be particularly pleased with the Ministry himself, lately.

On the other hand, this was Dumbledore mucking about in the Ministry, *again*, and Harry knew someone who would be very, very interested in that information.

And Percy was being a sacrifice, when Dumbledore could have worked out some way to do it that was easier on Percy’s mind and heart.

Harry smiled a bit, grimly, as he straightened. He would send a letter to Scrimgeour advising him to watch Percy, and see if he might be persuaded to try different tactics, rather than outright exposing him as a spy or feeding him false information. Dumbledore would no doubt be thrilled to have a spy in the Auror Office itself. Percy would believe he was getting somewhere. Scrimgeour would know where the mucking about was coming from and be able to act at his discretion.

Everyone wins, Harry thought, and made his way back to the Gryffindor Tower, and his twin.

“I’m so sorry, Remus.”

Remus shot Harry a faint smile as he packed up his belongings. “There was nothing you could have done, Harry,” he said, sounding as if he wanted Harry to understand that he did not blame him. “The Ministry shoved the legislation through overnight, using a secret meeting of their supporters, the kind that hasn’t been called in a hundred years. Everyone forgot that law was on the books.” He sighed. “And now I won’t be able to teach here again.”

Or hold any other paying job, Harry thought, and fumed silently at the unfairness of it all. If nothing else, he was sure that Dumbledore would try to use Remus for spy and scut work, just because he would want to feel that he was useful to the Order.

“Remus, about Sirius—“ he began.

“I did my mourning already, Harry,” Remus interrupted, his voice calm but firm. “Please. I went out under the full moon and ran myself exhausted.” His eyes caught Harry’s, asking in silence for Harry to drop it. Harry nodded, and Remus continued, “I’m more worried about you, and Connor. How are you doing with Sirius’s death?”

Harry sighed. He had promised to be more open about his emotions, but that was with Draco and Snape. On the other hand, Remus did care about him, and he wanted to speak, for once.

“It’s hard,” he said quietly. “I expect to turn a corner and see him coming towards me any day. And then I find myself thinking of him as an enemy, and wanting to destroy him.”

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Remus said. “He would have understood. And he did some good with his death.” Harry had made sure that Remus understood the full story of the Shrieking Shack, both Sirius’s death and what had happened at Godric’s Hollow. “He made it possible for you to know the truth.” Remus’s eyes glittered. “I think he would enjoy what is going to happen now, with you and Connor more in accord, and Dumbledore prevented from giving you any more of the same help that was so ineffective with Sirius.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you, Remus.” And some of the pain was easing. “How much did you know about his life?”

Remus shook his head. “A great deal about his childhood. And Regulus, of course. But nothing about the last few years, that he was suffering from nightmares, or that the curse had never broken.” Remus sighed and closed his eyes briefly. Harry could see the marks of the strain from the full moon two nights ago clearly etched on his face. “I can see why he didn’t want to tell me. It took him forever to tell me the truth about the night he ran away from home and went to James’s house.”

“Why?” Harry whispered. “What happened?”

“His parents tried to compel him to join the Death Eaters,” Remus said. “He broke free of chains and mental compulsion, both, and hurt his mother—badly enough that she was bedridden for the rest of her life—and ran.”

Harry winced. *And in the end, he was a Death Eater, sort of, all the same.*

He pushed the thought forcibly away. Sirius was at rest now, and that was all that mattered.

“I want you to stay with us for the summer,” he told Remus, to take his mind off things.

Remus snorted as he placed an illustrated chart of the moon’s phases carefully into his trunk. “And has anyone decided where you’ll be staying for the summer, yet?”

Harry flushed. No, they had not. He was insistent that Connor stay with him. Snape was equally insistent that he would welcome no Potter brat into his quarters, unless it happened to be the Potter brat he was guardian of, and Draco had made it icily clear that his parents’ invitation extended only to Harry. It was the last day of school tomorrow, the day that everyone would normally leave on the Hogwarts Express, and *still* nothing had been decided.

Remus chuckled. “I didn’t think so. If you do decide on somewhere, Harry, let me know. For now, I’ve got some places to go in London, and they’ll serve for a few weeks.”

“What kinds of places?” Harry asked, interested.

Remus’s eyes slid away from his. “Not my secret to tell, Harry,” he said. “Werewolf places.”

Harry nodded, understanding and letting it go. He wasn’t a werewolf, and couldn’t really understand what it was like, to have that compulsion-driven beast roaring inside him. If Remus had some contacts among werewolves that he felt he couldn’t share, Harry would respect his privacy. “I’ll let you know,” he said, and leaped up to go through the door.

I remember that.

Harry blinked. The voice in the back of his head had not spoken in several days, and he thought it had left him. But no, it was still there, and now it was speaking in a rush, its words spilling over each other.

There was so much shouting. There was so much pain. Then the magic flared, and I knew that someone had been crippled. I

didn't know who.

That's it. That's what it was. I know my name now! My name is Regulus Black.

Harry gasped and had to lean against the wall. He heard Remus's anxious question of, "Harry? Harry, are you all right?" but couldn't answer, staring stunned as Regulus's voice whispered rapidly to itself.

I stole the Dark Lord's locket, but I didn't make it far. I only had time to hide it in 12 Grimmauld Place, not to destroy it. He captured me and made me suffer with the curse, and let Sirius feel it. Oh, the pain. Harry could feel a mental shudder, and hoped that Regulus was not about to go mad or douse him with the pain again, but Regulus recovered after a moment and soldiered on.

I suffered for years. I don't know where I am, but I suffered. The Dark Lord didn't kill me, but shut me up somewhere and left me alive to suffer. That's what Sirius felt. That's why it was so intense.

But then the other fragment of the Dark Lord took over Sirius's mind from the locket and threw me out, because I was a link to his older self and he didn't need me any more. My web was broken, and I was drifting. I was attracted to your mind, and Snape's, and Peter's, and your brother's, and other people's, because they had a connection to the Dark Lord, but the pain had been so intense I couldn't remember anything for a long time.

But now I do. Now I remember.

Harry gulped, and managed to refocus. At least one minor mystery had been solved, then. All the wards on 12 Grimmauld Place had slammed shut and locked tight because Regulus, the family's chosen heir, was still alive, and he hadn't given permission for his cousin to access the house.

Do you know where you are? he asked.

There was long silence, and then an embarrassed, *Um. No. It's just dark, wherever it is.*

Are you hurting right now? Harry demanded. *We have to get you out of there. Why haven't you starved to death?*

The spells the Dark Lord cast. Regulus sounded almost dismissive. They keep me alive, but I can't move, and I don't know where I am, and I'm not hurting right now. I haven't hurt since the Dark Lord threw me out of my brother's mind. His voice abruptly dipped. My brother is dead.

"We'll find you," Harry whispered. "We'll do what we can to find you."

"Harry? Who are you talking to?"

Harry looked Remus in the eye, finally, and smiled a little. "Regulus."

After that came a hell of a lot of explanation, and fetching of Snape, who yelled, and Draco, who yelled some more, and Connor, who found the whole thing odd. But Harry had made a promise, and he meant to keep it. He was going to find Regulus, and he was going to free him.

I promise, he thought, and Regulus responded with a wistful, eager note in his voice.

It would be nice to see the sun again.

Harry woke slowly. Someone was shaking his shoulder, and it was the middle of the night. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and heard Fawkes chirp in disgust as the bed shifted, plunging his head further beneath his wing.

"Harry." Draco's face was pale, with a note of strain in his voice that Harry didn't understand until the next words. "Your father's here. He says that he'd like to see you."

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

Chapter Forty-Five: A Conversation With James

Harry stopped outside the hospital wing and tried to slow his beating heart. Apparently, James had come into the hospital wing first, under the impression that his sons were still there, and woken Madam Pomfrey, who had woken the Headmaster, who had woken the Slytherin and Gryffindor Prefects, who had woken Draco and Percy Weasley. Draco had explained this to Harry as he struggled into his Slytherin robes and tried to wipe the sleep from his eyes. Harry had reached the hospital wing first, and was trying to figure out what he would say to his father, as well as when Connor would get here.

“Harry?”

Too late, Harry thought, and turned around to clasp Connor’s hand. “Dad is here,” he said, to answer the question he saw on his twin’s face. “But I want you to remember that we don’t have to go anywhere with him, not when he hasn’t made an attempt to contact us for months.”

Connor gnawed his lip. “The Ministry—“

“Can only use legal solutions,” said Harry.

Connor blinked at him. “I always thought legal solutions were pretty powerful,” he said quietly.

Harry leaned against his brother and let his magic rise from its bonds, swirling around him. “That’s what the Headmaster thought, too,” he said. “I know someone in the Ministry who managed to resist him. And you were there when I negotiated with Dumbledore, Connor. I meant what I said. I won’t let him hurt us. I won’t let anyone hurt us.” He met Connor’s eyes and waited.

