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Chapter Fifty-One: Ideals of Restraint

It wasn't hard to catch Michael's eye, not when the other boy almost drooled on himself the moment he saw Draco. *Now I know why my mother never wanted people fawning on her*, Draco thought, waving Michael over to him as he stood just outside the Great Hall. *However would one get the stains out of one's robes?*

"Was there something you wanted, Draco?" Michael looked as if he wanted to draw his wand. A moment later, he did, giving in and casting a privacy ward.

"There is." Draco cocked his head and stood straighter. He'd been leaning against the wall, as much to encourage Michael to underestimate him as anything else, but for this, he needed to be standing as upright as possible. The more he thought about it, the more he saw Michael's assumptions about his bond with Harry, and especially the joining ritual, as insulting to *himself*. Michael was in love with someone who didn't really exist. Time for Draco to show him who did. "I know that you spoke to Harry about me a few days ago."

Michael's head jerked up. "*He spoke to me*," he clarified. "I wanted to leave matters just as they were, Draco. I'm content to watch from afar for the day when he hurts you."

"And you think that's going to happen?" Draco's voice sounded odd in his ears—familiar, still, but a strange thing to hear emerging from his own mouth. A moment later, he identified the reason for that. He sounded like Lucius, far more than he had for months.

"Of course it is," said Michael. "You were the one who encouraged me to admire you, Draco. You need admiration for your beauty. Oh, you need to be loved for your mind and your skills, as well, but I can do that, *and* love you in the other ways that you deserve to be loved. Harry can't. He told me himself that he was conditioned never to think about looks when gazing at other people."

He leaned forward, eyes shining, and Draco suppressed the impulse to move backward, even as his rage surged. *He comes off as half-deranged, but I think he really means what he's saying. He thinks he can give me what Harry can, plus all those other things that Harry will always have trouble with.*

He hasn't thought about what I want back, though, has he?

Draco let his lip curl and his eyes flick up and down Michael's body. "Hm. Well, I suppose I can understand where you're coming from," he said, letting his voice drag with reluctant interest. "But there's at least one bond with Harry that I've never shared with you."

"What is it?" Michael stood up straight himself, practically vibrating. "Tell me what it is. We can duplicate it."

You couldn't. You never could. The most amazing thing about this to Draco was not that someone would reach out to him while he was involved in a joining ritual—of course someone else might find him impossible to resist, and the ritual was not absolutely closed to outsiders until next Halloween—but that that other person wouldn't consider what was in this new bond for *Draco*. How could they match Harry's power, his laughter, the sight of him when he'd broken the phoenix web or when he'd Vanished Fenrir Greyback from existence for the crime of hurting Draco? Admiration was not enough; Draco saw that on enough faces every day. What really mattered to him was what could come back, as a gift, those things he couldn't invent or charm out of just anyone.

And Michael had nothing to offer on that scale.

"I can possess people," said Draco. "I've been in Harry's mind numerous times, practicing control of muscles and thoughts with him. Can you stand to let me possess you? I don't need as much practice any more, but that's one of the reasons I know I can trust Harry completely, because he never refuses me entrance to his mind. Will you let me do the same thing?"

"Of course," said Michael, and leaned down, holding eye contact. "I can't even imagine why anyone would refuse you."

You're about to find out.

Draco leaned back on the wall so that he would have some support, should his body sag, and leaped outwards into Michael's mind. He could have drifted among the thoughts, and let Michael sense him as simply a foreign presence. That was the Lighter side of his gift.

But the gift—born, as far as Draco could tell, from his transformed empathy mingled with something of the latent Black compulsion—was ultimately Dark now, a tool of domination and control. He had forced the Minister to do something he would never do, Stunning himself and the other Aurors so that Harry could escape during the jailbreak. And he was going to show Michael his true nature. He valued compulsion and control more than free will, unless it meant the free will of a few specific people, and he had no problems demonstrating that.

He lashed sideways, through Michael's mind, and took control of his body in the most painful way possible. He made all his muscles as taut as he could, and choked off his breath. For a moment Michael wavered, blue in the face, trying desperately to gulp in air. Draco showed off his complete indifference to the idea of Michael's death. After all, if the body he was in *did* die, Draco could always jump to another one. He could kill invisibly, undetectably, as he had on the battlefield at Midsummer, when he'd seized control of more than one Death Eater's mind and used his victims to guide others to the weak points in the wards—traps baited with deadly spells.

Draco had killed. And he did not regret it. He had felt sick while he did it, but afterwards, no guilt had troubled him. He let those emotions seep through to Michael, too, relentless indifference.

The gentle boy Michael thought he loved, who needed reassurance and admiration just to make it through the day, did not exist. What did was a Dark wizard on the verge of Declaring, and who would not hesitate to use his weapons to get his way, punish his enemies, and even inflict deadly lessons on those who irritated him. Draco was not Harry. He had no intention of holding back unless it was actually conducive to his goals to do so, while Harry would hold back to give others a chance to recover, or think, or choose another course.

Draco ripped himself free at last, knowing he would leave Michael with an enormous headache. He was back in his own body by the time the hold on Michael's throat eased, and he offered him a cool smile that made him flinch back.

"You should ask Harry to release you from your oath," Draco whispered. "He might want to give you a chance, but you and I both know, now, that you'll never have a chance with me."

"I could tell him that you flirted with me, that you encouraged me in the first place," Michael said. His voice was scratchy, and he coughed. Draco watched with satisfaction. He would feel the pain of choking, but there were no telltale finger-shaped bruises on his throat that might have got Draco in trouble.

"You could," Draco agreed. "And he would be angry at me, doubtless. And you could tell him that I possessed you, too, and forced you to see the truth, and he would be angry at me." He took a step closer. "But his anger will pass. Harry is *in love* with me. I don't think you understand that. His anger could last for months, and in the end, it would change to forgiveness. You have no standing in his eyes compared to me."

He waited until Michael's gaze, simmering with resentment—more for the breaking of his illusions than anything else, Draco thought—settled fully on him, and then added, "Besides, if you tell him, I'll be sure to know. And then what I did to you just now will seem like a Cheering Charm."

Michael flinched away from him, face sick with fear. Draco snorted. "The regard you *had* for me is insulting, you know," he told him. "My last name is Malfoy. And you believed me a kitten?"

He turned his back on Michael and walked in the direction of the dungeons, where he knew Joseph was working with Harry. Michael's eyes flared at his back the entire way. Draco doubted there was any love left in them now. He had wondered, at first, if Michael would refuse to learn the point and remain stubbornly, obliviously, around, waiting to pick up the pieces from a shattering between Harry and Draco that was never going to come.

Instead, it seemed that he hated Draco the more for having broken his false mirror so resoundingly.

Draco shrugged, delighting in the spare, elegant lift of his shoulders. *He is free to hate me. It will not change matters. I am stronger than he is, and so is Harry. And while Harry might be inclined not to notice the snake in the grass until its fangs are sunk in his heel, I am more cautious. Together, we are impossible for someone like Michael to destroy.*

"Tell me again why you want the monitoring board to exist."

Harry stirred restlessly and stared down at his hand. "Do we have to go through this?" he asked. "I already told you everything I

know, Joseph. It's not my fault that you understand none of it."

"I understand," Joseph said. "Or, rather, I understand your thinking. I don't think you understand your thinking."

Harry restrained a growl with effort. *Bloody Seer*. "Very well," he said, and made his voice as offensively bored as possible. Henrietta, and even Peter, would have given him detention for that tone. Harry was perturbed to see that it only made Joseph smile, as if he appreciated it. "I want the monitoring board in place to keep my bargain with the Light, and to insure that the trial of Gloriana Griffinsnest actually takes place."

"Not just that," Joseph said. "Or you would be content to dissolve it once her trial had happened."

This is the part that he doesn't understand. "I also want to encourage opposition to me," Harry said patiently. "I'm not sure that it would happen otherwise. The rebellion might seem too sweeping a victory to many, reducing them to gobbles and gasps in the corners. Voldemort's kind of opposition is mad. I don't think Falco Parkinson is far from mad—and besides, he works alone, not trying to gather allies. I want the monitoring board to have a chance to become what Scrimgeour wants the Ministry to be. It's a chance for ordinary wizards and witches to look around, realize I won't trample all over them, and start thinking instead of merely reacting."

"All of those are commendable ideals," said Joseph. "Or they would be, if you thought to point those new enemies at all proponents of irrationality, and not just at yourself. You told me that you value the monitoring board as chains on your power, boundaries on your sense of self. Why is that, Harry?"

"I am still a Lord-level wizard in power," said Harry. "Not a Declared Lord, and I never will be, but I can intimidate others, and prevent them from bringing up perfectly valid points that I've ignored. I want to show *everyone* that I won't ignore those points, that I value those other perspectives, that I'm willing to cramp and cripple my own magic, if necessary, so that they can have the security and space to breathe and think that they need."

He jumped, cursing, in the next moment. The bird had appeared on his shoulder without warning, and its claws had raked down the side of his face, a punishing gesture Harry had thought it incapable of now. He gingerly touched his hand to the freezing scabs and glared as the bird wheeled through the air, clacking its beak and hissing.

Its cold, vicious voice came to him as it had not for months now. *Bound to you. Hate you. Love you. Hate being bound*.

"I know you do," Harry muttered. "And that's one reason I won't let you go free. You would do damage if you were unrestrained."

The bird dived at him, claws spread wide. Harry ducked, and the creature passed over his head with a whiff of magic and wind and faded through the wall. Harry shook his head.

"Your magic is displeased at the thought of being cramped and crippled, I would assume," Joseph's voice held just the faintest trace of amusement.

"I can't help it that it's displeased," Harry snapped, sitting back up. "I *can't* just spread its influence wherever it wants to go. If nothing else, that encourages people to sway towards me because of the power of my magic. It's an unconscious compulsion, but it's a form of compulsion nonetheless. They'll make decisions just to get close to me, to feel that power for themselves."

"And when you know that resisting and cramping and caging your magic might send it back to Voldemort?" Joseph asked steadily.

Harry lowered his eyes.

"You are not to blame for the natural reaction your magic provokes in others," said Joseph. "Especially since caging it only results in its growing a personality and determining to break free once more. You have seen the disastrous consequences of that already, Harry. I believe it was called a phoenix web."

Harry exploded to his feet and paced back and forth across the room. Joseph's quarters were large, at least, and there was plenty of space for him to do that. "I don't know what to *do*. I've tried to give other people a chance to question me, and both Draco and Snape tell me the monitoring board was a bad idea—and then I find out that I've made people actually plot against me, like Madam Whitestag. I've tried to hold back my magic, and that only makes it angry and likely to go to my enemies. I tried to avoid interfering in the Ministry, and that didn't last long. I don't know how to keep the balance between allowing others freedom and allowing my magic enough freedom that it doesn't go mad." He ran his hand through his hair.

“*That* is what I have been hoping to hear from you,” said Joseph, voice soaring with triumph. Harry frowned at him. Joseph smiled right back. “Your admission that forcing bounds on yourself that you would never dream of forcing on anyone else is a fool’s dream. It won’t work for practical reasons, and it should concern your ethics, should it not, that a *vates* is giving up his freedom?”

Harry leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. His magic lashed around him in coiled ribbons, shaking the maps and the banners.

“Now,” said Joseph, “the only question left is why. You do not expect Falco Parkinson and Voldemort to hold themselves back.”

“They’re Dark Lords, or tending that way,” Harry muttered, scrubbing his hand over his face. “Of course they won’t restrain themselves.”

“And Jing-Xi? Your Light Lady? Do you have a problem with the fact that when she arrives, you can feel her power through a door? You’ve said that she’s interfered to settle problems in the Chinese wizarding community before, even in the Chinese Muggle government. And you don’t hate her for that.”

Harry hunched his shoulders.

“This comes down to holding yourself to standards that others don’t have to fulfill,” Joseph continued remorselessly. “And do not feed me that line about Lord-level wizards having more power and thus more need to be careful of their magic. You don’t hold even other Lords and Ladies to your standard. You still see yourself as different, and I want to know why.”

Harry resisted the impulse to curl up and tuck his head into his arms. That wouldn’t remove Joseph’s stinging words, dragging the truth out of him like the lashes of a cat o’ nine-tails, and that wouldn’t remove the fact that now he finally had to admit this to someone else. He had not said it before because he knew both Draco and Snape would overreact, refusing to take what he said seriously, and assuring him it didn’t matter at all.

“I don’t trust myself,” he whispered.

“That is the truth,” said Joseph, and Harry was achingly grateful that he had not said that *of course* Harry could trust himself. “And why don’t you trust yourself, Harry? That, I wish to hear.”

“You’re not going to give up, are you?” Harry asked his arms.

“No.”

Harry sighed. “I still remember the times when something pushed me, just a little, and I went Dark.”

He heard a sharp movement, and looked up. Joseph was shaking his head. “I will not let you lie to yourself,” he said. “Those provocations were anything but little. The Minister trying to steal your magic. Your mother attempting to convince you that you should retreat with her to Godric’s Hollow and never show your face outside it again. Bellatrix Lestrange cutting off your *hand*.” Joseph cocked his head. “It is inhuman to expect yourself to retain control in those situations, Harry. At the same time, part of the reason that you lost control so badly was your usual tight restraint. Surely you can see that? That some relaxation on your part will soothe the problems and solve them for everybody?”

“What if I cause trouble?” Harry whispered. “What if something happens to make me hurt someone else?”

“And now you are playing with hypothetical situations,” said Joseph. “With what your mother told you, and what you still believe at some level, that you could become a Dark Lord. Hypothetical situations are the last refuge of the coward, Harry. You know the truth. You’ve hidden from it for a long time now. You’ve wanted to dissolve the monitoring board, to let your magic loose and flowing free. And you’ve decided that those desires are somehow inhuman and the product of a twisted mind.” His voice lowered and became, to Harry’s ears, horribly tempting, coaxing. “If you would allow this freedom to anyone else, Harry, why not yourself? Why must the *vates* fear and distrust himself, while other wizards have complete confidence in their own thoughts and motives?”

Harry looked away.

“Harry?”

“There isn’t an answer,” Harry said at last, his voice breaking. “I—I was hiding from the fact that there’s not an answer, that there was a contradiction in my reasoning, and that I didn’t want to find that out. It’s more *comfortable* for me to be restrained and act within strict limits of what I can’t and can do.”

“I know that,” said Joseph, and his voice had gone soft and compassionate. “But it’s not healthy, Harry, not anymore.” Harry could almost hear him fighting the temptation to add “if it ever was.” Luckily, he successfully fought it. “You need to let yourself go more, for the sake of your magic and the sake of others, if you don’t consider your own mental health a good enough cause. The world needs a *vates*, you’ve told me. But the world needs a happy and sane *vates*.”

Harry slowly nodded. He still felt an enormous reluctance to do as Joseph said, given what could happen if he made the wrong decision and relaxed too many boundaries. But he could not stay like this. He had lost the ability to simply ignore the contradictions in his reasoning during his fourth year, he thought, when Vera saw the real reasons that he behaved as he did. He could refuse to examine them logically, but when they were brought out and paraded before his eyes, he had no choice but to change.

Joseph’s arms curled around him. Harry tensed, then forced himself to loosen his muscles. *I can start with this*, he told himself. *I can start with the fact that it makes other people feel good to hug me. Perhaps I can, in the end, accept that it might feel good to me, too.*

“Now,” Joseph said quietly in his ear. “I haven’t asked for much commitment from you, Harry, other than to speak with me on a regular basis and think about what we discuss here. But I want you to carry this new understanding with you into the next meeting of the monitoring board, and see what happens.”

Harry stirred unhappily, but didn’t break out of Joseph’s embrace. “Do I have to promise?”

“Yes. You do.”

Harry swallowed. “Then I promise.”

Joseph stepped away from him, smiling, and waved his wand to set a kettle of tea brewing. Harry sat down numbly in the chair he’d risen from earlier and stared at his hand, turning it over and over.

What if I don’t have to spend the rest of my time researching Animagus training and other things useful to the war? What if I can have my second hand back if I just concentrate on it, think about it, do the research? What if other people would not be displeased to see me doing that?

Harry swallowed. He allowed himself, cautiously, to examine his own thoughts on getting a second hand.

He was surprised at how badly he *wanted* it.

He sighed. Of all emotions, desire was probably the hardest for him to both feel and acknowledge. But now he had a promise anchoring him, and the next meeting of the monitoring board was the first of December.

Dismally, he tried to persuade himself that it would be all right. He had managed to hold himself back during Loki’s sacrifice, hadn’t he? He could restrain his own desire to interfere when it was important.

And he need not fear himself. Perhaps.

“Drink your tea,” Joseph said quietly, putting it in front of him.

Harry ended up using his Levitation Charm to do so. His hand shook too badly, as he caught a glimpse of what he was going to need to change, if he really could trust himself, and how radically and deeply it would need to do so.

Aurora lifted her head like a hunting hound when Harry stepped into the room.

Something had changed. She needed no one to tell her it had. One learned to see these kinds of things for oneself, or one failed in politics—or found someone else leading one. Aurora smiled briefly, but, mostly, kept her eyes on Harry and tried to figure out the change.

He no longer walked as if he knew every path ahead, nor as if he had a hand out searching for someone to help and guide him. Instead, he moved like a child walking for the first time, terrified, but determined to do it. His eyes met hers, and Aurora saw them widen and then narrow, before Harry carefully looked away again. His face set into lines that she knew all too well, having looked at them in his guardian's face.

Aurora suffered the brief and terrible suspicion that, though neither Professor Snape nor the younger Mr. Malfoy was here, as she had asked, they were with Harry in spirit. Then she dismissed it as mere suspicion. Harry had shown his willingness to cooperate with the monitoring board. She would be acting against herself soon if she did not watch out.

"Harry," she said, with a brief, familiar nod to him. Most of the monitoring board was not yet there, only Madam Marchbanks, who turned the same kind of curious gaze on Harry that Aurora suspected she had used. Marchbanks's was much more obvious, though. "Is there something we can do for you? Any questions you wish to ask about the training in Light pureblood rituals, before the rest of the board arrives?"

"I came early because I wanted to speak to the two of you alone, actually." Harry ran his hand through his hair, and Aurora relaxed a bit. She knew that was his nervous gesture, and the shaky confidence he manifested was only a phantasm. Harry could not help but be himself, even when he tried otherwise. "I wished to ask Madam Marchbanks to take over the monitoring board."

Aurora felt the words catch in her throat, and she stared wildly at Harry.

Just for a moment, though. Then her backup plans fell into place, and she cocked her head and murmured, "That's very unfortunate, Harry. Have I done something to displease you? You must know that many of the Light wizards are comfortable with me as the head of the monitoring board, and wish to do nothing to disrupt the arrangement."

"I see no reason why they would balk at having Madam Marchbanks take over, Madam Whitestag, since she's Declared Light." Harry nodded at Marchbanks, who was watching him with narrowed eyes. "Provided that Madam Marchbanks agrees, of course."

"I do," said the old woman. Aurora restrained herself from giving her a glance of dislike, but it was a near thing. Marchbanks was necessary, she reminded herself. And at least Harry was not insisting that one of his Dark allies take the board—though he must have known that would not impress the Light wizards who ate out of Aurora's hand.

"I would still like to hear a reason why," said Aurora, and inflected her voice with hurt. "What have I done to merit such an extreme rejection, Harry?"

"Set your fellow Light wizards on me and mine like dogs." Harry's voice had no emotion. Aurora studied his face. His eyes were blank as fields of grass. "Lisa Addlington had orders to distract Draco, and provoke him to insure that I would agree to leave him out of the meetings in the future. Shadow had orders to attack Snape. You intended Marvin Gildgrace to draw out Narcissa, but she did not respond as you hoped."

How did he—But of course. Legilimency. Aurora supposed she should have guessed Snape's distraction during the prior meeting resulted from something more than just anger. If the reports of him were true, he would have grabbed his wand and cursed someone during the meeting, not just snapped ineffective insults in return for Shadow's far more effective ones.

"Is this true, Aurora?"

And now Marchbanks were speaking as if she were horrified. Aurora barely restrained herself from rolling her eyes. *As if she has not made her own political compromises in her time! And she dares to scold me for making sure that the monitoring board functions as it should.*

"It is true," said Aurora. "So far as it goes. You misunderstood my intentions with those provocations, *vates*. I truly feel that Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy are not the best influences on you. They may try to draw you down into the Dark and make you behave more like them than someone undeclared should."

"Then you could have approached me with that conclusion." Harry's voice and eyes once again gave nothing away. Aurora found it unnerving. The free play of emotion *belonged* in his tone and on his face. "One of the traits of the Light is honesty, is it not, Mrs. Whitestag? But you did not. Instead, you tried to separate me from them. And they are my guardian and my partner. Whatever their allegiance, you had no right to coax them from my side."

Aurora bowed her head submissively. She did seem to have fucked this up. Perhaps, though, the situation was not lost. "Will you still permit me to remain on the monitoring board, *vates*?" she asked softly. "I hope I have convinced you how passionately I care about the future course of your education, and your future influence on the wizarding world. I simply have not used the best

methods to show it.”

Silence answered her. Aurora looked up and found Harry’s eyes fixed on her. Now they spoke, but with intensity, more than any single and specific emotion. Aurora forced herself to be passive, and regard Harry with an eyebrow that inched higher and higher as the moments passed.

She didn’t bother looking at Madam Marchbanks. The old woman was too fully on Harry’s side. She would be aghast at the thought of letting Aurora remain.

But Aurora knew political reality, and Harry knew his own reality. And he would think she had to remain, so that he would have at least one person fully committed to stopping him, should the worst happen and he lose control.

“If you remain, Mrs. Whitestag,” Harry said at last, “I will require an oath from you.”

This is not the way it is supposed to be. But Aurora kept her face calm and attentive, with no more sign that this troubled her than the tilting of her head and lifting of her other eyebrow. “Yes?”

“An oath beyond the Alliance oaths,” Harry said. “An oath that says you *will* act out of concern for my education and my influence on the future of the wizarding world, and not out of concern for your own political advancement.”

This is impossible. Aurora made her face as regretful as possible. “I cannot do that, *vates*, unless others will swear the same oath.”

She watched Harry watch her, his eyes the picture of a stag before the hunters. His legs did not tremble, and he did not have antlers, but she knew he was cornered. He would hesitate to press her with another vow only she had to swear, and would not presume to restrict her free will in such a way.

“No one else on the monitoring board tried to take my loved ones from me.” Harry’s voice was low, but very clear. “They all either truly wish me well, or were obeying your orders. Mrs. Whitestag, I will have this commitment from you, or I will have you gone from the monitoring board.”

He could not dismiss her. He could not. Aurora had too many of the right ears beside her lips. She could whisper one word, and the Light alliance with Harry would sway like a flag in the wind. He must know that. He must know that she could call his bluff, and it would all crumble.

But he did not seem to know that. His eyes remained bright, implacable. And his shaky confidence had returned. He might jump off a cliff, Aurora realized, but he was taking her with him.

For long moments, the staring contest endured, and then Aurora bowed her head. Harry could not afford to lose her from the monitoring board, if only because he would want to keep her close and watch what she did, but neither could she afford to be away from him for that long. Harry would either convert her allies, or they would do something stupid enough, without her guidance, to get themselves dismissed. And the Dark allies and Madam Marchbanks would close ranks against her, Aurora was certain. She would not be around to subtly influence people and remind them of what other alternatives than blindly following Harry *vates* existed.

“I shall swear that oath, Harry,” she said at last, and used more regret. “If you really think it necessary.”

“I do,” said Harry.

He had no regrets, it seemed. Aurora, though irritated, had no choice but to draw her wand and swear by her magic and Merlin, while Harry watched her with those bright eyes. Then he leaned forward across the table, and included both her and Madam Marchbanks in his gaze.

“We should talk about how long the monitoring board’s period of supervision over me lasts,” he said.

Aurora concealed a groan. *Who has done this to him?*

I will learn, so that I can remove that influence from his life.

Harry leaned against the telephone box outside of the Ministry and closed his eyes. He had used the *Extabesco plene* charm, so

that anyone coming out could not see him. He was glad. He did not wish to be seen, and not for the usual reasons. He would present a picture of weakness just now, his face pale and damp with sweat, his legs shaking, his chest heaving as if he had run a mile.

And what had done it to him was something that few people would have found difficult. He had made Aurora Whitestag, who acted as an enemy to him even if she didn't mean to do so, step down as head of the monitoring board. He had made her reaffirm the commitments she said she had. He had argued the monitoring board's original determination to remain watching over him until he left Hogwarts down to the thirty-first of July next year, his seventeenth birthday and when he came of age. He had asserted legal rights that other people probably thought were common sense, and would have asked for the first day.

He had done it. And people had frowned, and whined, and tried to guilt him, but they had gone along. No one had stormed out of the room. No one had done much more than ask him some slightly sly questions. No one had told him he was infringing on her free will and he should draw back.

He had asserted himself, and nothing had gone wrong, and no one had died.

Harry tucked his head into his shoulder, shivering as the sweat on his skin began to cool and dry. This *hurt*. He had escaped the shell of one kind of prison, but the newer and wider world was far more frightening. In lessons with Jing-Xi and conversations with Joseph, he at least understood the rules, even if he feared he had already broken them in one case and resented what was asked of him in the other.

But this.

This.

Harry shook, on the verge of a panic attack, until at last it passed, and then he took a deep breath and stood. Nothing had gone wrong for him, either, and he was still alive.

But he would have to do this again, and again, until at last he learned not to restrain himself unreasonably or hold himself to unreasonable standards.

It must happen.

He ran his hand through his sweat-damp hair, murmured a drying charm, and turned to Apparate back to Hogwarts. He did catch a glimpse of the lizard-tailed bird, sitting on the high wall of the alley and watching him with something like approval before it took flight, wings clattering invisibly across the sky.

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Chapter Fifty-Two: A View In

Snape sat with his eyes closed and his face tilted upwards. He could only imagine what some of his students would say, could they see him now. He could imagine far better what some of his students in Slytherin House would say. They would see weakness, and where they saw weakness, they tended to attack actively or look for excuses to shunt one aside. Snape could imagine the contempt in Millicent Bulstrode's eyes, the word she would pass on quietly to her parents, and then the next time Snape went to a meeting of the monitoring board or met with the full Alliance of Sun and Shadow, Adalrico Bulstrode would be considering him carefully, looking for evidence of his unfitness to be Harry's guardian.

So he came outside and sat as Joseph had suggested he do early in the morning, accustoming himself to awareness of the world again long before anyone else would be awake to see his weakness. Currently, he sat beside the lake, and the sound of the water on the shore brought back old memories, as did the frosted grass beneath him—for now, the snow had melted and not returned, though it still lay in sullen slushy piles under the trees of the Forbidden Forest—and the bite in the air.

Do not think of them.

But Joseph had told him to come out here and think of them, and what time was Snape supposed to use for that, if not now? He concentrated, and drew up the memories. Chill water and chill air and chill grass that broke with a snap—or that might have been fragile ice. He was nine, and his mother had taken him to see a ditch filled with water for one of their lessons in the dirtiness and ugliness of the world.

This was the one time Snape could remember Eileen Prince's methods not working. She had meant to show him the dirt the water

carried, he knew, and compare it to the muddy blood running in his veins. She had meant to impress on him the ugliness of steep brown banks, and water too choked to reflect the sky, and grass that had died or gone brown in the wake of autumn.

But the sun had shone that morning, and caught on small gleams in the water and the frost. That was what Snape remembered, an ugly scene rendered unexpectedly beautiful, half-holy, by the sunlight.

His face flushed as he thought about that. How he could have such thoughts? How could someone who had led the life he had call anything “holy” without mockery or irony?

But he had the thoughts, nonetheless, and he knew that, five months ago, he would not have considered the beauty of this memory at all. He would have concentrated on his mother’s words and blocked out the fact that, then, he had blocked them out, staring instead at the small miracle of water still running too fast to be frozen, autumn not yet surrendered to winter even though staring it in the eye.

Past and present mingled to the point where he was not surprised, and not even alarmed, to hear a step beside him. Of course his mother would be there. He turned his head and opened his eyes to greet her, certain that in this mood, not even she could make an impact on him.

It wasn’t Eileen Prince. It was Harry, sitting down beside Snape with a casual air, as though they shared sunrises by the lake all the time. He clasped his guardian’s hand and looked out over the water.

Snape studied him, and waited for questions to well to the surface. There were none. There was only a deep peace, which seemed to have as much of its origin in the quiet breaths Harry drew as it did in the sigh of the wind and the song of the water on edge of winter.