Connor swallowed. “And that includes Dad.”

Harry nodded.

Connor took a deep breath. “All right. If you think that he can’t force us apart or do anything, then I’ll go in with you and talk to him.” He glanced at Harry with a faint smile. “It’s awfully nice to know that I have someone like you at my back, instead of across the room from me.”

Harry inclined his head, and didn’t say what he’d been thinking. *You’ve always had me at your back, brother, standing at your right shoulder. Even when you thought you didn’t, or didn’t know you did, I was here.*

He reached out and opened the door of the hospital wing.

James ran a hand down his face and told himself that he wasn’t afraid of his own sons, damn it, and that he was *too* awake enough to handle this confrontation.

The reality was that he’d finished the last confrontation with himself, learned the last truth he thought he needed to know to be a good father, and rushed to Hogwarts before sleep could dull the insights to mere baubles of glass from the clear diamonds they were now.

A spark popped in the grate, and he whirled. Madam Pomfrey, who was on her way back to bed, paused and eyed him sternly.

“I won’t have you frightening those boys,” she said.

James nodded, then realized how the motion would look—as if his head were some puppet on strings—and forced himself to repeat it more smoothly. His parents hadn’t believed in most of the pureblood dances used by Dark wizards, but they had taught him a good deal about the importance of proper posture. He gave the nurse his Head Boy smile, the one that had got him out of more trouble in seventh year than anyone would ever know. “I promise, Madam Pomfrey. I just want a little time to speak to them, and convince them to give me a second chance if I can. If I can’t, I’ll go, I promise.” He knew how fragile this chance was, how easily he could mess it up.

Madam Pomfrey snorted a bit, but her face softened. “I do like to see families reunited,” she said. “I saw enough of them torn apart in the War. But be *careful* with them, Mr. Potter. I mean it.”

James closed his eyes tightly and nodded. He would be. The confrontations with himself he'd fired in Lux Aeterna had shown him exactly how many chances he'd let slip through his fingers in the past, how much care he'd needed and failed to exercise.

He heard the matron move past him and to her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Then he opened his eyes and looked at the door. Dumbledore had assured him that his sons had been told of his presence, and that his best course was to stay in the hospital wing until they could be summoned, one from the dungeons, one from Gryffindor Tower.

Remember that, James chided himself. *One of them comes from the dungeons. Harry is Slytherin, and you're only going to hurt him and yourself if you forget that, or try to pretend that he can be Re-Sorted, or any of the other nonsense you've been up to.*

The door to the hospital wing swung open.

James felt his eyes widen and a tide of nervous sweat break out on his brow, but he waited patiently.

His sons came through.

Harry was slightly in the lead, his head up and his eyes fixed on his father. He moved like an Auror, James thought, recalling that part of his training. One important aspect was to look straight into the suspect's eyes, and never reveal that one was nervous or upset or worried. Harry was better at it than he had ever been.

Behind Harry came Connor, his hazel eyes shuttered in a way that James had never seen them, his steps shuffling. Of course, part of that could come from the lateness of the hour, James thought.

"Father," said Harry, his voice the very epitome of polite address to a stranger. "Thank you for coming. We were anxious to know what you would do." He paused and tilted his head to the side. James wondered if he was looking for wards, or spells, or perhaps simply the location of his father's wand.

James nodded jerkily. "I—I was thinking," he said.

"About what?" Harry's face was blank.

James took a long, deep breath. This was not going to be simple to explain, but his sons deserved no less, given how long he had spent away. "Sit down, please, boys," he said, and led them to two hospital beds. Connor scrambled readily into his. Harry watched James.

"Are you going to pace?" he asked.

James blinked at him. "I—yes, probably."

As if that were the answer he were waiting for, Harry nodded and scrambled into the bed James had indicated. James stifled any suspicion that wanted to rise. He understood almost nothing about Harry at all. At least he knew that, now.

James began pacing, completing two circuits in front of the beds before he nerved himself to speak. "Have you ever heard of Lux Aeterna?"

Connor blinked and shook his head. Harry said softly, "I know it was a Potter estate. But I thought it was sold when you and Mother went into hiding with us—that you wanted to have the money ready, and not risk having a property where Voldemort could attack us."

James shook his head. "That was only a ruse. In reality, the person who bought it was an—alternative of me. Lux Aeterna can't be sold. It's linked to the Potter bloodline. It's not the place our line was born or gained its name, but it's the place where we became linked to the Light, and made our major choices, and store most of our artifacts." He took a long breath. "It's a linchpin, boys."

Connor continued to look blank. On the other hand, Harry looked as if he didn't know whether to be impressed or frightened.

"I never knew that we had one," he whispered.

James nodded. It looked as though this wasn't going to be as bad as he had feared. Connor didn't know anything and could be eased into understanding, and Harry wasn't screaming his head off at the first mention of linchpins, which James wouldn't have been surprised about, considering the bindings Lily and Dumbledore had put on him. "We do. It's not a fact we advertise, given how easily our enemies could damage us if they knew about it, but there you are."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. Connor looked back and forth from his brother to his father, and finally burst out, "What *is* a linchpin?"

"An estate linked to a bloodline," Harry whispered. "More to the point, linked to a—a major *site* of that bloodline. It could be a place where they won a battle, or a place where they chose to be Light or Dark and committed their family to that allegiance, or a place where all their children were born. It can't be sold. It can't be given away. It anchors the family, insures they have a source of magical strength to draw on if all is lost, but it demands things from them, too. If the linchpin is ever attacked when the family isn't there, then it draws strength from the family to support itself. It might drain all of us in maintaining its wards." Harry looked up and met James's eyes. He had settled for looking terribly, gravely impressed. "I can see why you and Mother didn't want to hide there. Voldemort might have had enough strength to drain us even if we were behind the wards, or to shatter the linchpin itself."

James nodded, then hesitated. He had to continue the story, but there was something he needed to know first, and he was no Slytherin, to determine the emotions reliably from the boy's voice. Nor was he an Auror, or at least he was one long out of practice. "Harry," he said, "how do you feel about Lily right now?"

"I don't ever want to see her again," said Harry equitably. "She damaged me too much for me to be neutral towards her, and she encouraged Connor to get me back under control again." For a moment, temper flamed in his green eyes. James refrained from mentioning how much he looked like his mother when he did that. "Maybe, sometime in the future, I could be in the same house with her without wanting to destroy the house."

James nodded. It was about the answer he had expected, and it effectively nixed the plan he might have tried if Harry had felt able to see Lily again. *Very well. I'll do the other.*

"I went to Lux Aeterna because I knew it was the best place for thinking," said James. "And no one could come after me there. I'm the Potter heir, and if I want other people to stay out, they stay out." He let out a long breath.

"I thought, and I thought, and I thought. The only person I wrote to was Remus. I couldn't trust myself to be civil to Lily or Dumbledore, not after seeing what they'd done to you, Harry." He met his elder son's eyes for a moment, then looked away. "I didn't know what to do about Sirius, and I *still* feel so embarrassed about Peter that I don't know whether he would welcome a letter from me or not. And you boys were what I needed to make up my mind about. What had I done wrong, and how could I prevent it from ever happening again?"

"In the end, I knew it wasn't working. I'd thought, and still I found myself getting stuck in corners. I'd hurt you by being there, but I was hurting you further by staying away. I'd made mistakes in the past, but I had no guarantee that I wouldn't make mistakes in the future."

"We don't expect you to be perfect, Dad." It was Connor who said that, offering him a fragile smile. "We wanted you to be there most of all."

James inclined his head, feeling as though someone had just breathed all the air in his lungs. "I don't deserve that level of confidence, son," he murmured. "Or, at least, I didn't. And I knew I didn't. I could so easily see what I'd been, a rabbit—"

Harry started at that word, for some reason. James eyed him and waited, but when Harry said nothing, James decided it was nothing his boy wanted to share right now and went on.

"But I could see that I'd fall right back into being that if Lily asked me sweetly enough. She convinced me to *stay away* from one of my sons when he was hurt from being possessed by Voldemort." James shook his head. "And Albus is worse. Albus has the compulsion gift."

"I thought maybe Mum did, too," said Connor then, and drew his knees up to his chin. "Where else did I get it?"

"One of my ancestors had it," said James gently, figuring he could give Connor at least this much. It was one thing he wanted to give his boys, after all: a taste of their heritage. "It comes from the Potter line, not your mother's."

Connor nodded.

“No,” said James quietly, “all she had was her words, and the fact that I loved her.” He blinked. Quite suddenly, the night he’d returned home to find his sons both bleeding from scars on their foreheads seemed vivid before him. He shook his head. He had been tempted to say it was the night that started this whole mess, but that wasn’t true. He’d been what he was long before that night. “I still do,” he added.