He turned his hand and clasped Harry’s fingers back. Harry gave him a quick, grateful glance, as though this were an incredible privilege, and hesitated for a long moment. Snape could feel him debating, though not what he was debating, and he didn’t think that he could have given an answer to it anyway, not with his own gulf of deep silence gripping and turning him.

Then Harry leaned his head on Snape’s shoulder and closed his eyes.

It was the gesture of a boy asking for protection, not the gesture of a strong protector sheltering a dependent, but Snape did not feel pressed upon, or as though he would prefer Harry to resume the role he had adopted out of necessity when Snape was feeling inadequate to the task of caring for him. Indeed, he felt a satisfaction as deep and quiet in its own way as the peace, and he wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulders.

Harry’s breathing slowed and relaxed, as he lost whatever intangible nervousness had made him come out here in the first place. Snape turned his head and watched the sun’s reflection shimmering in the water, dimmed but unconquered.

Owen lay on his bed, and stared at the ceiling, and cursed all idiots. It was better than taking his *wand* and cursing all the idiots.

Michael would be sulking on his bed in Ravenclaw, or perhaps talking to the Ravenclaws who still distrusted Harry and trying to find sympathizers. Owen hoped it was the former, for his brother’s sake. The lightning bolt scar would bite him, according to the ritual they’d used to swear loyalty to Harry, if he tried to act against the Lord, or Lord-level wizard, he’d sworn to. Owen didn’t know if the bite was literal or not. He didn’t want to have to find out.

It would be best if Harry released him from the oath, but Michael had said he wanted to remain under it, to protect Draco’s interests.

There’s the other idiot. Owen had told himself again and again that his brother had behaved badly. He had *known* that Draco was their Lord’s joined partner, and that no matter how Draco flirted or laughed, it was still a bad idea to flirt back, or follow him and moon after him, or let his feelings be known. One could do nothing about emotions, but one could control one’s face and actions. And Michael had learned how to do that at Durmstrang, if not at home. So what had happened was Michael’s fault as much as anyone’s.

But the other half of the fault belonged to Draco. Draco had encouraged him. Draco had done things which the devoted partner of a Lord never should have done. Sometimes Owen wished they were living in older and simpler times, or that Harry was a Lord who would strictly follow the ancient protocols, which called for the Lord’s partner to swear a similar oath to a companion. Lords and Ladies were too important and rare to be distracted by the machinations of someone bored or jealous. A slow burning pain in

one's hand, coupled with the loss of fingers if the partner persisted in acting like an idiot, tended to discourage both boredom and jealousy.

Harry would never do that, and that was one of the reasons Owen and Michael had chosen to swear to him in the first place—because Harry was also the kind of person who would come to Durmstrang and rescue children tortured under the auspices of another Lord, something most of the older rulers wouldn't do unless the other Lord was a personal enemy. Harry had accepted them, as he had accepted Draco, without trying to change any of them, and his patience and forbearance were gifts. Owen knew that.

But sometimes it was all so *frustrating*. And it looked as if he would have to solve this problem, since no one else would. Draco was smugly confident he was right. Harry held back, trying to give both Draco and Michael what they wanted. And Michael refused to divulge whatever had so shaken him a few days ago; Owen suspected it was because he didn't want to betray his beloved.

Beautiful and cruel. Michael had plenty of chances to fall in love with someone like that at Durmstrang, if he wanted. Did he have to wait until we arrived at Hogwarts?

Owen sat up, with a sigh, and laid his hand on the lightning bolt scar that cut across his left forearm. If he thought hard enough, he could know where Harry was. It wasn't something he used often, since he spent a great deal of his time in Harry's company anyway, and the effort left him with a headache. But he needed to find him now, and remain by his side until there was the chance of a private conversation. The contingent of seventh-year boys in Slytherin was small. Owen thought his room would remain empty for at least the next few hours, so he and Harry could talk.

Someone rapped on the door before he could sink properly into concentration. Owen frowned and stood. If it was one of the other blokes come back, he had rotten timing, but one of the other blokes wouldn't knock, so it was probably his twin. Then Owen would have to listen to Michael ranting on about how wonderful Draco was, or about how bitterly his illusion had been broken, and have his own sensible suggestions meet with silence.

He opened the door, and blinked. It was Harry.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. It was hard to keep himself from adding a title. Harry's magic blazed around him in a steady lightning storm, at least to Rosier-Henlin eyes, and lately the incandescence had grown brighter and brighter as he grew more confident and careless of his power. Owen thought it only proper that someone like that should be called Lord, or *vates* if he would not accept that word. It was the way things were done.

"Not with me," said Harry. He was still slightly shorter than Owen, but he stood and looked gravely into his eyes now, and he seemed to stand taller. "With your brother, and with Draco. I would appreciate your help on how to deal with them, so that someone will represent Michael's interests properly."

Owen blinked again, several times, and moved backward. "I didn't think you had noticed," he told Harry's shoulders, and then shook his head. He didn't mean to say things like that. His father had instructed him against damaging honesty. But Harry's magic *changed* things, made the air sharper and wilder. Opening his mouth seemed to have less adverse consequences then.

Harry turned around and gave him a small smile. "For most of the time, I didn't. But Michael had some reason to think he had hope of Draco, and he has a reason to avoid him as he's doing now. What are they?"

Owen sank to his bed in sheer relief. His *vates* had asked him a direct question. That meant Owen could tell the truth without betraying his brother.

Quietly, he told Harry about Draco's flirting, and then the incident he suspected had happened a few days ago, about which Michael refused to give any details. Owen himself thought it had to do with Draco's possession; Michael always *had* failed to think about what it meant that his beloved could control other people's bodies, just as he had, to Owen's mind, not thought through the implications of Harry's magic properly. Owen loved his twin dearly, but Michael had always been the baby brother, and not even the death of their father and the destruction of Durmstrang had changed that. He still had more of the boy who played at skillets with their mother than the hardened warrior within him.

Harry recognized that, Owen saw as he listened. He was, of course, an elder twin as well, and one trained to protect his younger brother—though he had been told to elevate Connor, while in Owen's case he had been told it was his duty because he was his father's magical heir, and stronger than Michael, and one duty of the magically powerful was to shelter those who were weaker. Owen should not have feared that Harry wouldn't understand.

He nodded when Owen was done, and said, "I'll talk to Draco, and make him apologize to Michael—properly. I also have a punishment in mind for him." He smiled grimly. "And then I'll release Michael from his oath. That may be dangerous, because it could mean that he'll attack me or Draco, but I would much rather see him free like that than bind him close."

"It *will* be better for him," said Owen at once. "He should not have taken that vow in the first place. He didn't really know what it meant."

Harry considered him, head tilted to the side. "What about you, Owen? Will it hurt you, to know that your brother and I are essentially on opposite sides?"

Owen bowed his head. "I am Michael's brother," he said. "And I am your sworn companion and the head of the Rosier-Henlin family. Those two allegiances to proper courtesy and custom pull against the other."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, Owen."

He left, then. Owen let himself sag back on the bed and close his eyes. He should still be vigilant in the future, he knew, because there would be problems he could notice and Harry never would.

But it was so refreshing, so relaxing, so different than anything he could ever have imagined, to know that Harry would notice at least some problems, and take steps to solve them as only he could.

Draco felt Harry's stare on the back of his neck like a blade.

It went on throughout dinner, which Harry had been late to. Draco had trouble eating. It wasn't so much that the food turned to ashes in his mouth or sat poorly in his stomach; it was more that the hand which held his fork shook badly enough that he had trouble holding a piece of food on it consistently. When Harry stood, caught his eye, and jerked his head towards the entrance of the Hall, Draco was almost relieved.

He made his way there neither too slowly nor too quickly, giving anyone who had decided to watch him a free lesson in grace, should he want it. When Harry's hand clasped his arm, he had to bite his tongue to prevent himself from wrenching away in shock, but at least it didn't actually happen.

"What is it, Harry?" he asked, as casually as he could.

"You possessed Michael," said Harry. "After flirting with him in the first place."

Draco's eyes widened before he could stop himself. Then he cleared his throat. "Harry, whatever tales he's been telling you—"

"It was Owen who told me."

Draco closed his mouth. Owen was a Slytherin. Harry had less reason to doubt his powers of observation.

"You did that on purpose," said Harry, his voice even and low. "I can understand your wanting to be admired, Draco. Most of us do." *But not you*, Draco thought, half in a rage, mourning, and not for the first time, the lack of that common link that would have made Harry understand this so much better. "But flirting with someone you knew couldn't really respond to you, since you're closer to me than he is, and you have a commitment to me in the form of a joining ritual—why did you do that?"

Draco tried a few times to answer, but his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He had just clearly seen the emotion in Harry's eyes for the first time. It wasn't anger, which he had expected and prepared to weather.

It was disappointment.

Harry looked at Draco as if he had left him alone in a perfectly neat room and come back to find that Draco had destroyed it. His eyes were weary. This, too, would pass, his stance said, of course it would, but he could wish that Draco had done something more productive with his time than create a mess he would have to clean up.

"I wanted to make you jealous, a little," Draco whispered. "And he was there, and already obsessed with me, and willing to give me the stares I craved. I saw no reason not to take advantage of that."

He'd done what a good Slytherin would do. He'd done what a neglected boyfriend would do. Why did he feel so bad now?

"I could have understood that perfectly if you were a normal adolescent," Harry said. "But, for better or worse, this is more like a court, Draco. I've had to grow up lately, and realize that I was hiding from my responsibilities and some of the implications of Lord-level power. I think you need to realize what it means when you flirt with someone else, what can happen, what kinds of destruction it might encourage. What if Michael had grown so angry during the rebellion that he betrayed us to the Ministry, for example?"

"He wouldn't have done that—"

"Are you so sure?"

Draco frowned and studied the ground, uncomfortable. No, he wasn't sure, damn it. Michael was sworn to Harry, but there were ways around a sworn companion's oath, especially if he managed to convince himself that he was doing it for Harry's own good. And some people in Woodhouse, especially those werewolves who resented their condition fiercely, might have listened to him if he sought for allies.

He had thought he knew Michael. But he hadn't known that Michael's obsession for him would grow.

What other things did I miss?

And then shame sank its claws into him, because dancing with and defeating those too weak to know any better was one thing, and not anticipating the waltz of another and making himself look like a fool was another. Draco felt his cheeks heat up. This was wrong, if only because of its consequences. Yes, hindsight was perfect, but his foresight needed to be perfect, too, as much as it could be. He knew Harry would forgive mistakes, unlike his father. If he had gone to Harry the moment he realized something was wrong, then he could have avoided this. Or he should have guessed the consequences and never started this.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Harry didn't say anything. Draco looked up to see that Harry had waved his hand, and letters of fire were stitching themselves across the air.

You'll be apologizing to Michael, and not just to me. I'll be keeping silent and away from you for two days, one for the original flirting you did and one for the possession of Michael.

"Why?" Draco demanded.

Your punishment. There's not much that I can do to punish you as you acted, Draco, since I'll hardly be flirting with someone else. But I can and will refuse to share myself with you for that little while. It's two days, and then it ends, and then we'll put this aside. I only hope Michael can do so as easily, once he's released from his oath.

Harry half-closed his eyes, and then Draco felt as if a glass barrier had descended in front of him. It took him a short time to realize what it cut off. He could no longer sense Harry's magic, nor hear his breathing, nor feel the warmth of his skin.

"Harry," he said, and knew his voice sounded desperate.

Harry gave him one more of those disappointed glances, and turned away. Draco tried to reach after him, and his hand halted an inch from Harry's shoulder, refusing to move any further.

"How long does this last?" Draco whispered. "Two full days, or forty-eight hours from this moment?"

Forty-eight hours from this moment.

Draco swallowed, glad that he would not have to sleep alone more than two nights, but dreading the thought of those he would, and dropped his hand. Harry nodded at him and walked away.

He started to turn away himself, but Owen Rosier-Henlin stepped up to him then and clapped him on the back. Draco eyed him warily.

"I've come to conduct you to my brother, and make sure you've properly apologized," Owen explained.

Draco concealed a groan, and stifled the urge to turn his head and watch Harry go. He had not expected Harry's absence to tear at him so much. They had spent long hours apart in the past few days, after all.

But that was different, because he had always known that he could go to and touch Harry as much as he wanted to if he became bored or lonely.

He followed Owen along dully, hoping Harry wouldn't choose to use this punishment often. It was *horrible*.

Of course, perhaps he wouldn't have to if Draco didn't do things deserving of it, either. Draco concealed his flinch and his frown, and decided he could try to act a little better. Sometimes.

The wards around the Manor were all relaxed. His wand lay on the table, a good distance from him. The auditory glamour around him, which concealed the voices from Narcissa's spell that continued to murmur and natter on about the states of his emotions, was thick and tight. Lucius sat back in his chair and nodded to the house elf next to him, who bowed and vanished.

He looked up when he heard the light footstep cross the threshold of the study; with the wards down, he had no way of hearing or seeing her before she arrived. Narcissa paused when she saw him, her head high and her blonde hair curling around her neck. Her eyes were placid as a lake in winter.

Lucius inclined his head slightly. "Welcome, Narcissa."

His non-use of a pet name would not go unremarked, he knew. Narcissa sat down on the padded bench placed at the far end of the room, a safe distance from him. Besides the distance, it provided a straight flight of escape out the door, while Lucius sat in a corner between bookshelves, hemmed in if he tried to dodge. With many visitors, such small disadvantages would not have hurt him, but Narcissa was too nearly his equal for them not to matter. Lucius knew it, and she knew it, and he knew she knew it, and she knew he knew she knew it.

They regarded each other in silence for a long time, before Narcissa stirred and asked, "Have you decided to repent yet, Lucius?"

The term repentance would have galled him. In some corner of his soul, it did still. But Lucius had prepared carefully for this meeting. He needed to handle Narcissa differently than either of those rash and impulsive boys. Narcissa had much less to lose from his antagonism, and she had agreed to a meeting whilst neither Harry nor Draco would come near him.

"For not telling you beforehand? Yes, of that I repented long ago. For asking you to come here? I do not see that I need to." Lucius paused, studying her. Narcissa shone in the sunlight through the study window as if she were made of glass. He found that he was very glad to look at her, as he had not been glad in a long time. She was beautiful, and the house had been without her too long. Two months was two lifetimes too long. "For fighting with you?" he added softly. "I cannot be, my beautiful one. We have not fought in too long."

He saw an answering spark, almost unwilling, in her eyes. She would know, as he did, that the last duel that had been that serious between them was when Lucius had wanted her to take the Dark Mark. She had won that one, and given how mad Voldemort was when he returned, she was right. She would be wondering at the insinuation that she was also right this time.

Lucius did not think she was. But with Narcissa, he could be almost honest, certainly closer than he came to honesty with anyone else. He knew her strengths, her weaknesses, her defenses against those weaknesses, and she knew his. They had spent long years coiled together like two drowsing serpents.

It was not deception when another serpent offered a show of its lovely scales to the other. The second snake must be wise enough to know the fangs were still there.

"I will not be returning to Malfoy Manor at this time," Narcissa announced, as they moved through several silent steps of a dance conducted by the expressions on faces and the minute gestures of the body.

Lucius inclined his head.

"I will come again on Midwinter's Day," Narcissa added, standing. "It is appropriate that we should be present at Draco's Declaration to the Dark, whatever our personal feelings on the matter are."

Lucius concealed his shock and dismay deep. He had not known Draco was Declaring. He had not thought it possible when Draco

received the gift of empathy from Julia Malfoy, and he had never known how much that gift had altered. That was a weakness that Draco, of course, had never revealed to his father.

“I will await you then,” he said, and tilted his head to the side so that she could see his throat and his collarbone.

Narcissa waved her wand, and tried to dismiss the glamour that hid the voices speaking about the state of his emotions. Lucius had made it too strong for such a simple spell, though, and the room around them stayed silent. Narcissa’s lips curved in a small smile, and she made him a tiny curtsy, hands dropping her robes almost before they gathered them.

“I do hope that you provide interesting company on the twenty-first, my dear husband,” she murmured, and turned for the door.

Lucius let her depart before he went to the bookshelves. He would use the ancient texts and his knowledge of Draco’s mind to guess what ritual he would use to Declare to the Dark.

He was confident he could guess, and turn it to his advantage. Draco was yet a snake with fangs, not a serpent full-grown.

“And Harry, if you would.”

Peter watched closely as Harry came to the front of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and stood patiently waiting. His magic was a good deal calmer than Peter had seen it in a week, and he glanced about now and then as if wondering why in the world people stared at him. It was amazing, Peter thought, how quickly one got used to the lack of a left hand at his side; his Levitation Charm compensated well enough for that.

“Now,” Peter said, “this particular lesson is in skill and creativity on the battlefield. Varying a spell can cause an enemy much more trouble than casting one he doesn’t know.” He saw a hand move from the corner of his eye, and turned his head. Skills he’d developed as a spying Death Eater helped him notice the kinds of subtle signals that a teacher needed to recognize. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“Professor Pettigrew,” she said, lowering her hand and frowning at him, “how can that be? If you throw a spell at an enemy that he doesn’t know, wouldn’t that mean that he *couldn’t* grasp what would happen next? It might make his shield explode for all he knows.”

“There is that,” Peter acknowledged calmly. “But a variation of a spell he knows well can produce overconfidence, you see. He will not seek to fight you because he thinks he knows the effects.” He watched Hermione’s mouth widen in an O of understanding, then nodded at her and turned to Harry. “Would you care to demonstrate one of the modifications on a spell you know, Harry?”

Harry studied him back. His eyes asked as clearly as words could, *You’re sure that you want my magic at full strength?*

Peter inclined his head a tiny bit. Harry visibly took a breath and stood up straighter, extending his hand in front of him. He probably should have brought his wand so he could practice the movements for the rest of the class, Peter thought critically, but Harry rarely carried it any more.

At least he did say the spell aloud, instead of thinking it. Peter had started them on nonverbal spells, but he wasn’t going to try that with a variation the first time off. “*Praestigiae*,” Harry said, enunciating the word on the first syllable instead of the second.

Peter observed in interest as several misty gray balls formed in the air and began to whirl around each other. The spell usually produced an illusion, but adding a second word to the end of the incantation often specified what sort of illusion the caster wanted. Peter suspected that Harry had left off that second word on purpose, and also played on another meaning of the Latin word, that of juggling.

The balls gained speed and focus, and Peter realized each one spun on a brilliant white axis, going so fast that it seemed as if the gray should dissipate in every direction. But that didn’t happen. Instead, the white axis sharpened and brightened, spearing into lightning, cracking in half in front of Peter’s eyes. Beyond lay a wide green vision that split open to reveal a deep blue one, and beyond that—

Abruptly, the visions vanished. Peter blinked and shook his head, and turned to see Harry looking rather embarrassed.

“Er, sorry, sir,” he said. “I didn’t mean to enchant you and the others like that. I let my magic go too much.”

Peter acted at once. Harry was finally permitting his power to stretch its wings, and achieving a balance between uncontrolled danger and the kind of restraint he'd practiced lately, which made Peter want to shake him. He would not let Harry become mortified that his incantation had worked too well and shut his magic up again.

"That did exactly as it was supposed to do, Harry," he said firmly. "Bewilder and hypnotize an enemy, correct?"

Harry peered at him from beneath one black lock of hair, as if wondering when the axe would fall, and nodded slowly.

"While the regular *Praestigiae* simply creates illusions that may or may not baffle a foe, depending on how good they are, correct?" Peter drilled him. He could see Hermione and several of the other students scribbling down notes on their parchments.

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

"A useful variation," said Peter. "And exactly what I asked you to do. Ten points to Slytherin, Harry. Please do sit down."

Harry retreated to his seat looking somewhat puzzled, but the puzzlement turned to consideration as he sat there. Peter hoped he was *thinking*. His magic had hurt no one, and if anyone felt humiliated about how easily Harry had bound them, at least they only needed to think that their professor had been bound in the exact same way. That ought to prevent quarrels.

Good. Peter wanted Harry to think about this, not hide from it. His magic was different from the other students', and he ought to follow where it led him, not refuse the road because it was too long or turned in unexpected directions.

He was awake again, and if he did not feel quite alive, he was in good company. The fragment pulsing in the cup did not feel quite alive, either.

"Indigena."

She was at his side at once, summoned less by his voice, Lord Voldemort thought, than the pulse of pain he radiated through her Dark Mark. He gazed at her approvingly through his snake's eyes. Her eyes had gone completely green now, without pupil or iris. She had given herself to her magic, and only her commitment to him was deeper. That ought to be the regular practice of wizards, not shunning their magic no matter how ugly it turned them, but following where it led.

"My Lord?"

Lord Voldemort stirred thoughtfully, flexing his fingers. The cup lay clasped in one hand, always; as he uncurled one, he curled the other close. He was vulnerable, and with the wound in his magical core, he knew the power would still drain away from him.

But that was why he had been wise. He was always wise, Lord Voldemort. If he could not use magic in his body, he would go to a place where he could, and wield others as his hands and limbs and feet.

"The use of the two proceeds apace," he announced aloud. "I will require you to make ready for the first test soon. Fetch *Odi et Amo* again, and read me the eleventh chapter."

"Yes, my lord," Indigena murmured respectfully, and went to fetch the book.

Lord Voldemort directed his snake's head to stare at the ceiling of his earthen refuge and, very slightly, smiled. Soon he would leave this place and travel to the one that had been prepared for him. With the hand he could wield, he would have enough magic to protect him and keep him safe during the journey.

And then he would commence his new war.

Harry Potter was not only the one marked to defeat him. He was not only a personal enemy who had stolen thirteen years of Voldemort's life, lost to bodiless suffering and pain. He was also the one who had hurt Voldemort so deeply that what Albus Dumbledore had done to him looked like the fumbblings of a hedge wizard.

Lord Voldemort was still going to live forever. He was still going to conquer the wizarding world and rid it of the taint of Mudbloods forever.

But first, he would destroy Harry Potter.

It would be done carefully. Simply killing him would be too easy, as would torture of those he was close to. The tortures had to be different from each other, or at least sufficiently different to punish Harry. And Lord Voldemort must be careful, must be precise, must strip from Harry all that he had loved, which in the end would include his magic and his morals and his sanity.

He would have to think on this. He had time.

He would always, he thought, caressing the cup, have time.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Three: Vengeance Lies Dreaming

“Come and look at this article, Pemberley.”

Honorio rolled her eyes as she gathered up her robes to pick her way in among the presses. No matter how long she spent at the Maenad Press, Dionysus Hornblower refused to call her by anything but her last name. He seemed to change his mind on her daily. Now she was the liaison with the press Harry had assigned her to be, now she was a spy from the cause of an underground rebellion and the Press’s ally, now she was a spy from a *vates* who had sold his cause out by cooperating with Light wizards for the sake of a legal authority Dionysus cared for less than spots on bread. Life was never boring, but sometimes Honorio wished it wouldn’t vary quite so much.

His refusal to call me by my name should be refreshing, perhaps, as the one constant, she thought, as she finally hopped over a discarded piece of metal and came down beside Dionysus, who thrust an article impatiently at her.

Honorio took it up carefully. It was written on fine parchment, which argued against it coming from a student at Hogwarts; so did the accurate spelling. But many pureblood families had parchment like this in the house. Honorio did not see how she was supposed to tell anything about the article from that.

“The content, girl, the content,” said Dionysus.

She read the article, and stifled her complaint against the only other “name” that he ever called her. Mad-Eye Moody had been the same, and Honorio had liked him well enough, though she thought he needed to relax and learn how to dance. And at least Dionysus had not decided to announce her stupidity to the press at large today, as he had a habit of doing.

DEPARTMENT OF MYSTERIES ‘UNSPEAKABLE’ IN ITS LOYALTIES

It didn’t look any different from the articles they printed almost daily—except, Honorio thought as she read on, for the tone, measured and assured, without the half-hysteria that permeated most stories about Harry’s treachery or the Ministry’s treachery or the werewolves’ treachery or Voldemort’s treachery. The *Vox Populi* was very fond of treachery, usually.

This article outlined a story of the founding of the Department of Mysteries that Honorio had never heard before, beginning with the Stone and arguing that, pretense or not, the Unspeakables still served the Stone and not the Ministry. Some were things that she thought Dionysus couldn’t have known, either, given how early his “training” in the ways of the Unspeakables had finished. The article-writer concluded with a few sentences that made the hair on Honorio’s arms stand up.

For now, when they must fly against public outrage and loss of face, the Department of Mysteries is quiet. But it will not remain so for long. If we do not stand on our guard, they will return, filtering into our dreams, turning our very shadows on the walls against us. Maintaining the amount of light shed on them is the only way to harness them and their Stone, to negotiate rather than face them in a hopeless all-out war.

Honorio lowered the parchment and rubbed absently at the gooseflesh on her arms. She blinked as she caught a glimpse of Dionysus’s scowling face. “What?” she asked. “You *love* this.”

“But I know who it’s from.” Dionysus regarded the article with a jaundiced eye. “Our readers won’t know, of course, since we print without names, and I’ve never let a story’s origin disturb me before. But.”

“But?” Honorio prompted.

“This one’s from Scrimgeour.” Dionysus all but snarled the word, and then met her eyes as if daring her to challenge him.

Honorio blinked, and had the urge to laugh. She supposed that the day would, of course, come when the Minister would seek to use the *Vox Populi* to express his opinion. Everyone else did. She would never have thought that Dionysus, champion of freedom and the rights of everyone to speak, would balk, though.

“And so?” she asked gently. “You know that he can write these articles and send them to you, too. And he certainly has the spelling and the writing skills to be accepted.” The only articles that Dionysus tended to reject out of hand were the ones so badly-written it was impossible to say what the author had meant.

“He’s an enemy of freedom.” Dionysus turned his head upside-down, watching the article from the corner of one eye as though it would burst into flames if he regarded it directly for too long. “What would your *vates* say about this, Pemberley? Since I consider him the champion of freedom.”

Only when it suits you to do so. “He would say that you should print the article,” said Honorio, and gave it back to Dionysus. “If the Minister is planning treachery, then it should be outweighed by the fact that other voices in the same edition of the *Populi* speak against him. And you know that Harry always gives his enemies a chance to have their say, even to his own detriment.”

“Then he uses them to gain power,” said Dionysus, but absently, showing off his inconsistent philosophical position for the day. He went on staring at the story, and refused to take it from her hand. “What if it’s a code? I print it, and it tells someone to attack the Maenad Press, or gives other information damaging to the cause of freedom?”

Honorio refrained from rolling her eyes, but with a very great effort. “Change the wording a bit.”

“I can’t do that! Not to something I’ve agreed to print.”

“Then don’t print it.” Honorio shrugged. Dionysus’s paranoia had kept him alive, but it was tiresome to deal with. “I’m knackered. Going home to be with Ignifer for a time.” She turned to grow wings and rise out of the mass of the press. She hadn’t used her Animagus form to reach Dionysus mostly because there was so little room for her to change back from gull to human in the crowded mess of the floor where they stood.

Dionysus caught her shoulder, and he was heavy enough that it was hard to dislodge him. “You won’t consider writing that exposé I wanted?”

“No,” said Honorio, with finality. Dionysus had wanted her to write an article on what it was like to live with an exiled Apollonis, or, alternatively, a Light witch turned Dark. Honorio had her own reasons for refusing, but those wouldn’t content him. She had to find ones that would. “That plays too much on Ignifer’s blood status, and makes everyone think all over again that purebloods are special and worth more than other people. You don’t want to undermine the Grand Unified Theory like that, do you?” The one wind that remained constant in Dionysus’s character, or had so far, was the Grand Unified Theory.

His shoulders stiffened. “Of course not.” He released her with a faint push. “Go home to your lover. *Sarah!*”

Honorio transformed and soared upward. She was nearly out of the building when she remembered she hadn’t had her joke yet today, and wheeled back to lift her tail discreetly over the machinery of a press. The magic that drove it could cope with most failures, but they hadn’t yet figured out a spell that would get rid of all the problems bird-shit caused.

Thus fortified to come back tomorrow and enjoy her task, Honorio merrily flitted out of a window and was gone.

Ignifer was in the extraordinarily odd position of talking with her father for the first time since he had cursed her with infertility and not being furious at him. She sat stiffly in front of the fire, hands clasped before her, and watched Cupressus with a keen eye through the flames. He crouched with his head poking through them. That alone was impossible enough to earn Ignifer’s attention. Cupressus Apollonis never made a gesture that could be interpreted as submissive to *anyone*. Ever.

“And that was the end of it,” Cupressus concluded. “The Unspeakables threatened to publish what I’d done in the past, specifically in my foolish youth.” His slow glance said that he might consider foolish youth to extend to thirty-six. Ignifer ignored those implications, and just nodded. “I told them they were welcome to do so, but I would know what direction the attacks came from, and I was not yielding my time or my treasures to them to do with as they would.” He sat back, looking pleased with himself, and added, “Some others were not so lucky as to avoid that trap. Or they went *seeking them out*, as if one wanted the Department of Mysteries to engage with.”