“So do I,” said Harry.

James grunted, feeling as though a centaur had kicked him in the chest. Hearing that from Harry only reminded him of how very, very hard this all was. He wanted to sit down.

But he’d decided that he had to keep on his feet through the whole thing. He best expressed his nervous energy when he was pacing. And he’d be ready to leave, quickly, if Harry or Connor rejected the gift he was going to offer them.

He resumed his story. “I decided there was only one thing I could do, even though it meant staying away from you boys even longer. At least I knew, once it was done, that there was no turning back.”

“How?” Harry asked. “Did you make an Unbreakable Vow?”

James shook his head.

“A ritual of some kind?” Connor added.

James shook his head again. “I went into one of the artifacts in Lux Aeterna,” he said. “I knew that when I came out of it I’d be either a fit father, because I would have seen and confronted every one of my faults and resolved to overcome it, or I’d be dead.”

Connor paled and stared at him. Harry frowned.

“And you thought we’d like having a dead father?” he asked.

James flinched. He had to admit, he hadn’t thought of it quite that way. There were still ways in which he needed to work to understand Harry. Harry went straight for weaknesses in his armor that a Gryffindor would have ignored or considered excused by his courage.

“Not really, no,” James admitted. “But I could literally think of nothing else, Harry. If I’d had someone with me, then perhaps I wouldn’t have done it. But I’d spent a few months in isolation by then, outside of the one letter to Remus, and I think I went a bit crazy. I was sure that my dying would cause you pain, but so would my staying alive unchanged, and I couldn’t think of a way to change. And at least, if I died, then Lily and Dumbledore couldn’t use me as leverage against you. So I entered the Maze.”

Harry sat up abruptly. “You must have sent one more letter, at least,” he said. “Snape mentioned a maze.”

James inclined his head, and stifled the irritation that squirmed inside him at the thought of Snape anywhere near his son. That was another thing he would have to get past, for Harry’s sake, since he doubted his son would give up his guardian. “I did. The Maze is a long labyrinth, which showed me something of what’s going on in the outside world—but only what would enhance my facing my mistakes, never anything that would detract from it. I knew when you shed your phoenix web, Harry, and what you boys faced in regards to Voldemort. That was near the end, so I was able to send a letter saying that I’d see you soon. I sent it to Remus. I think he must have shared it with Snape.”

Harry nodded, but not as though he knew, rather as though he were too absorbed in the tale to doubt what James was telling him.

“The Maze was—not too bad,” said James. That wasn’t strictly true. It had been beautiful, and horrible, but the end result was “not too bad.” What he had told his sons was the bare bones of the truth. The Maze had plopped him straight down in front of his mistakes, and refused to let him look away, either from the mistakes themselves or the consequences of them. He’d had to watch what happened when he loved his wife more than either of his sons, when he loved Connor more than Harry. He could tell them that, and would, but they would never understand unless they entered the Maze for themselves, and James hoped to Merlin they never would. “It did what I was hoping for. It showed me how I had to change.”

“How?” Harry asked.

James paced twice across the room before he answered again. He felt as though his heart were about to burst out of him, still alive, and hang in the air, for his sons to reach out and crush with a touch. This was the moment that all his plans for the last months hung on.

“It showed me that I needed to consider you boys and your welfare before my love for Lily, or my own peace of mind,” he said. “Being a parent is supposed to be difficult and painful, and I’d been avoiding that. It showed me that I was being a coward, hiding from my own capacity for Dark behavior.” Harry caught his eye then, and James nodded to him. To Harry and Harry alone, he’d revealed the tale of how he’d snapped and tortured Bellatrix Lestrange, probably making her insane before she ever went to Azkaban. “It showed me that I can’t win Light by hiding while others do all the work, or glancing aside from things I don’t want to see. I’ve lost my wife, at least for now, and my trust in my mentor, and two of my best friends from school, because I didn’t want to see.” He felt tears in his eyes, and wiped at them angrily. *I promised myself I wouldn’t cry while I did this, Merlin take me.* “I’m not going to lose any more.”

“And how specifically do we figure into it?” Harry was leaning forward.

James faced him. “You know a lot about the pureblood dances and the traditions that the Dark wizards use, Harry,” he said. “But you don’t know anything about the rituals and traditions that the Light wizards use, and I think you should. That’s your heritage, too. The Potters have been declared Light wizards for two generations, and acted in accordance with the Light and followed Light Lords for a lot longer than that. You don’t know *anything* about that. You should.” He turned and held Connor’s eyes. “And you, too. You’re both Potters. I’ve forgotten that for too long.”

Harry nodded, he could see from the corner of his eye. Connor caught his brother’s eye and nodded, too.

James gnawed his lip. *First Snitch caught.* “And I know that you both need some place to heal,” he said. “Sirius...” He didn’t know how much he could say about Sirius without babbling like a fool, so he restricted himself to saying, “Sirius. And Voldemort, Merlin damn him, from both last year and this one. I want you to have some time to recover.

“Some time to *play*,” he added, thinking about the house in Godric’s Hollow, shut behind isolation wards. Harry and Connor had had only each other to play with, aside from Sirius and Remus and sometimes James, who almost never played with Harry. Harry was always reading, and James couldn’t understand that (he’d almost thought the boy would end up in Ravenclaw, sometimes). Now, of course, he knew why Harry had been reading all the time, and he found himself sick at the thought of it. “Some time to stop living in fear, as though Voldemort were everywhere you looked, and to be normal children.”

Connor nodded, his eyes shining. Harry looked as if he might object.

“I want to take you both to Lux Aeterna for the summer,” said James. “You can learn about the Potters there, and your heritage. You can fly all you want, and you can have friends come over and visit safely, the way we couldn’t at Godric’s Hollow.” *Because of Lily’s paranoia,* he wanted to say, but it had been his paranoia, too. If he didn’t have to face anything Dark, then he didn’t have to consider that he might be Dark himself. “You can be together, and safe from the Death Eaters. Lux Aeterna’s wards will see to that. And I’m going to ask Remus to come with us.”

He met their eyes and steeled himself. This was the part he had to ask, that he’d promised himself he’d say, but he wanted to run from the room anyway.

“And you’ll be with me,” he said softly. “I can be a real father to you, for the first time in my life.”

Connor’s face was lit and blazing now. James allowed himself to bask in that for just a moment. In truth, he hadn’t expected much argument from Connor, though the Maze had shown him so bluntly how much he misunderstood his sons that he’d wondered.

He turned and looked at Harry.

Harry’s eyes were dark green, like Lily’s when she worried, and he was frowning. His lightning bolt scar stood out on his brow as he moved his forehead so that his hair tossed aside. The Maze had told James what that scar had meant, too, and Dumbledore had confirmed it in the brief moment he’d spoken with him via firecall. James thought Albus had meant the mention of it to scare him. It’d only made him more determined, instead.

“Could Draco visit?” Harry asked, carefully.

James gave him the truth. "If the wards will accept him. Someone who's drenched in too much Dark magic may not be able to pass them."

Harry looked at him, neutral. "I'm drenched in Dark magic."

"But you're a Potter," said James. "Your blood will permit you through, unless you turn fully and irrevocably to the Dark and are cast out of the family. No Malfoy has that guarantee."

Harry nodded. "And Professor Snape?"

"I don't know," James admitted. "A linchpin can be temperamental, Harry, if its scion is. And I don't like Snape, so Lux Aeterna might forbid him entrance because of that."

"I know," said Harry. "I'm not asking you to guarantee that you'll change your heart. I'm asking you if you'd agree to let him visit, and Draco too, if he can."

James wanted to close his eyes. Harry was an adult in everything but age and height. *What have we done to him?*

But he knew that in intimate detail, after walking the Maze, so he didn't have to spend long on the question. The important thing was getting to know his son now, and he would hardly be able to do that if he simply refused entrance to Lux Aeterna to Harry's best friend and guardian.

Snape would never have been his guardian if I hadn't ignored Lily's insanity for so long. James reminded himself, and opened his eyes. "I'll do what I can to convince the house to let him in," he said.

Harry was quiet for a moment, thinking. James looked back at him. He was aware of Connor's wide, pleading eyes, and wondered how much of a factor his brother's gaze was in making Harry finally nod.

"I'll come," he said softly, and then winced, as though someone had yelled at him. "But there's a certain unpleasantness to be got through first."

James wanted to close his eyes and dance. He had a second chance, which he had to admit, in some respects, that he hardly deserved.

"I'll come along with you," he said. "They can blame me, if they want." He turned and looked at Connor. "Is there anyone who will object to your going to Lux Aeterna for the summer, Connor?"

His younger son shook his head. "So long as Ron can visit, and maybe others if they want to, then I don't think so," he said.

James blinked, nonplused. He hadn't realized that Connor was so bereft of friends. Of course, if his son's character was anything like James's mistakes had formed it to be, then he would have had little to recommend him lately.

"Of course," he said. "The Weasleys are sworn to Light, too. There's no problem with that."

Connor cocked his head. "Since Lux Aeterna is a pureblood place, will it welcome Muggleborns?"

James smiled. "Yes. It's mostly Dark magic that it rejects."

Connor nodded. "Then I think I'll ask Hermione if she wants to visit," she said. "I—don't know if she will. I've apologized to her, but things aren't exactly the same between us as they were."

He sounded uncertain, but also as if his voice were growing strength with every word. James was relieved. Connor had some resilience, then, and was not going to crack the moment he faced his first true challenge. Perhaps James could, after all, have a relationship with him that wasn't based on innocence and ignorance.

"Dad?"

James turned around. Harry stood near the door of the hospital wing, patiently awaiting his company.

"Thank you," Harry said, and smiled.

It's all been worth it, James thought, to see him smile like that.

Draco was not able to understand, really, how all his neat plans for the summer had gone so horribly wrong.

First Harry had put him off when he wanted to come to the hospital wing, insisting that he needed to meet with his father and brother alone. Draco had tried to argue, but Harry had pointed out that the promises he made covered solitude as long as he explained it. Draco had grudgingly agreed to let him go, certain that Harry would be back soon. What could his blood traitor, cowardly father possibly have to say that was at all interesting, or a reasonable explanation for where he had been?

And now Harry had come back, with his father in tow—awkwardly ducking to get his head around the door—and told Draco that he was going “home” with his father and brother for the summer.

It was *unfair*. Draco had been sure that the universe was on his side for once, as soon as he got past Snape’s stubbornness and managed to make him see that Malfoy Manor was the best place for Harry. Instead, it seemed that the universe was going to take Harry away again, the way it had taken him away for every holiday except Christmas their first year and the first month of last summer. And, Draco supposed, Christmas of their second year, but Harry had been unconscious in the hospital wing then, so it didn’t count.

“You can’t do this,” Draco tried.

Harry gave him a patient glance. “Of course I can. You and Snape will know just where I am, and you can come visit.”

“Maybe,” Draco grumbled. He’d heard stories about linchpins, and a Light wizard’s linchpin was unlikely to let someone who bore the Malfoy name within a mile of it, no matter if he’d done any Dark magic or not, because Light wizards were bigots. “But, Harry, *why?*”

Harry gave him a curious glance as he shuffled through his trunk, apparently looking to make sure that all his possessions were packed up. “Can you ask? I have to train my brother, and this way, I’ll be able to do that. I want a chance to reconcile with my father, and this way, I’ll be able to do that.” He shot James a smile that James returned, and which made Draco seethe. It hadn’t been too long since he’d been the only one able to make Harry smile that way. *Why do all the obnoxious parts of healing have to come along with the good parts?* Draco thought. “And we need someplace safe for the summer, so the Death Eaters can’t get us. Hogwarts would be safe, but the Death Eaters do know where we are. Lux Aeterna is safer, more sheltered, and will protect anyone of Potter blood more fiercely than Hogwarts would.”

Draco put a hand on Harry’s arm and forced him to face him. “All of those are fine advantages for other people or for the war, Harry,” he said. “But what about *you*? What do *you* want?”

Harry went still, staring at him with wide eyes. Draco waited, his heart pounding unexpectedly hard in his throat. Harry really might change his mind and come with him, he thought in those few moments.

And then Harry smiled at him, and Draco compared that smile to the one Harry gave his father, and found that this one outshone it.

“Thank you,” said Harry. “Thank you for asking that, Draco.” His voice turned gentle. “I do want all the things I described to you. And, more than that, I know that you and Snape won’t forget me, or turn against me, or anything else—that I matter to you more than that, and I don’t need to remain with you every moment to repair or strengthen my relationships with you.”

Bloody prat, Draco thought dully, feeling a pain slam to life in his chest. *He can’t tell the truth to try and get out of this. It’s not fair.* “Then how about remaining with us just because you like being with us?” he asked.

“I would, if that was the only factor,” Harry said. “But you know what I am, Draco—all of what I am, probably better than anyone else except Snape. I want to help my brother, too. And he’s traumatized from the loss of Sirius, and he has to learn.” He looked at James, and made sure the man could hear him. “I don’t trust anyone else to train him rigorously enough, yet.”

James flinched, but inclined his head. Draco found himself revising his initial impression of the man a bit. He was a pureblood, after all, even if he had sworn himself to Light and stank of that.

“I want to go to Lux Aeterna,” said Harry. “I need to do this right now. I can’t just say that I want to repair my relationships with my family, and then do nothing to prove it.” He let out a little breath. “But sooner or later, they’ll be as healed as I can

get them, and who knows, in the future?" He smiled at Draco.

Draco nodded slowly. He supposed, seen in that context, that it wasn't so bad. He could visit Harry, and this was only one summer. There were going to be others, and Christmases, and Easter holidays, and then all their lives after school, when they wouldn't be responsible to parents and annoying clingy brothers anymore.

Draco intended to see that he and Harry spent the majority of that time, if not all of it, with him. He could surrender a present battle for the sake of increasing his advantage in the future.

"All right," he said, "but I want to know that you'll invite me over as soon as possible."

Harry smiled. "Of course." He turned back to rooting in his trunk. Draco glanced around, wondering what he was looking for. It really hadn't taken Harry long to pack. He never spread his belongings out, as though he expected any moment to have to pull up stakes and run before enemies.

Then Harry turned around with a folded piece of parchment in his hands, and said, "Happy birthday, Draco."

Draco blinked. It was true that it was his fourteenth birthday tomorrow, the fifth of June, but he hadn't expected Harry to actually remember, given the state he was in. He had almost forgotten himself.

Almost.

He reached out and accepted the parchment from Harry's hands, unfolding it slowly. Their experience with the Dark Lord writing Harry from the Shrieking Shack had made Draco less than enthusiastic about letters when he didn't know what they said.

This one wasn't a letter, though, unless one counted the salutation of *Dear Draco* at the top. Below that was a list. Draco began to read it, frowning.

When you made me welcome to our House at the Sorting Feast.

When you made me see that being Sorted into Slytherin wasn't so bad, and I might even make friends there.

When you wanted me to stop cheating in Potions so that Connor would stay out of trouble—I know now that you just wanted to see me get some credit, even though I didn't know that at the time.

Below that the list continued, all times that Draco had demonstrated some gesture of friendship to Harry. He reached the end of the enormous list, his mouth dry, and read,

For friendship, even when I was too blind to see it. For gestures of affection that I thought came from jealousy of my brother. For being a Slytherin in all the ways that matter, and still the best friend I could ever have.

Happy birthday, Draco. I notice it now, and I know what it means, which I didn't then. I'm never going to forget again, and if I fail to notice, feel free to hit me.

Harry.

Draco looked up, furious that a piece of parchment could make him sniffle. He held Harry's eyes instead, and saw Harry incline his head, a small smile playing around his mouth.

"It's not as though we'll be out of touch," Harry said softly. "Even if we didn't owl each other and didn't see each other until September first, we never would be."

Draco nodded, slowly, and slid the piece of parchment into his pocket. "Are you really going to leave now?" he whispered.

Harry glanced over to check with his father. "Yes," he said, when James nodded. "Right after we talk to Professor Snape." He grimaced, as though to say that he wasn't looking forward to that.

"You came to talk to me first, then?" Draco asked.

"Of course," said Harry. "Why wouldn't I? My trunk was in the room, and I had to give you your birthday present, before

you wrote me in hysterics and accused me of forgetting it.”

His smile kept Draco from hitting him. He reached out instead, and hugged Harry goodbye. “I expect to see you in a few days at most,” he whispered. “And good luck with Professor Snape.”

He felt Harry wince. “Thanks. I’m going to need it.”

Snape blinked his eyes open slowly; he’d fallen asleep in his office again, over the last of the exams for the term. Someone was knocking on his door. There was only one person it could possibly be, at this time of night.

The moment he thought that, he was on his feet, wand out, and striding to open the door. If Harry was in trouble...

Harry was not in trouble. Harry was standing in the hallway, looking mildly startled that Snape had opened the door so fast. Behind him floated his trunk, which looked full. And behind *that* was James Potter, his arms folded and his slouched posture as annoying as it had ever been.

Snape understood the situation at a glance. He had to. He had known James was coming to see his son, and he knew that Harry would not have agreed to simply go to Malfoy Manor without telling him.

He felt something deep and ugly twist in his chest, something not so different from what he had felt when he first realized that Sirius Black was a danger to Harry. *No. I will not permit this.*

“No,” he snarled.