Ignifer tilted her head. She knew that tone in her father's voice. He had specific information, in this case names, and he would give it up if he was given something in return. And once again she felt the temptation to bargain with him.

Don't, the voice of experience told her. *His bargains are iron chains that only slowly fade into being around your limbs.*

But this time, she had protection, while all the other times she had faced him alone and crippled by the terrible yearning to return home, not to be an exile any longer. She had Harry, and the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and their shelter even if her father tried to hurt her.

She asked, carefully, "Would the names of these unlucky or foolish ones be common news?"

"Not common news," said Cupressus. "One is often watched in Ireland, because of his importance, but no one would guess that he was so unfortunate as to misstep. The other is shining brighter, but passing beneath the shade of the Unspeakables could well dim his light forever."

The only thing that told Ignifer was that the unlucky one was an important pureblood wizard, and the other a Light pureblood wizard on the rise, not necessarily important. But pursuing this line of attack would win her a collar about the throat. She adopted an expression of indifference. "And they are proclaiming their failures?"

Cupressus laughed quietly. "Oh, daughter, *everyone* proclaims his failures, if one only knows how to look. And read."

Ignifer gnawed her lip a moment, trying to find her way through the strands of the discussion. An important pureblood wizard who had slipped up. What Cupressus was implying *could* mean that the consequences of his failure had been announced in the *Daily Prophet*, but most readers wouldn't know the nature of his folly.

And then she blinked, because there was only one wizard who fit that description, and, somewhat to Ignifer's own shock, she was involved enough in politics now to know who it was.

She didn't blurt it out to her father, of course. She nodded to Cupressus and said, "I appreciate your willingness to share this knowledge with me, Father, and I salute your resistance to unspeakable designs on your home and property."

"You might have the right to speak their names, again, in the future," said Cupressus softly.

Ignifer didn't react. Her father had told her again and again what price would win her back her home and her family and his approval. She only had to Declare for Light, and she would receive everything she wanted.

Was it stubbornness that kept me Dark for so long, or honor? Well, it is honor now. I won't abandon my allegiance in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, the allegiance that lets me sit on the monitoring board, the allegiance that means I can obtain what I want from my life instead of what my father wants.

"As soon hope for a change of voice, as a change of name," she told her father, and then dismissed the flames. Cupressus would only offer some savage or ironic farewell. Ignifer saw no need to entertain either.

The moment the flames ended, she cupped her hands around her cheeks and bowed her head. Her stomach was sick with nervousness, churning as if she would vomit at any moment.

Only one wizard fit Cupressus's description, and if he was right—and he might not be right, Ignifer tried to tell herself, again and again—then that wizard had been conspiring with the Unspeakables right under Harry's nose.

Lucius Malfoy.

He had publicly broken with Harry, but almost no one knew why. Ignifer had to admit she'd doubted it was over the disownment of his son. After all, what *reason* did he have to dissuade his son from going to Harry? He was Harry's joined partner, or would be, and using a ritual that required a level of will and commitment that most parents approved of. Lucius Malfoy was simply too practical to disown Draco in a fit of pique, or because Draco had disobeyed some whim of his. He would need a compelling reason, and an entanglement with Unspeakables through which he hoped to escape blackmail would fit.

If it was what her father suggested, then Lucius had not only betrayed the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, but he had more personally and permanently betrayed Harry. The Unspeakables had tried to *control* Harry. They had tried to compel a vates. Lucius cooperating with them stated that he did not believe in the very ideals he claimed to support.

Ignifer tried to pull her rampant speculation up short. This might have been the very track her father intended to set her mind running along. She really had no *proof*, other than her father's word, and the odd coincidence of Lucius breaking from Harry for some reason no one knew the full tale of, and her own conviction that Lucius was slimy enough to do something like this. For all she knew, Cupressus wanted her to become Lucius's enemy to advance his own agenda.

Of course it's to advance his own agenda. Ignifer wiped at her cheeks and tried to calm her breathing. *It always is. And he may want me to suspect and accuse Lucius, and fracture the Alliance further, or weaken Lucius's place with Harry. He is Lucius's enemy by allegiance. He could want to see Lucius destroyed just because he's a Dark wizard. I don't know anything yet.*

But the suspicion sank into her stomach and gathered force, if only because Cupressus had been right about odd things before. He had predicted long years before it happened that Cornelius Fudge would become Minister, and that he would be weak and contemptible enough to need the "advice" of prominent Light families, while fearing the Dark ones enough not to seek comfort from them. And he tended not to make statements without some kind of proof behind them. Lucius was really the only candidate who fit his parameters this time, no matter how Ignifer turned them in her mind.

A door banged, and Honoria's voice called out, cheerfully, "Ignifer? Are you—" Then she entered the room and crossed it in a soft run. Her arms locked around Ignifer's waist, and when Ignifer looked up, illusions of lions juggled tiny balls on her shoulders. Ignifer cracked a reluctant smile.

"Who did this to you?" Honoria whispered, stroking her hair. "The bitch or the bastard?"

The descriptions of her parents made Ignifer chuckle, and then feel bad for chuckling. If her father was trying to help—but then, she did not know if he really was, and he could intend to help the Alliance purely and solely because it would benefit him. She didn't know, couldn't know, and keeping the suspicions locked in her own skull was making her nervous and jumpy.

She licked her lips and did what she usually did at such a time: told Honoria.

Honoria went more and more still as Ignifer listed the reasons she had for thinking Lucius had been involved with the Unspeakables, and the reasons she had for not believing Cupressus. At the end, Honoria jumped away and flung her arms into the air, swearing. The illusions of flames sprang out, crackling around her fingers.

"*Fuck*," she said, when other, and more eloquent, terms had deserted her. "There's no way that we can move against this, either. Not easily. If we accuse Lucius falsely, then we'll lose credibility and cost Harry two of his best allies, and practically compel him to give Lucius a second look and another hearing. If we turn out to be correct, then it could still split the Alliance and put Harry in a very difficult position. Is he going to be able to eat the magic out of his father-in-law?"

"I don't know," said Ignifer, and she didn't. She had held firm to her own promises, even when they cost her with her family, but that had cost her, too, hardening her pride into a bitter, hollow shell. She had also had longer than Harry had been alive to consider her position, and she'd had people she despised begging her to reconsider her choice. Nothing fortified the will like open attacks from the opposition. No matter which principles Harry ultimately chose to support, those of justice or those of mercy, he would have people he loved and cared for on both sides, not scorned.

"It's not a good idea to tell him just yet, maybe," said Honoria. "Not until we have more proof." She paused for a long moment, and a slow, manic, brilliant smile crept across her face.

"What?" Ignifer asked.

"Minister Scrimgeour sent an article decrying the Unspeakables to the *Populi* today," said Honoria, and sat down on another chair, swinging her foot. "I convinced Dionysus to print it. We could send news of Lucius's possible treachery to Scrimgeour, since we know that he distrusts the Department of Mysteries. He could look around for clues to it, and he has a much better spy network than we ever will."

Ignifer smiled. She knew the Minister didn't like Lucius Malfoy. Honoria's solution was as close to perfect as it could get. At least they would know someone was working on the problem, and someone with much better resources to handle any eventual discovery—and, best of all, someone without the Alliance of Sun and Shadow oaths hindering him. "You're brilliant."

Honoria tossed her head in pretended pique. "I'm *radiant*, I'll have you know."

Rufus rubbed his forehead. Days like today were why he hated being Minister.

Oh, it was very pleasant when he could sign a truce to end a rebellion, or hear near-assurances that Gloriana Griffinsnest would be judged guilty of murder and put into Tullianum for a *very* long time. But those days were pinnacles of high shining light in the morass of his life. Sooner or later, the time always came to descend into the bogs and valleys again.

First had come the news that the Centaur Committee, which Rufus had hoped would be ready no later than November sixteenth, was having problems. Some of their original volunteers had flat-out refused to serve when they realized that their tasks would involve actual *contact* with centaurs, not simple paper-pushing. Rufus had written what reassurances he could, but in the end the answer was to hire wizards less prejudiced, if any could be found. It would further delay the Committee being in actual operation.

Second was this movement to start a new, wizard-controlled bank, now that some people no longer trusted Gringotts. The *hanarz* of the southern goblins had sent Rufus a polite note to the effect that her people would consider any such operation unfair competition, and expect the Ministry to support their legal claims against the upstarts.

Third was the confirmation that some of the Muggles who'd observed the flight of the British Red-Gold had escaped the Obliviators. Now the Muggle papers were full of speculation on what the dragon could be. The most heated debate was between those who thought it some political gambit of the Prime Minister's and those who thought it some secret project of the Queen's. But a substantial minority insisted it had been a *dragon*, secret projects be damned, and those were the ones bringing in variously-worded owls, some polite, some not polite, from the Ministers of other countries, asking why in the world Britain seemed intent on violating the International Statute of Secrecy.

And now, this.

Rufus eyed the note lying in the middle of his desk as if it were a Many cobra. Actually, a Many hive would be less troublesome, since all of them in Britain seemed to work for Harry. The note was from Ignifer Apollonis and her lover, explaining that they had reason to believe Lucius Malfoy had interfered in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow by cooperating with the Unspeakables, and could he look into this?

Nothing would have delighted Rufus more a year ago. Now, he assuredly could *not* look into this, because the Unbreakable Vows he'd sworn in Courtroom Ten bound him from betraying Lucius in any way.

He had sent Percy off for tea when he first read the note, so that he could throw things at the walls in peace.

The man's words made so much *sense* in this context, he thought bitterly. Lucius had spoken of not getting everything he wanted when he first appeared with Flint and swore the oaths. And he hadn't, had he? The Unspeakables hadn't managed to control Harry or prevent the rebellion from happening, and Lucius had broken with Harry when the rebellion began, so Rufus rather thought his motivation traced to that. He had *not* thought to give Lucius's words that particular spin, and so that meant he was sitting hand-bound in his office and Lucius was walking around the roads of the wizarding world free to do as he pleased.

It *pained* Rufus.

He wished there was a way that he could give the note to someone else and let that person investigate Lucius. Wilmot would be perfect. He had told Rufus, quietly, a few days after the anti-werewolf laws were repealed, what he was, and the only questions Rufus had been able to ask in his astonishment had been how he managed during the full moons and why he had never noticed before. He was loyal to the Minister and Harry—somehow both at the same time—and he was discreet. He could look for proof of Lucius's treachery without blaring his intention all over the front page of the *Daily Prophet*.

But even giving the note to someone else would be a betrayal of Lucius; he could feel the Unbreakable Vow tightening like a noose on his throat just thinking of it. Rufus shook his head and crumpled the parchment up. The tightening eased. If Honoria or Ignifer asked about the progress of the investigation, then Rufus would simply have to say that he had been unable to find proof, which was true enough.

Would Lucius go on from this to act against Harry again? Rufus did not doubt it. Lucius had broken his ties with the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, to hear the *Vox Populi* announce it. And his own Unbreakable Vows bound him from action against the Minister, not against the *vates*.

Rufus's only comfort was the fact that his article for the *Vox Populi* separated him firmly from the Unspeakables, and thus from whatever Lucius's activities for them had been. At least that particular association, of blind belief in and support for the Department of Mysteries, did not taint him.

Lucius tapped his fingers rapidly against his knee as he read the description of the Declaration ritual on page 363 of *Declaring for Children*. Then he shook his head. He could not see Draco choosing that particular ritual. Not only was it demanding, long, and bloody, but it involved an element of dominance that Lucius did not believe his son capable of achieving, given what must happen after the ritual. No, Draco would find a ritual that let him preserve his purity in the eyes of his partner.

Lucius felt another lash of irritation at the thought of Harry. If Harry had only done as he was supposed to, and reacted to Hawthorn Parkinson's imprisonment by means less extreme than rebelling, then Draco's disownment would not have happened. Lucius would know what ritual his son was using to Declare, and he would have been able to influence him by subtle suggestions.

Neither boy had responded to his letter indicating that he wanted to reconcile. Lucius counseled himself, again, to patience. It would take more work than that to earn back Harry's trust, and Draco's. It would take months of perfect good behavior, and even cringing submission if necessary.

He did not like cringing submission. But he had done it for the Dark Lord, when he still believed the man might give him gifts beyond the brand on his arm.

Lucius scratched the Dark Mark absently. Several times in the last week he had awakened from rough dreams to find it tingling, and, once, when he peered at the snake and skull by the light of the moon, surrounded with red lines. Lucius had cast several spells on it, trying to determine whether the Dark Lord was reaching out across the miles to influence him, but the spells had revealed nothing. The tingling had ceased now. And though Lucius had analyzed his dreams, he could not find any way in which they would be useful to Voldemort. They were memories, of times when he had punished his enemies, or future hopes, such as what would happen when he finally disproved the Grand Unified Theory and put the Mudbloods in their proper places. He often had such dreams. Voldemort had not changed them in any way, had not planted visions in his head as Lucius knew he had often done to Harry.

The thought of the Grand Unified Theory reminded him that he had long meant to issue a certain invitation. He spent a pleasant few minutes composing a letter to Thomas Rhangnara, inviting him to come to the Manor. He would like to discuss the implications of the Grand Unified Theory on the heritage of the Malfoys and Blacks.

The letter sent with Julius, Lucius turned and drew another book down from the shelves. Somewhere, he would find a match for Draco's temperament and goals. He would know that was the ritual his son was using, and he would be prepared to use it when he went to Hogwarts on Midwinter's Eve.

He would never attempt to change the force of his son's Declaration to the Light, of course; the ritual would prevent such outright interference in any case, and on the longest night of the year, the wild Dark was likely to kill the wizard who tried something so foolish. No, what Lucius would do was—minor, really. A suggestion here, a tweak there. The wild Dark would approve of that, since Lucius was working with its methods, subterfuge and deception.

Connor smiled as another gray-and-black owl flew down and alighted on his bed. They were beautiful birds, the ones Mark kept finding to send his letters. The young werewolf had left Woodhouse, but continued writing to Connor, mostly talking about his inability to find a job now that most people knew he was a werewolf.

This letter was typical.

Hi Connor!