Harry sighed. “Can I speak with you, Professor Snape? Please?”

“Yes,” said Snape, and then stabbed James with a glance when he tried to move forward. “*Not* you.”

James subsided, having the audacity to replicate his son’s mildly startled look over Snape’s behavior. Snape tugged Harry into the office and shut the door behind him.

“Dad’s doing much better,” Harry told his back earnestly. “And he’s willing to take both me and Connor. I know that you weren’t willing to do that. I think I should go with him.”

“Has Draco heard about this ridiculous charade?” Snape drawled, turning around. Harry blinked at him.

“Of course,” he said. “He was the one who came to get me when Dad arrived. And he can visit me in the summer, so he said yes.” He hesitated for the first time. “Dad said that you might not be able to visit, since Lux Aeterna is a linchpin. But he promised that he’d try to get over his dislike of you and let you through the wards.”

And if he doesn’t want me to see Harry, Snape thought, it would be the simplest thing in the world to say that the wards forbade me entrance.

He found it hard to breathe. His situation was different from Draco’s, even though Harry might not think it was. James had no particular reason to hate Draco Malfoy. He did hate Snape, and Snape hated him.

The mere thought of being denied access to Harry just because his father was back and had determined that Snape should no longer see him...

It made Snape actively consider, for one moment, kidnapping Harry and Flooing to Spinner’s End, despite the danger being at Spinner’s End would put them in from the Death Eaters.

“I said that I wanted you to remain my guardian.”

Snape blinked, and came back to himself. Harry was watching him with solemn green eyes that understood far too much.

“Dad knows,” Harry went on. “He said that you could. He’s not going to try to take you away from me, sir, or the other way around. And I know that it must be hard for you to hear me calling him Dad,” he added, more quietly, “but I think I should. I think I should reconcile with him if at all possible.”

James is still the boy's blood father.

There was a time when Snape would have been unable to forgive that. That time was a year in the past.

Not for the first time, he cursed Harry's tendency to be unselfish, to forgive.

He kept his voice patient. "I think you should have a normal summer, Harry. A summer without any responsibility for once, a summer where you can simply—play, and do all the things that children do who don't have Dark Lords after them. You could have that, here. You know that I wouldn't let you overwork yourself, and you wouldn't have to protect your brother if you were without him. And you could heal from your own wounds," he added. "I know better than to think that you have healed entirely from the loss of your godfather, or from what you saw and did that night, even though you let others think you have."

Harry's eyes slid away from him.

"How many nightmares, now?" Snape asked, and continued pressing when Harry backed a step away from him. "How many?"

"One or two each night," said Harry reluctantly. "They're not visions from Voldemort, though, just nightmares," he hastened to add.

"I don't care," said Snape pleasantly. And he didn't, he found. Next to what might happen if Harry went home for the summer with people who didn't understand him, who would demand things of him, who wouldn't notice the signs when Harry was driving himself furiously into exhaustion, he didn't care at all. "You still need to overcome them. And having all the weight of the world on your mind won't let you do that."

Harry stopped backing, and took a deep breath, and looked up at him. "But the weight of the world doesn't go away just because of where I am, sir," he said. "I know you want to protect me, but you can't. Not from everything."

"The wounds I took that night were mild in comparison to what's coming. I know," he added, when Snape tried to interrupt. "I've heard and read the histories of the First War since I was a child, remember. Voldemort's going to try to do all that again, and probably worse. I'll be in the front lines, fighting, because I have to, and I'm going to take on the brunt of some of it."

"This is the part where I'm your ward, and grateful for it, but also not a child." Harry spread his hands. His magic shimmered around him, a palpable force in the room, and Snape had to catch his breath at the strength of it, for all that he normally didn't notice anymore. "I'm a powerful wizard, and maybe the *vates*, and a warrior." *A leader*, Snape almost said, but from the look in Harry's eyes, this was not the time to have that argument. "I have to get Connor ready, and to help him heal. There's no one else who can." He looked at Snape searchingly. "And you're unwilling to have Connor here."

"Because I want you to think of yourself for once, and not that child!" Snape snapped.

Harry smiled. "I'm grateful, believe me," he said. "But war doesn't really care what we want. And this is the middle of a war, now, one that hasn't really ended since Voldemort came to Godric's Hollow. I haven't known what peace is."

"Then you should know it now," Snape urged him. *Why can't the blasted boy see that?*

"Not right now," said Harry. "When the war's done, maybe."

"Or next summer," Snape said, voice light as a threat.

Harry inclined his head to him. "Maybe then." He glanced at the door. "Does this mean that you're going to let me go to Lux Aeterna?"

Snape struggled with himself for a long moment. He knew that Harry would not hurt him if he refused, but Harry was also unlikely to stay, and forbidding the boy to go as his legal guardian would result in resentment from him. And then James might have more reason than ever to take Harry from him, and if James challenged Snape in open court, he would win.

At the same time...

Harry forgives too easily. James was part of what happened to him, no matter how sorry he is now.

“You will tell me in an *instant* if your father does anything to hurt you,” Snape said. “You will Apparate here if he does it again. I know that you can get through the anti-Apparition wards.”

Harry nodded. “I would come to you,” he said. “If only because I’d be afraid of what I would do to him if he did that and I stayed in Lux Aeterna.” His eyes held a fire that Snape liked, but thought should be deeper and hotter.

“You will write to me every day,” said Snape. “Without fail. And you will tell me the truth about your nightmares.”

Harry bowed his head meekly.

“And you will not drive yourself to exhaustion teaching your bloody brother,” Snape finished.

Harry nodded. “Thank you, sir,” he said, and stepped forward to hug him, briefly. “I know how hard this is for you. I promise, you’ll see me again, one way or another, before next term.”

Snape embraced him back, his eyes alighting on the pile of books across the room, the ones he’d acquired from the Department of Magical Family and Child Services.

There is that, of course. There is always that. It will take some time to prepare, but revenge is, in any case, a dish best served freezing.

Snape was able, with that reminder, to agree to let Harry go, to even open his door and give only a half-sneer at James, to watch Harry walk away with a wave of his hand and his trunk floating behind him. Then he shut his door and went back to marking the last exams, so that he could begin his research.

If Harry will not take the proper steps against his father, against Lily, against Dumbledore, I will take them for him.

“Ready, boys?”

Harry glanced once around the hospital wing, then nodded. Connor had his trunk beside him, and Godric in his cage on top of that. Harry had his trunk, Hedwig in her cage, and Fawkes perched on his shoulder. Fawkes had caught up with them as they were leaving the dungeons, and didn’t seem inclined to be left in the school. Remus was standing just behind Connor, holding his own belongings, seeming a bit stunned at the change in his fortunes. Harry hadn’t heard what James said to him, but apparently it was enough to get him to come along.

Then he turned and looked up at his father, and took a deep breath. *The rest of what we need isn’t anything you can see.*

“Ready,” he said.

James gave him a faint smile and cast the Floo powder into the fire. “Lux Aeterna!” he called, as the flames blazed green, and stepped into them and was gone.

Connor followed him, tugging along a startled Godric, who beat his wings against the bars of the cage, and then it was Remus’s turn. Harry watched him go, and then jumped as Fawkes crooned encouragingly.

“I know, I know,” he muttered, as he picked up the Floo powder and cast in another pinch. “I wasn’t scared. I just wanted to be sure that everyone else got through all right, that’s all.”

Fawkes chirped again, shoved his head against Harry’s cheek, and then took off in a ball of flames, flying fearlessly through the fire.

Harry drew a deep breath, and called out, “Lux Aeterna!”

Eternal light.

Harry hoped, as he jumped through the fire and into his future, that the name was a good enough omen to make up for what had preceded it.

No big deal. It's just the rest of my life.

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

JAMES MAZE

Title: Maze of Light

Summary: This is a short story taking place in the middle of my novel-length story [Comes Out of Darkness Morn](#), but chronicling an event that's only referred to glancingly there. It probably won't make much sense if you haven't read CooDM and its prequels. James Potter faces an ancient artifact that will either grant him peace from his mistakes, or end them forever.

James Potter halted outside the main hall of Lux Aeterna, and once again checked the small bag slung over his shoulder. Yes, he had the mirror, and the small silver knife, and the vial of poison in case something went very badly wrong and he had no other way to escape the Maze. He had confirmed that he had them in the old room he'd taken his for his own quarters, and again on the stairs, and again now.

Stop stalling and get on with it, James.

He bowed his head and shivered, even though the voice was nothing more than the voice of his own thoughts. He'd become quite familiar with it over the course of the last few months, as he stayed in the Potter family linchpin, named for eternal Light, and tried to come to grips with what he had done and what he had allowed to happen in the past. He'd refused all letters from Dumbledore, read many others but not replied, and sent only one of his own, to Remus. Remus was the only one who might understand the storm that James found in his own thoughts whenever he glanced at them.