Well, I did try your suggestion today, and went to Gringotts. But they're not hiring wizards anymore, did you know? Or, at least, they're only hiring them for curse-breaking and other dangerous jobs that you have to have a lot of experience in. One snotty goblin told me I just wasn't fit for the job, and I'd need at least two more years of private training before I attempted it. Prejudiced bastards. I can say that because I'm a werewolf myself, you know, so I can't be prejudiced.

I'm sending you another gift with this letter. And yes, I know, check it for tracking spells and Portkey spells and all of those things you like. It's just a wooden model of a broom. I know you said once that you were kind of jealous of your brother for having a Firebolt, so I made you one!

*Cheers,
Mark.*

Connor shook the package until the little wooden broom tumbled out on the bed. It was just what Mark had said, a complete Firebolt down to the twigs. Connor supposed he must have drawn the model from Harry's broom, when he took it with him to Woodhouse.

Humming happily, Connor went to enchant the wooden broom and Snitch and chase them around the Pitch on his Nimbus. If he saw Harry along the way, he would ask him if he wanted to play. Harry was spending an awful lot of time without Draco these days, even though Draco's punishment for being a right git to Michael was long over.

Draco took a deep, bracing breath. He stood on top of the Astronomy Tower, lingering behind after his NEWT Astronomy class had departed below. Professor Sinistra had given him an understanding look when he asked if he could stay. She knew how much he loved the stars, and she would think this another opportunity for watching them.

It wasn't, though. It was about listening, instead. This high, and this close to Midwinter, Draco could hear the cry of the wild Dark as it swept through the black spaces between the constellations, hunting down the Light. The day was near when it would land and bite the year in half, proclaiming its power with a thunderous roar that Draco thought even Muggles might hear, if they would only listen.

His vision swam with stars during the day, and with blackness at night. He could feel the wind tugging on his heart, trying to make him follow it into the sky. Draco resisted that—he would not lose himself that far—but he could admire the savage beauty of the wild Dark.

If it were not presumptuous, he would say that the tone and temper of the wild Dark this year was much like his own, or at least as he perceived himself: beautiful, cruel, cold, indifferent to attempts others made to crack that coldness.

That observation, at least, was the thing that had made him rethink his behavior with Michael, and resolve not to do anything like it again. It was *beneath* him. He would watch out for threats, he would battle them, and he would work for his own advantage, but indulging himself with vengeance was undignified. Draco wondered that his father had ever thought it a good idea. A cool insult or quiet application to Harry to take care of the problem worked much better.

Draco felt his smile widen as he traced his eyes from star to star, almost seeing the thing blacker than the blackness that danced between them.

He had no objection to riding on Harry's power when he couldn't do something for himself. If *he* knew who and what he was, what others thought did not matter, and remaining in Harry's shadow, at least to their perceptions, would just encourage more people to underestimate him.

But on Midwinter, at least, it would be his night. He had chosen a ritual to Declare to the Dark that he rather thought would surprise everyone who witnessed it.

And it would certainly surprise Harry, and serve as Draco's answer to those two days of punishment when he hadn't been able to touch him or feel his magic.

Watch out, Harry. You're about to find out what it's like to have a Dark lover, Dark in heart and soul as well as in magic.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Four: His Night

Harry came in late to breakfast that day, but he was already feeling smug about what he'd accomplished so far. A letter to Camellia to let her know he would spend his Christmas Day at Silver-Mirror, after a few more days at Hogwarts, and then some days with the pack, had gone out with the first owl. Then had gone invitations to several of his allies who might not have presumed to contact him at this time of year. He would like to have Ignifer, Honoria, Hawthorn, Adalrico's family, and Thomas with him for Christmas, if they would come. Snape, Narcissa, Peter, Connor, and Draco would already be there, of course.

He paused when he saw Draco sitting at the Slytherin table. Then he shook his head and started forward. *Draco always sits at the Slytherin table*, he told himself. *In fact, he usually sits exactly there and looks exactly like that. What made you stop?*

"Going to enjoy yourself tonight?" he murmured as he took the chair beside Draco. The owl from Hogsmeade bearing his own breakfast, shrunken packages of cornflakes and milk, arrived then. Harry brought them back up to normal size and Levitated the

cornflakes in the air as he poured the milk over them.

“Yes. And so are you.”

Harry stopped for a long moment. The smirk in Draco’s tone didn’t deserve a startled jerk and a craning of his neck, even if it was what Harry felt like giving him. He turned his head slowly instead, fully expecting Draco’s expression to have changed by the time he saw him.

But Draco was still smirking. Harry shook his head slightly. “I read the description of the ritual you chose,” he murmured. “It didn’t say anything about my joining in, though of course I’ll be there to watch you. And isn’t Declaring about confronting the wild Dark on your own? Or the wild Light, for that matter?”

“Ah.” Draco popped a sausage into his mouth and eyed Harry’s breakfast with mild disdain. “I didn’t choose that ritual. I chose a different one.”

“Which one, then?” Harry demanded, trying to remember the books he’d helped Draco sort through in the library. There had been too many of them, though, and Harry had done nothing more than scan most of their pages. He had his own tasks, and Draco had wanted to prepare alone.

“You should find out soon.” Draco glanced around the Great Hall. Harry tracked his gaze. It was Midwinter morning, and most of the other students had gone home already, unless they were staying at Hogwarts for the holidays. Only Michael and Luna sat at the Ravenclaw table, and the Hufflepuffs had a very small gathering that happened to include Zacharias Smith. Hermione had gone, but Ron and Ginny both remained with Connor. Harry meant to invite them to Silver-Mirror, too, if their parents would concede to them celebrating Christmas with a bunch of Dark wizards. Most of the teachers were at the head table, but both Professor Sprout and Professor Sinistra had left to spend the holidays with family. Draco sniffed. “A small audience, but I suppose it will do. You’ll all find out at the same time.”

“And so this ritual does require my help?” Harry took a bite of his cornflakes, frowning. “I’ll mess something up if you don’t tell me what to do, Draco, and I know that you don’t want your Declaration anything but perfect.”

“You did well on the last ritual where you had nothing but a few instructions, Harry,” Draco said, and his voice grew low, teasing, intimate.

Harry swallowed, and felt his face go warm. “That was different,” he said. “That was a ritual focused on the both of us. Isn’t this a ritual focused just on you?”

“I suppose I can tell you a bit about it, since you won’t be able to guess which ritual I’m using just from this small piece of information,” Draco said airily. “This Declaration helps me with what I want and need, Harry. And one of the things I want and need is you.”

Harry was still trying to apply that vague statement to any reasonable course of action when all the lights in the Great Hall went out.

There were startled shrieks from several of the students, and even from the head table, though later Harry thought the professors would deny making that sound. He remained still in the blackness, trusting to his ears and his magic to guide him. He’d tried, automatically, to conjure a *Lumos* around his hand, but it had failed.

He could feel the Dark in the room with them.

It rubbed against his hand, a sensation of prickly fur that might hurt if it was rubbed the wrong way; Harry had heard about sharkskin being like that, sharp enough to cut a swimmer who touched it. It laughed in his head, a curl of a chuckle that boomed into raging waves like the sea, and clenched at his spine with fingers that seemed to pierce straight through his skin and bones. Harry felt the weight above him, the choking heaviness of a cave pressing down. His shoulders sagged under stones, and his heart struggled to beat.

But the power still left him free to turn his head and check on Draco. And what he saw there stilled his breath.

A pulse of light was around Draco—either that, or a pulse of darkness so much darker than the rest that the rest became as light. Draco had his eyes closed, his neck tilted back, and a faint smile on his lips. Jaws outlined his head, cupping and cradling his skull, flowing into the ill-defined form of a beast that crouched on his back. Harry knew those jaws could close in a moment and turn Draco’s entire face to little more than scattered pulp.

The tableau lasted for long moments, pierced only by occasional startled cries from the other students. Harry felt his own breath quickening the longer he waited. He had dreaded this day, because he knew it would remind him of Fawkes, and he had thought the wild Dark would want to inflict *some* punishment on him for fighting it last year.

But he should have remembered that the wild Dark was never consistent from one day to another, much less from one Midwinter to another. What he felt was the proud greeting of a very proud power. It suppressed thoughts of Fawkes and phoenix song, and drew his own darkness to the surface. Harry felt as if his vision swam with tar, and his muscles twitched with the need to run, as he had on Walpurgis after the white stag.

But no white stag would come to them today, he thought, no such creature of light. Tonight was the Dark's time.

And Draco's.

The night vanished the moment he thought that, and Draco leaned back in his seat as the jaws around his head went with it. Harry could see others crying softly in confusion, or staring around as they tried to locate the source of the darkness. Harry knew they wouldn't find it. The wild Dark had taken all the light out of the Great Hall because it wanted to, and then it had left again as suddenly. It had no source, and needed none, because tonight the darkness was everywhere.

Draco opened his eyes and turned his head away, not even looking at Harry before he did so. *He knows I'm watching*, Harry thought, and something in his mind—a remnant of the wild Dark, or the awareness that he'd built up around Draco since the Halloween ritual, or the cruelty that he looked at, sometimes, and then buried under the bed again—purred with satisfaction at the thought.

Blood ran from two precisely præcised holes high up on Draco's skull, staining the blond hair. Harry didn't have to ask to know they came from the jaws' prominent fangs. Solemnly, he stretched out his hand and caressed the hole on the left, without asking if Draco wanted the wound healed. The wound couldn't be healed and still signify Draco's willingness as it was supposed to.

"Does it hurt?" He *was* surprised to hear his own voice sound so breathy, as if he were still watching the beast hold Draco.

Draco turned around and shook his head. "No. It doesn't." He caught Harry's hand and bent low. Harry felt the impact of teeth on his palm, hard enough to break the skin, if not to make him bleed. "Not against the thought of what's going to happen tonight."

Harry watched him with half-lidded eyes, feeling the darkness dance up and down in him. He was not Declared. He never would be. He had the phoenix song and the preference for Light ethics to ground him if he ever thought that might be happening.

But he had a closeness to Darkness, too. And it had been months since he had truly indulged that—arguably, not since Walpurgis. Most of the magic he had been working since he came back from the Sanctuary was Light. The joining rituals he'd shared with Draco on Halloween and his birthday acknowledged the presence of the Dark, but did not confront it.

It could do no harm to indulge the wildness struggling to escape within him, as long as that was what the ritual allowed.

Draco looked up and caught his eye. At once he grinned, a feral expression that Harry was sure he'd seen before, though he couldn't remember if it was on Draco's face or someone else's. "You don't need to think about this, Harry, or worry about the rules," he whispered. "I called to the wild Dark last night. Its appearing this way is a sign that the call was accepted. From now on, the ritual will handle things." He reached up with his free hand and tugged at Harry's hair, hard enough to hurt, the way he liked to do. "Let go."

Harry held back one more moment. "You're sure the ritual won't hurt anyone else?"

"Sure." Draco's voice was breathy, too, come to that. "It doesn't want to. The wild Dark isn't interested in easy victims, not this year. I've given myself up to it, and it wants to play."

Harry nodded, and heard triumphant laughter well in his head, followed by sweetness, followed by the knowledge that he could float off the floor and out the windows of the Great Hall if he wanted to.

He could always have done that, at any time of the year. But this knowledge swarmed back and struck him across the face like a blow from the bird's lizard tail, and he took a deep breath that seemed full of the complementary knowledge: that he might *want* to do it, too.

Snape knew which ritual Draco had chosen to use, though he'd never seen it act.

He spent the day observing the boys in silence. They helped him brew a stock of potions that Madam Pomfrey would almost certainly need when the students returned from holiday, as they played with magical toys and took falls from brooms and stayed outside long enough to let the cold air soak into their lungs. Harry brewed with his attention half on the process and half on Draco. He made no mistakes doing it, so Snape held his tongue. That was the only reason.

Draco brewed like a dragon would fly, with intent, leaning forward into the hunt, given so completely to it, heart and soul, that it was impossible to imagine him doing anything else. Snape knew the ritual did not give that perfection, only enhanced it. Usually, something else distracted Draco too thoroughly to allow him that focus on potions. Now, he stirred and cut and pounded and cast stabilizing spells as though that were all that mattered in the world. Not like a madman, nor yet a machine, but like a dancer in the middle of his music, each motion a complete and transient work of art.

Snape shook his head and told himself to stop with such poetic comparisons.

He had given Draco *Medicamenta Meatus Verus*, two years ago, because he had envisioned the boy taking a path that would carry him out of Harry's shadow, and give him his own interests. Yes, Draco might have found the path on his own sooner or later, but his obsession with Harry had concerned Snape. If he could spend even a few hours a day concentrating on what *he* loved, then it would be good for the both of them.

That had been a spectacular, resounding mistake. Snape could admit it now.

But only slowly was he learning why it had been a mistake, other than the consequences of the book's compulsion for Draco and its losing him Harry's trust. It had been a mistake because Draco was finding his independence on his own. And really, Snape supposed, that was the only way it would ever matter to him, if he unbound *himself*. A mentor could encourage, as Snape had seen Joseph doing with Harry, but ultimately the decision came down to the student.

And here it was, the culmination of Snape knew not what silent decisions and discussions and debates and false turns. Draco had chosen a ritual that was going to set him on a path that did not turn backwards. The Justification, the formal name for the ritual, brought him face to face with himself. And Draco, by calling to the wild Dark, by invoking this ritual at Midwinter, had chosen to embrace the darker and Darker parts of himself.

It was not necessarily the future Snape would have chosen for him, especially as Harry's partner. It was not the future, he felt certain, Lucius Malfoy would have wanted.

But it was the future Draco wanted, and it was the one he was going to get. Snape could see the delicate tracery of black fire around him—that might even be what continued to draw Harry's gaze, though he didn't know if Harry was aware of it—and knew it would keep steering him along this path. There was no stopping the Justification, once the call had been given and answered.

There was only moving through it, and surviving it.

For both of them, Snape thought, but he knew this was another situation, like the monitoring board, when he had to step back and let them go. Harry would survive it, both the ritual and having a partner like the one Draco was transforming himself into. He wanted Draco to have his own will? This was the consequence.

And, disturbing as it was to see physical desire in his son's eyes, Snape had to admit that Harry didn't look at all like he minded.

"Greetings, Mother."

Narcissa narrowed her eyes as Draco came into Silver-Mirror, forcing herself to see not an intangible, indefinable attraction about him, but the actual, present mantle of black fire. When she finished seeing it, she stood with a small smile and bowed to him, not extending a hand. Draco would touch only whom he chose to this day, and while Narcissa was certain he had touched Harry, she would be extremely surprised if it were anyone else.