I know I bloody well don't, James thought, and then grimaced as he felt the artifact in the main hall give out a sharp pulse of magic, like sunlight on his face, even though the door between him and it was closed. The Maze was awake, then, and sensed him. Now the Light magic was waiting to see if he would come through, or turn his back and refuse it.

He couldn't. He had refused enough in his life, and it had backed him into this corner. He didn't want to hurt anyone else, but no matter what he did—stayed here, or returned and confronted Lily and his boys and his friends and Dumbledore—he would. The Maze offered death, perhaps, but also a path out of this confusion.

He had no other choice, and for once, instead of closing his eyes and huddling against the ground like a hare who'd just seen a threat in the hopes that it would miss him, he was going to face it.

He took another deep breath, on the off chance that it might help, and pushed open the door.

A flood of light greeted him, for all that it was night outside Lux Aeterna. The Maze had supposedly come from some other world where it was always day, part of the reason that it was able to continually shine. James blinked and shielded his eyes as he paced slowly forward, confirming his childhood impressions of the Maze as he moved.

Yes, it still looked the same: silvery folds of walls and tunnels that nearly filled the room, blending and rushing into each other like water or foam, but undeniably sharp. The edges glittered like diamond. Light radiated from them, and from the heart of the Maze, which James couldn't see. *Trying* to see it only resulted in afterimages. It was too much a mixture of silver and gold and white and the sun shining off polished glass. James blinked and looked away, and then took the mirror from his bag and held it up in front of him.

He felt the heat glow through the mirror's polished silver and into the wooden frame, and then into his hands, as the Maze recognized his intention to enter it. The light abruptly dimmed, and then surged again. His request was granted.

James sighed. *Another excuse to hide taken away*, he thought, as he laid the mirror down on the floor and then removed the knife from the bag. A quick cut to the side of his right arm, and he dripped three drops of blood on the floor.

His grandparents had declared themselves Light wizards and abandoned many of the old pureblood dances that favored the strong and bred people more likely to break than bend, but some of the ancient rituals were still essential for things like this, James's father had taught him. The Maze had once belonged only to itself, but it had resided in Lux Aeterna for generations now. It needed to know that the one facing it was really a Potter before he had a chance of surviving. There had been a nasty surprise a few generations back when it turned out James's several-times-great aunt was not, in fact, a Potter, and she had tried to enter the Maze anyway.

There was no problem here, of course. Some of the protective glow diminished, and James could move nearer for the first time. He sealed the wound with a swipe of his wand and let the knife drop behind him. He realized that he was breathing lightly, so lightly he could hardly hear it himself, and that his chest felt tight and too warm.

Another barrier passed.

And now there was only the Maze, and the tunnel in front of him, like a tunnel into the ocean, complete with a white edge that reached out and swept up to his feet like foam.

James shivered.

Light and Dark magic were divided by several differences, but only one mattered to the Maze. Dark wizards often relied on deception and subterfuge; almost every glamour had come from the wands of experimenting Dark wizards. Light relied on truth. The Maze would show him the results of his mistakes, force him to face, in brutal honesty, every rationalization he had made about them, and test his acceptance of them in the meantime. If he was unable to accept that he had made these mistakes and needed to change, the Maze would kill him, or perhaps trap him in limbo. Hence the vial of poison.

Once he entered the Maze, he was honest, or he was dead.

James closed his eyes, and remembered the expression on Lily's face the night he had left Godric's Hollow, the sudden devastating realization that had followed his first realization of the night—that a pureblood justice ritual had heard Harry's plea to take her magic, and *listened* to it, and obeyed him. She had deserved to lose her magic, according to the ritual's impartial judgment.

And he had been part of the reason that that had happened.

He had no choice, not if he loved his family.

James moved forward, and entered the Maze.

James bowed his head and shut his eyes.

He had faced the minor mistakes of his childhood, and accepted them easily enough. For the most part, he had made peace with them long since. It had been a mistake, in many ways, to train to become an Animagus when he learned of Remus's lycanthropy, and to teach Sirius when he asked, and to tease and cajole Peter until he went along with it. There were the mistakes that had caused his parents pain before he came to Hogwarts. There were the common pranks in Hogwarts, the times he had cheated on exams, the times when he had earned, and deserved, detention for his cruel remarks about the Defense professor's deformities. For the most part, they were old regrets, and James could put them aside.

Not so easily this one. The scene waited for him on the Maze's wall, with infinite patience. It would go on waiting until the Maze decided that he would never accept it, and then he would have death one way or the other.

James raised his head and opened his eyes.

In the mirror, he watched himself bite his lip and shift anxiously back and forth on his bed in the sixth-year Gryffindor boys' room. Sirius was lying on his own, his gray eyes brilliant. Sirius had been happier than James had ever seen him that year, in the months after he finally fled his family and came to live with James instead. But the happiness often translated itself into glass-edged recklessness, deadly as the Maze's edges in its own way, and this was a time it had.

"Come on, James," Sirius coaxed. "It'll be fun." He paused—for effect, James realized, viewing this scene from the outside. "I don't usually have to explain to *you* how much fun something is," he said, a whinge creeping into his voice. "Peter, sure. And you know how Remus needs to be prodded along. Come on. What's eating you?"

The adolescent James lay back and folded his arms behind his head. "I don't know, really," he said slowly. "After all, it's just a more intense version of what we've always done."

The adult James flinched as the Maze made sure the words echoed in his ears. *There's my first rationalization. And Merlin, of course it matters. We're talking about someone else's life here, not his pride, and I've known since I was a child which*

one matters more.

“But I just don’t think it’s right.” James bit his lip again.

Sirius snorted. “Come *on*, James. It’s *Snivellus*. He deserves a good scare, especially after what he did to Peter the other day.”

The Maze stilled the scene, and James sighed. “I know,” he whispered. “Sirius was only using that to butter me up. I know he didn’t care all that much about what had happened to Peter.” One thing the Maze was making sure he understood was how much Peter had seemed like a tag-along to his friends, more tolerated than welcomed. Of course, his fawning attitude played into that, but if James and Sirius were really as much moral paragons as he had thought they were in Hogwarts, they should have been able to forgive him through their superior understanding of human nature.

But the James on the wall nodded, and then said, “I can see that, I guess. When? Which night Remus transforms?”

The scene blurred into fog, which coalesced into the younger James hurtling across the grass towards the Whomping Willow. He threw a rock that hit the knot precisely, hurried under the suddenly still branches, and ducked into the tunnel at its base, then thrashed through the darkness until he reached the door into the Shrieking Shack. He could hear Sirius barking joyfully, and the snarls of the beast Remus had become, and Snape’s terrified screams.

James threw the door open. He cast a Stunning Spell at the werewolf. Werewolves were usually better-equipped to resist them, but Remus had let his friends in on a secret: just after his transformation, he was still woozy, and could be taken down by a number of spells that otherwise wouldn’t work on him. Now, he staggered and fell.

James also Stunned Sirius, who was in his dog form, just to make sure he wouldn’t interfere, and then grabbed Snape and pulled him out of the Shack. Snape said nothing at all until they were almost out of the tunnel.

“Why, Potter?” he whispered.

“I couldn’t let them kill you,” said James, and then stopped. That sounded stupid even to himself, and he didn’t say the words that burned on his tongue, because they were even more stupid. *Lives are worth more than that. We’ve hurt each other, but it was just stupid school-boy stuff. This was worse.*

The adult James bowed his head. He should have said them. Things might have been different if he had.

Snape, though, sneered and wrenched himself away from James. “You knew about it,” he said. “You knew about it, and you decided to come and stop them from killing me at the last minute.”

“Yes,” said James. And then, because he could, and Snape’s sneer irritated him, “And now you owe me a life debt, Snivellus, which you’d better not forget.”

Snape threw him a glare full of poison, and then turned and stalked out of the tree. The adolescent James stepped free of the Willow, waited until he was sure Snape was gone, and changed into his stag form. Remus and Sirius would be coming out soon, and it would be better if he didn’t look like the human who had Stunned the werewolf.

James let out a shaky breath and scrubbed a hand over his eyes. *I have no one to blame but myself for that part. I could have stopped Sirius when he was setting the prank in motion. I could have made up my mind to interfere earlier, so that Snape didn’t almost die. I could have told Dumbledore if Sirius wouldn’t stop, and he would have prevented the whole thing from happening. And then maybe Snape wouldn’t hate me so much, and if he did end up becoming as important to Harry’s life as he has, then he might not fight me as bitterly as I think he will if I try to take Harry back. And I wouldn’t have wronged Remus as bitterly as I did, almost making him into the murderous beast that he worked so hard to avoid becoming.*

But he hadn’t said the words he should have. He was too much afraid of looking stupid, when a true Gryffindor would have risked it.

The Maze let him go abruptly, and James moved on up the tunnel, shivering. He thought he knew when the next profound mistake would appear, and he was looking forward to facing that one even less.

“No!”

The Maze echoed with his shout, and it waited. James could feel the profound magic at the center of it, watching him without pity. The Maze was interested in justice and redemption, not mercy. If he refused now, then it would kill him, and give him no second chances.

I have to live, James thought. I have to see this.

Shaking, he opened his eyes.

He saw himself standing in front of a fire, turned towards it. Behind him, in one of the chairs of the comfortable sitting room at Godric's Hollow, waited Dumbledore. He had been silent for some time, but now he spoke, his voice the gentle, implacable one of the Light's fabled leader, the one who coaxed even his political enemies into agreeing reluctantly that this was the best, the *only*, course of action.

"James."

The younger James in the image straightened his shoulders and turned around slowly.

"It is the only way," Dumbledore said quietly. "You know that the prophecy *must* come true. Voldemort cannot be defeated otherwise." The younger James winced at the Dark Lord's name, but nodded. "And if he strikes at someone else, we may never know who that person is. We certainly will not be able to keep him safe and protect him as we should do, nor the person who, according to the prophecy, will be his shield and the one who loves him.

"If Voldemort strikes at your boys, then I believe the prophecy will come true through them. I have thought this ever since Lily had twins at the end of July. You know the prophecy speaks clearly of a younger and an elder. The younger boy would be Connor, destined to defeat Voldemort, and the elder Harry. But, to defeat Voldemort, Connor *must* be marked, according to the terms of the prophecy. The Fidelius must be released. Voldemort must be encouraged to attack your sons, and not the Longbottoms or anyone else who might conceivably fit the prophecy. He knows only a few lines of it, not the whole thing, and this way we can deceive him.

"And you know that you and Lily would be able to make this sacrifice. You are both Gryffindors, brave and strong and devoted to the Light. You have both escaped Voldemort three times. You are the perfect candidates."

James in the image closed his eyes and swallowed. James, as himself, did the same things. The logic sounded horribly convincing, even now. What were his sons' lives against the fate of the world? Against the chance to attack Voldemort?

But now he knew, he knew, what that bargain had cost Harry and Connor both. And it was about to cost another person nearly as much.

James opened his eyes and watched.

"But does Peter really have to go to Azkaban?" his self in the image whispered. "Couldn't we just lure Voldemort here and then explain what we did?"

Dumbledore shook his head, his face kind but stern. "We cannot, James. It is necessary that the Ministry and the rest of our world trust absolutely in the Light, and many people would see us as bating a trap with innocent children—"

Which is what we did, James thought.

"—if we told them what was happening. Instead, we must make it seem a simple betrayal, and then tuck the traitor away where no one can question him. And you know that only Peter has the strength to go willingly to Azkaban. Sirius's mind would tear apart. Voldemort has already almost torn it apart, making him suffer as he tortured Regulus. Remus needs his friends too much. You need your family too much. Peter is already apparently a Death Eater, and Voldemort believes him jealous of you, to such an extent that he would betray his friends to their worst enemy. Make Peter your Secret-Keeper, and you free both Sirius and Regulus of their pain as well as insure the future of our world."

"Very well," the James in the image whispered.

James remembered himself as having hesitated longer before agreeing. It was somewhat humiliating to discover that he had not.

But it seared him more to be forced to remember, as he had forced himself not to remember for years, that he had willingly

given up Peter, sent him to Azkaban and twelve years of insanity, and lied to his sons, telling both Harry and Connor that Peter had simply been evil, and jealous of his more talented friends. And then, when Peter had broken free this summer, James had believed, in terror, that Peter had come to take revenge on them for having sent him into living death.

Peter had not hurt Harry, despite having access to him several times.

I never thought he was good enough to be in Gryffindor. Instead, he's apparently strong enough not to blame us, or at least not to blame my sons for my mistake.

Why had he despised Peter so much, anyway? Because he was small and fat and not very clever?

A stupid bunch of reasons to send someone to prison for twelve years.

James sucked in a deep breath. "I agree," he whispered. "I *will* write to Peter, if I get out of here alive, and tell him I'm sorry."

The Maze eased its hold on him. The younger James and Dumbledore wavered and dissolved into mist. James moved forward, or perhaps backward; the tunnels had a habit of shifting, and with his eyes blinded by tears of guilt and shame, it was not always easy to tell where he was, or where he had been.

James wiped his mouth carefully. He'd vomited several times, and now his head and his stomach both felt extraordinarily light. He didn't have to eat while he was in the Maze—the magic would keep him alive until he chose to either refuse the Maze's revelations or take the poison—but he felt emptier anyway, now that he had expelled most of the food he'd come in here with.

He knelt there, and did not know if he could lift his head.

The images were waiting, there.

With a breath that he hoped would replace the lost food with courage, James faced them again.

The Maze showed memories without a pause, without a break. It showed him his sons growing up. Connor was mostly the way that James had remembered him, sweet and innocent, his hazel eyes flashing like his father's when he played a prank, his fringe occasionally bouncing up to reveal the heart-shaped scar Voldemort's wand had left him with. Dumbledore's plan had worked. Voldemort had come to Godric's Hollow, shot the Killing Curse at the baby destined to defeat him, and been destroyed. Connor was growing up with his parents, sheltered, locked tight behind isolation wards to prevent any former Death Eaters from attacking him in their dead master's name. Oh, he was lied to, in that James and Lily had never told him the truth about the prophecy or Peter or how he was left open to attack on the night Peter broke the Fidelius Charm on Dumbledore's orders, but he was a relatively normal child.

It was Harry who was entirely different from his memories—and this time, the Maze would not allow James to hide his head in the sand, or turn his back on the obvious signs that he had forced himself to miss. James in the images thought he had a perfect family. The Maze made sure his older self knew he did not.

From the moment of the attack that both babies had survived, Connor with his heart-shaped scar, Harry with the vivid lightning bolt on his forehead and his magic inexplicably heightened after the confrontation with Voldemort, Lily had trained Harry to shelter, guard, and protect Connor, to be the shield standing between his brother and danger. She had trained him in complex spells that no child of five should have been able to master. She told him the tales of the First War, stories of torture and rape and murder that no child should hear. She insisted that he read histories of the wizarding world, to learn complex pureblood rituals and dances that might be essential in winning Connor allies someday, and practice the formalities until he could recite them in his sleep.

My grandparents tried so hard to get the Potters away from that, to stop us from being ice-cold machines who would use the Killing Curse without a thought, James said to himself, not for the first time, as he watched Harry go under the web at four that bound part of his magic away, because he was so powerful that Lily was afraid he might harm Connor. I was supposed to raise my children in peace and freedom. And what happened? I allowed one of them to become pureblood at the deeper levels, just because Lily thought it was necessary.

He'd had time to notice. Lily could never have hidden this from him so completely unless she had his willing cooperation.

And James saw himself give it. He convinced himself that Harry was just studious, that the way he devoured books just meant he'd end up in Ravenclaw when he went to Hogwarts. He walked in on Harry practicing wandless magic, and told himself firmly that he must have been mistaken. He listened to Harry discuss, in cold detail, the deaths caused by Voldemort's Black Plague spell, and he scolded Sirius for scaring his son with horrible stories. He turned away from every opportunity to realize that he didn't live in a normal house with a normal wife and two normal children, but one normal child, a wife so dedicated to the war effort that she had made one of their sons a sacrifice, and one young man who hadn't been a child since he began reciting the vows to defend Connor, save him, and hide his talents, always, so that observers would think the miraculous rescues and spells had come from Connor himself. He saw, for the first time, how Harry's love for his brother was not natural, but obsessive and cultivated, growing around him like a vine, twisting him into a soldier before he was six.

He'd allowed that to happen. He should have been a better guardian, a better father.

The Maze bound him with chains of shame and self-loathing, and held him there as he vomited again over lost chances.

He watched through hazy eyes as Harry and Connor went to Hogwarts. Connor went to Gryffindor. Harry, instead of going to Gryffindor as he should have, went to Slytherin—in large part thanks to Lily's intense training and the cunning he'd exercised in hiding that training from anyone else. James saw himself ask the Headmaster, several times, if Harry could be Re-Sorted, and Dumbledore regretfully refuse.

I should have either supported Harry wholeheartedly, or pushed wholeheartedly to get him into another House, James thought, shuddering. Not this—this half-effort, this believing the worst of Harry and then giving in the moment Albus told me I shouldn't push. What kind of a father am I?