Sure enough, Draco simply nodded back and sat in a chair across from her, crossing his legs. His gaze was keener than Narcissa could remember it being. Of course, when she squinted, she could see a revolving dot of black in the center of each pupil. Well, black or dark green. At this point in the day, there was no difference between them.

“Is Father coming to my Declaration?” Draco asked.

Narcissa nodded. “You know that he may choose to try and bind the ritual in some way,” she warned Draco. It was not unknown. Many Declaration rituals were delicate things, and the individuals in the center of them needed to give all their attention to the Dark or Light waiting for them, not to what the spectators were doing. Parents had bound injunctions to obedience into the patterns of the ritual before, and their children had never noticed. Enemies sometimes introduced a weakness in the form of a disease which slowly but surely weakened the victim’s heart. Narcissa would watch for such interference by Lucius. She could not guarantee that she would catch it.

Draco laughed softly. “He will, I’m certain,” he said. “But you can’t bind the Justification, Mother, unless you begin before the wild Dark answers the call.”

Narcissa raised her eyebrows. “And what makes you so certain that he did not?”

Draco leaned forward. “Because Father underestimates me,” he said. “He has continually underestimated me. He didn’t bother extracting a promise out of me not to go to Harry during the rebellion, for example. He merely assumed that I would obey him, because I’m his son, and weaker than he is. And I don’t think he’s changed his mind. He’ll come prepared to counter any number of the weaker rituals, but not this one. It’s not one that he thinks I’ll choose.” Draco’s smile flashed for a moment, reminding Narcissa of something that lay in the swamp and showed too many teeth. “Too bloody for me, he’ll assume. Too violent.” He cocked his head. “Too dominant.”

Narcissa might have protested that, but she remembered too many of the words Lucius had murmured to her, when he still assumed they shared one heart and one soul about Draco. He *did* worry about Draco’s seeming submissiveness to Harry, and underestimate his will. He forgot the times Draco had chosen to exert his will—in second year when he found out that his father had given Harry Tom Riddle’s diary, when he reached for confirmation as magical heir, when he refused, in dozens of small and subtle ways, to do what his father asked of him. Draco might not ordinarily exert his will, because he had to want something greatly before he would think the effort worth making.

But when he did, Narcissa did not think anything could stop him.

She met her son’s eyes, and inclined her head. “I think you are right, Draco,” she said. “And Harry?” She did not have to elaborate the question.

“Is going to enjoy himself,” said Draco blandly, and that ended that.

Harry shivered as they made their way out onto the Hogwarts grounds. The sun was setting, and that meant the time had almost come for Draco to finish his ritual and call the wild Dark’s direct attention. Harry, Snape, and Henrietta, as a neutral Dark witness, would watch, along with Draco’s parents, but no one else was welcome.

Harry had to admit he was almost sorry to see the ritual end. The day had been fascinating, as the magic pointed out to him all sorts of small things he hadn’t noticed about Draco before. The color of his eyes, the way he bit his lip not only when he was worried or thinking but when he was concentrating deeply on a potion, the way his expression could light with laughter even when he didn’t make a sound out loud. At one point Draco had stood in the pale winter sunlight falling through a window and smiled, as if defying the Light to find any good in him or take him back. The sunshine had turned the edges of his face to blankness, his hair to a hard pure luster as cold as adamant.

And Harry had known, for just a moment, what it might mean to find someone else physically beautiful.

They walked through snow now, and biting air that finally made Harry give in and cast a warming charm, conceding that his training couldn’t protect him all the time. Snape was beside Harry, and Henrietta on the other side, wand out as she checked for threats. Draco walked slightly in front of them.

Then he turned around.

Harry met his eyes.

He caught his breath. Draco’s face looked—uplifted, transfigured, filled with a burning, brewing flame that Harry had seen only in a Light context before, when he freed the unicorns and they cast their glory on the bracken, the trees, and the rest of the forest.

Come to think of it, that had been in winter, too, almost two years ago now.

This did not shed glory on anything. It shouted impatiently for its own glory to be noticed. Draco looked up at the first approaching stars, and Harry saw a faint red stripe of light stroke his face as the sun appeared from behind racing clouds.

He doesn't need to shout to get my attention, Harry thought. He has it.

He felt anxieties worrying and pressing at him, trying to remind him of all the times he had wounded or ignored Draco, or the recent fact that Draco had hurt Michael out of pique at not getting attention, or getting the wrong kind from the wrong person. But Harry shrugged and let them slide off, and not even into an Occlumency pool. Draco had asked him to relax and let go today.

He could. The worries occupied him almost every other day, outside the bounds of the ritual. This was for today. The worries would wait for tomorrow.

They reached the place Draco had chosen, and marked out that morning, though Harry had not known with what. He saw, now. A circle lay in the grass, framed by steep banks of snow. Draco had used a spell—or perhaps the wild Dark had used one—that burned the ground. Whenever a dollop of slush slid into it, that dollop flashed and hissed into steam before it could touch the circle itself.

Lucius and Narcissa were waiting for them on the other side of the ring. Harry eyed them for a moment. Narcissa wore deep blue robes, the color of sapphires, the very oldest color of winter. She supported Draco, and indicated that support by showing her approval of the time of year when he had chosen to hold his Declaration.

Lucius wore white.

Harry felt his lip twitch in exasperation. Lucius could not give *up*, could he? The white proclaimed Lucius an outsider, dressed like a Light wizard for all that he was Dark. He showed support, but only qualified support. Draco had done something that disappointed him.

I hope it's the choice of ritual, Harry thought spitefully. He had restrained his questions about what, exactly, would happen at Draco's insistence. He didn't think Lucius had, but that he could not be satisfied even now—

Harry cut himself off with a shake of his head, and faced the burned circle as Draco stepped within it. He walked with his head up, proud, self-assured. He didn't look at any of them, though his sight line went past Lucius and Narcissa as he faced the setting sun.

"I called to you," Draco said, his voice so low and warm and intimate that Harry's body tingled with awareness, "before the dawn this morning, at a moment of deepest dark when clouds were in the sky and snow was on the ground. You answered me. Will you answer me now, and let me justify myself to you?"

Harry caught sight of Lucius's frown, which quickly turned into wide eyes. He mouthed the words that Draco had just spoken, and took a step forward, as if he actually intended to cross the burned line and take Draco away from what he was doing.

Then blindness struck them all.

Harry saw it as a black hand that passed across his vision and stole away his sight. He stood still, his shoulders hunched, his heartbeat suddenly the all-consuming sense impulse for him as his panic built. But he knew he had to remain quiet, and trust Draco. No one was allowed to interfere. It seemed that no one else was allowed to see what happened, either, except for Draco.

Harry heard a soft crunching noise, like snow impacted by the push of dense paws. Snape's hand rested on his shoulder. Harry leaned his cheek on it, as he listened to the great beast walk towards his lover. *Stride, stride, stride, stride, and thump.* Four feet, Harry thought, and a long tail.

He could feel the moment the beast halted on the edge of the burned ring. Silence built around them, pregnant as the hour before a storm burst.

The voice, when it spoke, made Harry nearly convulse in joy.

So. Show me that you are worthy to live.

Let me justify myself to you.

It was not until he heard those words that Lucius understood how wrong he had been. The burned circle and the sunset timing were common features of many Declaration rituals. He had waited for Draco to humble himself, abase himself, fall to his knees before the Dark in the particular version of the Minor Music Ritual Lucius was sure he'd chosen.

He had never expected his son to choose the Justification.

He cannot. He will be killed.

Lucius had lunged at the circle fully intending to put a stop to this madness. The Dark had not yet accepted Draco's invitation, not yet arrived. Until it did, there was a small chance that he could break the Declaration by dragging Draco out of the circle.

He was exasperated with Draco, irritated at his recent behavior, and determined to control him, but he did not want to lose his son. And that was what he would do if he let Draco do this.

Then he went blind, and had to halt. He would survive if he stepped over the line of burned grass, but not if he stepped upon it.

In the hammering silence of that moment after blinding, doubt crept into his mind. Draco was not foolish enough to do something like this when he was sure he wouldn't survive it, no matter how desperate he might be to prove his worth to Harry or his parents. He was Slytherin, a survivor. He would not throw away his life.

So he must be confident he could handle the Justification.

The doubt spread through Lucius like a pattern of cracks through ice. And then the Dark arrived, and he had to listen instead, but the doubt grew further and further, worming fine lines into some of his most cherished convictions.

So. Show me that you are worthy to live.

Draco had been waiting for this moment.

The Dark had come to him in the form of a chimera. The head facing him was a lion's, but the body a black goat's, and the tail that ran behind it was that of a dragon. Sharp, ice-edged wings trailed from its shoulders, a fan-shape like the ridge on some lizards' backs. Draco knew the teeth could rend him apart, that the tail could cave his ribs in, and that the hooves were sharp enough to scalp him. And it would all be done with astonishing quickness, too. Chimeras were the swiftest beasts that lived.

He had not been able to predict the form. Of course he hadn't. The wild Dark did not manifest consistency.

The lion's eyes were a deep and sickly black, like the spots that Draco knew had swum in his own eyes all day. Not looking away from them, he put out a hand.

There was no motion, but the chimera's teeth were clamped around his fingers. Draco imagined the scarred stump on the end of Harry's wrist. It could sever his hand, he knew. It could crush his fingers to less than the solidity of butter. Bone would tumble about him in small and glistening shards.

He breathed evenly.

The chimera laughed at him. He had passed the first test of the Justification, the temptation to run away or cower, but there was always later. And he had not managed to impress it. Nothing impressed the wild Dark, Draco knew. One fought it, and then it circled away and became whole again, forgetting the defeat.

Rather like my father.

Rather like, the voice agreed, the pulse-pounding joy of a storm in flight, and the wild Dark was in his head with him. Draco had invited it in.

It ravaged his mind.

It dived deep, and all his memories were prey for and play for it. It dragged up the small and selfish cruelties he had done as a child, and laughed at them. It snickered at the memory of his proud and horrible father standing helpless in front of the mess Draco had made of his room, with a burst of accidental magic that insured no house elves could touch any of the items. It grabbed his head and pushed it into his own embarrassment over his first sexual desires, as a Kneazle's owner might rub its nose over the feces it had left on the carpet.

Draco withstood it all. He knew those things existed, and now that he had called the Dark, he had no choice but to let the ritual continue. What the Dark saw in him, what it told to him, what it did to him, was its own choice.

Why did you call me? The voice made Draco shiver, but not with cold and not with fear. It was the same arousal he'd sometimes felt over Harry's magic in fourth year, when Harry grew angry enough to let it matter. *You have nothing to offer me. What are you but a spoiled and selfish brat?*

A spoiled and selfish brat who has done these things, Draco answered, and he brought up the memories of his wrongdoings.

He had known, even as he flirted with Michael, that this might turn around and bite him at some point. But he had been unable to stop. Why should he? It got him what he wanted, admiration for his physical looks, the one kind he lacked, and he was confident that he could survive what came after this. He had resented Harry's punishment; it had made him reconsider his actions, but only in the sense that he had been stupid and would not do anything like it again because of the stupidity. He had not agreed that Harry had any right to punish him. Nor had he thought that his original impulses, the desire to flirt and be noticed, were wrong. He should have chosen his target better, and managed his emotions better, so that the admiration would not turn into obsessive love.

There had been other times like that, too. Draco had meant what he told Michael about his possession. It had been strange to leap in and out of Death Eaters' heads on the Midsummer battlefield, and know they were dying when he left them, and that he was guiding them to their deaths in cold blood. But he had not thought of them past the moment. He couldn't remember their names now, couldn't remember the feel of their minds. The pain of those actually important to him, himself and Harry, had occupied him in the days after the battle, once he was assured that his parents and Professor Snape had taken no serious injuries.

That is the greatest difference, then. The wild Dark's voice was eager. *I know the one who calls himself vates, and I know you. He has many whose pain is important to him. You have few whom you truly love.*

That was true, Draco acknowledged. He knew that Lucius loved only him and Narcissa. He was fairly sure that his mother loved only his father, him, and Harry. He came of a proud family tradition in loving fiercely, protectively, possessively—and only those people he absolutely had to.

The wide circles were for Harry. The compassion for every small and hurt living thing was for Harry. The love for the wizarding world that the prophecy proclaimed the one to defeat the Dark Lord had to have was for Harry. He was welcome to them.

That did not mean Draco hated the whole rest of the world. Of course not. He might try to get along with them if it seemed beneficial, as it was more and more coming to seem with Harry's brother, or he might do something for them if it did not hurt him, or was amusing, or helped him in his own plans, or pleased Harry.

But his compassion, his love, were reserved for a few people alone. He did not see why they should extend to more.

He supposed he had tried loving more people in the past. There had been a time when he loved Pansy as a friend, for example, or thought he did. Losing her had hurt. But he had recovered from his grief and gone on. He had seen what grief did to Harry when it was deep enough, casting him down, disordering his mind. He had grieved like that over the loss of his phoenix.

Draco did not. He never would. The people who were important to him could destroy him if they died, but that was just another reason to keep them safe as strongly as he could. Draw the circle and defend—or, better yet, reach outside the circle and manipulate so that fewer enemies would ever look their way. The protection of those he loved was in the end a protection of himself.

There were some who called Slytherin irredeemably evil, the wild Dark said in his head, winding Draco around itself like thread on a spool. *You know that is not true, do you not?*

Yes, Draco knew. Slytherin did not mean irredeemably evil. Light Lords had come out of his House.

What Slytherin tended to mean was *selfish*, to a greater or lesser degree. Selfish of ambition, selfish of place and precedence, devoted to gaining one's own goals and then hanging on to them. A Slytherin did not give coins and compassion away to every stranger who passed unless doing so would safeguard something more important, like happiness or a sense of self-worth. And

Slytherins loved best, were happiest, when they could take those they loved away from the rest of the world and lock them up like the treasures they were.

Draco could not do that with Harry. But then, he'd always known he would have to share Harry with most of the world. What he could do was evaluate his own happiness, know what things he absolutely had to have for himself in his relationship with Harry—just as he knew the people he absolutely had to love—and ignore the things that didn't matter. When someone did intrude on his territory, then it was the time to fight back like an enraged dragon.

And Harry was not someone who only had to be protected. He was a partner who could protect, too, who could hold his own in a fight. Since Draco also enjoyed being sheltered and petted and spoiled, this made him smugly pleased. Harry's magic aroused him. His beauty made Draco want him. His past inspired those rare bursts of sympathy Draco was capable of. And he was honest enough to say, most of the time, exactly where they stood.