A bad one, the Maze answered him, and dragged him on ruthlessly through Harry's second year, when Harry had first broken his arm in a Quidditch game and then had to remain at the school over Christmas, thanks to the havoc that Tom Riddle, Voldemort's younger self, had managed to wreak on his mind when he possessed Harry. Neither time had James visited Harry in the hospital wing. Lily had been deep in the middle of persuading him that Harry really was better off as a sacrifice, and that his seeing Harry at the moment would just encourage a love neither of them could afford, that the *world* could not afford. They had to let Harry be the sacrifice the prophecy said he had to be. James had slowly come to agree with her. He'd let her make him agree with things he never should have.

Then Harry had come home for Easter holidays, and Remus, convinced something was wrong and unrelenting in the face of Lily's reassurances that nothing was, had tried to kidnap Harry and take him somewhere safe.

James watched, sick, from the outside, as he pulled a silver knife on one of his best friends, and forced Remus into going to Dumbledore. Dumbledore, of course, had *Obliviated* Remus, unable to take the chance that he would disrupt the prophecy by trying to make Harry do something other than live for his brother.

That's two apologies I owe Remus, then. James swallowed thickly. Or three.

On the year turned, only this time James saw what had really happened. Harry had cast the *Fugitivus Animus* spell on him and Lily, which made them forget for months that they even had a second son. Harry had done it because of the mental upset caused by his battle with Tom Riddle at the end of the year; if his parents had paid any negative attention to him at all, he might have killed them. It was safer to make them forget he existed, and to try to survive without their care.

It was no wonder, James thought, numbly, from the middle of his shock, that Harry had turned to Snape for guardianship and his best friend, Draco Malfoy, for other kinds of understanding. They were the only ones other than Dumbledore who knew what had happened to Harry, and certainly the only ones who might have been able to help him heal. James and Lily quite happily existed in the fantasy that they had only one son, while Harry struggled to get his shredded thoughts and his vicious magic back under control.

Then came Christmas, when Harry returned home to his family and removed the *Fugitivus Animus* from Lily, because he wanted his mother back—and, in doing that, removed it from James as well, though he hadn't known that at the time.

James put his hands over his eyes as he watched the confrontation between Harry and Lily, but their voices still echoed in his ears. Lily pretended to be sorry. Harry made plans for them to face the future together, as a family.

Then Lily tried to bind Harry's magic again.

Harry called the ancient justice ritual and stripped the magic from Lily, making her a Muggle, and vanished, along with a phoenix.

And James left for Lux Aeterna, once again too much of a coward to confront Lily, or go after Harry, who had fled to the Malfoys', or do anything but retreat and hide. He'd justified it as needing time to think.

He saw it for what it really was now.

You were hiding from your responsibilities again, James. You should have been a better husband. You should have been a better father. You should have stood up, at some point, and told Lily that what she was doing was wrong. Instead, you have one son who's never learned the truth, and one son who's nearly died and teetered on the brink of insanity multiple times, and a wife deprived of magic by an impartial ritual.

Good show, James.

Guilt perched on his shoulders and scraped them to the bone, but the Maze was not satisfied with that. It would not allow him to wallow.

And why not? James thought furiously, wiping at the tears on his cheeks. *Wallowing is better than vomiting. I like wallowing.*

Because it was not enough.

He would only hide in self-pity for the rest of his life if things went on like this. The Maze would not allow him to hide there, any more than it would let him hide inside itself. He was to be dragged forward into the light of honesty and truth, unless he refused and died.

I have seen what I did that was so awful, mistakes piled on top of mistakes.

Now, what am I going to do about it?

James took a deep breath, and opened his eyes.

Start by being a better father.

I'll bring the boys here for the summer, rather than leave them at Hogwarts, or in Lily's sacrificial care. I'll do what I should have done all along, and teach them about their heritage, their family—play my part in their education. I'll love them more, and tell them the truth. My bonds with both of them are so fragile right now. Connor won't trust me for hiding these last few months, and Harry won't trust me for hiding all his life.

I'll get them to trust me. No, more than that—I'll show them I can be trusted.

Lily...

I love her, but there's no way she can be trusted around either of the boys right now. Connor would listen to her too much. Harry doesn't want to see her ever again. I'll wait, and send an owl to her when I can, to ask her to do something other than control them. I don't know how hard it will be to get her to agree to that.

I don't know how hard it will be to do any of this.

For the first time in years, though, James thought that it might not matter how hard this was. He had given up the life that held those memories. He'd kept looking at the images even when they made him sick. He'd already given up the temptation to back out when he stepped into the Maze.

How could he ever have thought that he was unchanged, that he wouldn't change until the final moment passed and the Maze released him?

Just by carrying through with the decision to step into it, he'd done something that would have been incomprehensible to the versions of James in these images.

He threw his head back and laughed.

The laughter had an immediate effect on the Maze. It bulged and rippled, and the silver walls appeared to rise up around him like crashing waves. James looked up, and saw himself reflected from half a dozen curves and corners, then seven, then

twelve, then thirteen, then dozens of them.

The Jameses were poised to fall on him, if he chose to continue. There were still consequences of his mistakes that he needed to see. There were still paths that he couldn't take without facing those consequences. There were still non-obvious ripples from his actions that would build into obvious ones in a short time.

James smiled. He thought it very appropriate, after so many years when he'd hidden his own realizations from himself, that he hadn't realized his own decision until just now.

"Yes," he said aloud, so the Maze would recognize it.

Down came the sides, and buried him in honesty, buried him in horrible consequences to his sons, buried him in truth, buried him in Light.

James lifted his head, slightly dazed. He was lying on the floor of Lux Aeterna's great hall. Behind him shimmered the Maze, gone back to its silver, quiescent state, the wards around it that prevented casual entrance burning. James stood slowly, and then shook his head as more images played through it in a storm.

He'd seen Harry break free of the webs that held him prisoner, now and forever, and seen how much that scared Connor. He would have to work to heal not only the trust between him and his sons, but the bond that Harry and Connor had once shared.

He'd seen Sirius, possessed by Voldemort, trap his sons in the Shrieking Shack. He'd seen Voldemort delay too long, and Sirius break free long enough to kill himself and take that bit of the Dark Lord with him. He'd seen Harry and Connor learn the truth about what had happened at Godric's Hollow the night that James and Lily abandoned them to their fate, and he'd seen Harry kill for the first time. It didn't matter that the kill had been a Death Eater; Harry would still need healing.

He'd been able, briefly, to send a letter to Remus, then, the Maze transporting parchment and quill to him when it had felt his plan and approved of it. He'd wanted to tell Remus that he would go to his sons the moment he was free of the Maze.

And that moment was now. Never mind that it was the middle of the night again, from the feel of the house's wards, and probably a few weeks later than the time when he had seen his sons simultaneously traumatized. Never mind that he had not yet properly mourned Sirius, or come to terms with his death. James was going to Hogwarts. He was going to retrieve his sons.

If they will have me. I know they might not. And that was a fear in him, a sickening fear, slamming against and biting at the inside of his stomach.

But Gryffindors did not run from their fears. Gryffindors faced them, and fought anyway.

James thought it was a truth he had forgotten for far too long.

He made his way smoothly towards the door from the hall, his mind already working. One of the upper rooms had a Floo that corrected directly to Hogwarts's hospital wing, a relic of the days when traveling by the Hogwarts Express had been too dangerous for Potter children. He would contact Madam Pomfrey and ask her if he might come through.

He would speak with his boys. He would speak with Remus. He would bring them all back here, and do what he could to repair the bonds he'd broken, or set new ones in place if the old ones could not be repaired.

And then...

James's hand twitched. He'd faced his mistakes. He could help other people heal, but just remaining in Lux Aeterna and showing his sons their heritage and talking with his friends wasn't enough. His mistakes had rolled down and affected other people, and he wanted to make up for that, if he could.

The Maze had made him face the moment when he'd broken and tortured Bellatrix Lestrange, likely sending her insane before she ever went to Azkaban. He'd given up being an Auror because of that, come back to Godric's Hollow and hidden his head in the sand. It was yet another step in a long dance of being afraid, of giving up when he encountered something that he didn't want to know, of turning away and refusing to acknowledge reality.

James didn't think he could do that anymore.

A war was beginning. He had money, he had people who would listen to him in the Ministry for his name and his deeds in the past, he had Auror training. And he had his courage back, now, or at least the means to stare his fear in the face.

When his boys went back to Hogwarts after this summer, he planned to ask the Ministry if they could find any use for a Potter willing to fight again.

He reached the door, spun, and bowed to the Maze, which glittered behind him.

"Thank you," he said softly.

The Maze glinted, and did not answer, which was enough of one.

James walked through the door, his head high and his heart pounding with terror on the edge of joy. Time to go meet Connor and Harry, and then to go forward and meet the rest of his life.