The one thing Draco could wish for with Harry was a little more lowering of the barriers—more frequent sex, more attention paid to him physically, more times when Harry would say what first came into his head instead of holding back and phrasing it diplomatically. The Breaking of the Boundaries had started them down this path. Joseph had encouraged Harry to go further. Draco intended the Justification to show Harry something so wonderful that he would never want to go back to the cramped and sterilized little existence he'd led.

The wild Dark laughed in his mind. Draco started. He'd almost forgotten its presence, much more interested in exploring himself.

You are a selfish and spoiled brat. The wild Dark sounded highly amused. *You entertain me, Draco Malfoy. You have what you have sought, my recognition and your Declaration. You are a Dark wizard.*

Searing pain radiated from Draco's hand. Opening his eyes, which he had closed sometime during the Justification, he saw the chimera removing its jaws. The waves of cold and pressure turned to waves of ecstasy a moment later, as the tooth-marks from that morning had. Draco closed his eyes again and moaned.

Take your lover somewhere else, said the wild Dark. *No, not somewhere else. I have changed my mind.*

Draco opened his hazy eyes in time to see the chimera facing the stars, tilting back its head, and roaring. A spiral of snow came shooting down from the sky immediately, shining so brightly that Draco was sure the stars themselves were falling for a moment. Wind buffeted him, tore his feet from under him, and carried him into the air.

He blew through blackness, weightless and boneless, until he hit a cloth-covered surface. Breathless, he bounced and tried to get up, but a heavier weight pressed him down a moment later. Draco blinked, and pushed through wild black hair, and saw Harry's startled face, green eyes obviously free of the blinding spell the wild Dark had put on them.

Enjoy, said the voice, and the chimera was gone.

Draco knew this was a room with a bed in it, and it could have been their own bedroom or a place the wild Dark had conjured for them. He didn't know. He didn't care.

He kissed Harry violently, and so began the attack.

Harry rolled over, gasping, his ribs aching, not only from the suddenness of the landing but from the fact that he had landed on top of Draco. Then his glasses smashed into his face as Draco kissed him.

This is new.

But it really wasn't, Harry realized, after a moment in which he writhed under Draco's hands and Draco flipped them both over with surprising strength so that he was on top. This was the kind of passion or violence that Draco had inspired in him the first time they did more than kiss, the kind of abandon Draco had reveled in with the Breaking of Boundaries. The difference was that this time, neither anger nor magic was throwing Harry off-balance. He had a choice in how to respond.

He licked his lips, or tried to—hard as they were kissing, his tongue simply ran right out of his mouth and into Draco's—and considered what he wanted to do. He didn't have to go along with this. He could insist that things slow down, and they could make love more gently. Or he could walk away altogether, perhaps. Harry doubted this lovemaking was part of the Declaration. It was more something Draco wanted to do.

And something he wanted. He could feel his cock stirring already, arousal strung through his nerves like hot wires, and thoughts he normally never allowed himself to think drifting around his mind like bits of flotsam in the sea.

He could walk away.

Or he could let himself go.

He closed his eyes and did.

He felt his magic speed away from them both, unfolding like barbed wings and screaming in joy. Somewhere, the lizard-tailed bird would be shrieking in approval. But Harry didn't think he could hear it, because Draco's hand had found that place on the side of his neck that Harry normally hated and pinched it, hard.

Harry's body jerked like a marionette, and he choked into Draco's mouth. Draco sat back for a moment, looking pleased with himself.

Harry took the opportunity to Vanish all their clothes. Draco's pupils dilated noticeably when he found himself abruptly naked and sitting astride an equally naked boyfriend. For a moment, the haze in his eyes vanished all the same, and he gave Harry a quizzical glance.

"Yeah." Harry could see his magic, beyond Draco's head, drawing what looked like a series of intense and intricate pictures across the walls, but he was more interested in the way Draco's eyes got even darker. "I want it, too."

He waited for one more staring, tension-laden moment, then reached up and cupped Draco's head, drawing him down hard enough for his teeth to cut into Draco's lip. Harry rolled them over, trying to get on top again. Draco braced a leg on the bed and pushed off with his knee halfway through the roll. Harry grunted as he landed firmly on his back once more, one of the springs in the mattress stinging his shoulders.

"I want to do what you've done to me twice now," Draco said, hovering over him. "Twice you've touched me, and not allowed me to touch you. This time, you're going to share yourself with me, Harry, and you're not allowed to move. Or to give me anything in return." His eyes cut as he leaned over and stared into Harry's face. "Or are you too unselfish to do that?"

Harry gritted his teeth. He wanted this, and not only because it would please Draco. He could say that at least. The thought of lying still before Draco and letting him touch him like that made a warm frisson run through him that rivaled the cold ones the wild Dark had introduced.

"I *want* you to touch me," he said.

Draco's smile was pure triumph, and undoubtedly the most beautiful thing Harry had ever seen on his face. He lowered his head and fastened his teeth on that hateful point on Harry's neck. Harry swore as he bit it. The tremors that set up seemed to make more muscles in his groin clench than he'd known existed. He tossed his head back urgently, laying himself bare for Draco, the voices that said he couldn't so muted that they might as well not have spoken.

"Fuck, Draco."

"What do you think I'm doing?" Draco muttered, and sucked on the bite mark, making Harry half-shout. His body was slick with sweat already, and he'd forgotten what cold felt like. He writhed on the bed, but kept his hand from rising to touch Draco, just as Draco had requested.

Draco moved down the bed, surprising Harry, who'd thought he would go slowly. But then his hand engulfed Harry's cock, and Harry let his head fall back with a groan, deciding that quick was perfectly all right with him.

Pleasure made his body shiver and convulse. Harry had lost control of his mouth, and had no desire to have it back, even if what he was uttering *was* a string of nonsense. He couldn't remember sex feeling like this before, like stabs of spears up and down his body, and the urge to push and thrust and scrape reduced to elemental necessity, rather than a step in a dance or ritual.

That's because you've never let yourself go before, he realized. *This is what it could feel like, if you'd trusted yourself enough.*
This—

And then he screamed aloud, because *that* was a new sensation, yes it was. Not mouth, and not hand. Well, all right, yes it was a

hand, but in the wrong place, or at least a place he hadn't expected it, stroking gently around the curve of his arse and then parting his cheeks.

"Draco." Harry was sure he said that. He might have wailed it, though.

"Lie still. You promised me," Draco said, or Harry thought he said, somewhere in the drifting haze that was currently his mind and his magic. "And I think we're past the point of elaborating each step of a sex act before we do it. If it hurts, tell me." He had something slick and sweaty on his fingers, and he slid one finger into Harry's body. Harry saw one glimpse of his intent expression before he threw his head back. His whole body felt tight, and it did hurt, but then stabbing pleasure invaded again, because it seemed Draco hadn't forgotten about his erection. He whimpered.

The finger stopped moving, but then pushed forward again a moment later. Harry thought he was bracing himself on his heels, his legs arching, his spine curving. He didn't know for certain. Every sensation that struck him lasted only a moment before another overcame it, so that he was buried in a succession of emotions and pressures and pullings, steady as waves.

He babbled something about "clean," he did remember that, and Draco said, "That's why I brought my wand." Or something. Harry was currently trying to breathe and remember that he had to do that and feel good *at the same time*. It seemed impossible.

He could relax, though, couldn't he? Go limp? Then it probably wouldn't hurt so much. And he was already breaking boundaries anyway. He was here of his own free will. Joseph would be so proud, Harry thought, and tried to picture his muscles as limp puddles of flesh.

It worked. Suddenly Draco's finger—fingers, probably—slid a little further, and Harry could feel them bumping and slithering around inside him. It led to images of snakes, which was disturbing. Harry gave a drunken little giggle, and saw his magic mess up the mural that it was making on the ceiling above them.

"Hush," Draco whispered, and kissed the side of his chest, which Harry thought was an odd place for a kiss, and then pressed deeper. He had the oddest expression on his face, Harry thought, as if he were groping for a misplaced textbook at the bottom of his trunk.

Well, groping is certainly the word for it—

He screamed then, and didn't care if anyone heard him. He *really* didn't. Pleasure was hitting him like boiling lead, and the hot wires strung through his nerves had all come to life at once. Harry was certain he was making all sorts of undignified motions with his hips, and babbling nonsense.

"That's called your prostate, Harry." Draco sounded unfairly cool and collected. "I take it you like this?"

"Yes," Harry said, which was also unfair, because he would have liked to add something along the lines of, "What does it look like?" But the pleasure had other ideas, and so did Draco's fingers. Harry supposed his hips did, too, if the way he was moving backward was any indication.

He felt the skin on his groin tingling and tightening, and he concentrated very hard on that to the exclusion of all else, and so managed, with only a few interruptions for panting, "Keep that up and—I'm going to come—before you—get in—here, Draco." Yes, it was strained, and trailed off to a moan at the end, but it was a complete sentence. Harry felt prouder than he thought he had a right to be, most days. Then he decided, *Screw it, I'm lying here with Draco's fingers up my arse, and it's about to be his cock. I have a right to be as proud as I like.*

"Well," said Draco, and at last a tremble of strain made itself known in his voice, to Harry's eternal gratification. "Can't have that." He eased backward, which eased the pleasure a bit, and Harry eased his head around and watched Draco.

The darkness that had transfigured his face earlier that day had come back. Harry didn't think he'd ever noticed all those shadows or angles before, and he'd *never* seen Draco look at him the way he was doing now. Even the man-before-parched-water look during the Breaking of Boundaries didn't compare. This was a look that said Draco wanted to fuck him, would tear his own skin off in a moment if he didn't fuck him.

"You're beautiful," Harry told him, really *seeing* it.

Draco shuffled carefully up the bed so that he could kiss him, biting Harry's lower lip on the way, in return for the lower-lip cut that Harry had given him, he supposed. "Never thought you'd say that so passionately."

And then he was back into position, and lifting Harry's legs carefully over his shoulders, and Harry had the feeling he would be horribly uncomfortable in a moment, but that didn't matter; it wasn't as if either of them would be lasting very long.

"I should make some long speech about your beauty, too," Draco said.

Harry wondered if he noticed the magic that briefly stopped drawing pictures and came up to hover behind him with steel claws extended.

And then he didn't care, because Draco was pushing carefully inside him.

It hurt. But Harry had borne far worse pain, and never as much pleasure. When the pain ate at him, he twisted away from it and rode under it. He would not risk putting it in an Occlumency pool. The point at which he'd finally broken free was no time to go back to his prison.

Draco pushed, and pushed, and pushed again until Harry thought his legs were going to tear off at the hips and his prostate had bugged off. Then he halted where he was and tilted his head back. Harry watched the darkness collect and swirl on his face, haunting every drop of sweat that fell, every crease that seamed his forehead, every straining line of his throat.

Then Draco pulled slightly back and threw himself forward.

And it turned out that Harry's prostate hadn't bugged off after all, just gone into hiding for a little while. Harry forced himself back at least as hard as Draco was thrusting forward, and laughed, because, damn, thinking of the word *buggered* while it was happening to him was funny.

Draco gasped and tried to say something, probably to ask why he was laughing. Harry didn't give him the chance to. He called his magic, and it floated his upper body from the bed, giving him leverage that Harry couldn't have had with one hand missing. Draco moaned at the change in angle, and then it was *his* turn to scream. That satisfied Harry, something wild and selfish in him that he didn't want to admit hid at the bottom of his mind and looked out through his eyes.

But this time he could admit it, since he was admitting everything. He wasn't *vates* or savior at the moment. He was just Harry. It felt wonderful.

And he didn't think he could ever thank Draco enough for making him that way.

It really didn't take long. Harry met Draco thrust for thrust, relentless in competition, excitement speeding through him as it did when he flew on his Firebolt. But this felt far fucking better than the Firebolt ever had, and Harry found himself laughing again when he could find the breath to do so, laughing for the pure joy and fun of it.

Draco caught his gaze, and Harry saw him open his mouth again, then close it, seeming to understand the laughter wasn't for his performance. He shut his eyes instead and sped up.

Harry felt rapture and joy and love and Draco pulling at him, trying to throw him off the edge.

For the first time ever, he really let himself go with them.

He shook as he soaked his belly and his groin, his body responding in a way that only catching the Snitch or thrumming with magic had ever made him do. The thought wandered through his haze: *So this is why people like having orgasms so much. They do feel good, don't they?*

Draco was still pushing inside him when Harry had done, and Harry didn't intend to relax just yet. Draco had told him to lie still and accept without giving, but Harry figured he'd already broken that rule when he sat up. He reached out, gripped Draco's shoulder with his hand, and pushed forward with all his might.

Draco's shoulders twisted and rolled like someone doing a Wronski Feint, and then he came, too, his head rolling back against Harry's wrist and his mouth open. And still beautiful, Harry thought, even as the darkness appeared to speed away from his face and leave it smeared with light.

He drew Draco towards him when he was done and kissed him thoroughly. Halfway through the snog, Draco recovered enough to join in. He pulled slowly out of Harry without breaking the kiss; Harry only noticed that he had when he rolled Harry over and flung a leg onto his hip.

“Are we done yet?” he asked.

And he would have accepted a yes answer, Harry could see that in his expression. He felt almost sorry for the one he gave.

“No fucking chance,” he answered, and had the satisfaction of seeing Draco’s face flood with delight before he closed in for another snog.

Draco woke to winter sunlight, and blinked slowly. He lay tangled with Harry around him in a bed that was not theirs. He’d assumed that the wild Dark had tossed them into their Slytherin bedroom, but it appeared not.

He lifted his head and looked slowly about, as much as he could with Harry resting on top of him, his back against Draco’s chest and his wild black hair obscuring the view with every snore he made. Draco took in the colors the sunlight showed, and then began to laugh.

That roused Harry, who murmured, “What?”

“We’re in an old room where they put discarded furniture,” Draco murmured into his ear, “in case they need it, since not every year has a Transfiguration professor competent enough to make comfortable furniture. We fucked on a Gryffindor bed last night.” He gestured to the soiled, dusty red hangings around them.

Harry snorted, and stretched, wincing as unexpected pains shot through his muscles. Draco couldn’t help being smug about that, even though he had quite a few aches himself. *He* had done that to Harry. He had made him let go—

No, that wasn’t quite true. He had made Harry come, yes. But Harry had done the same thing to him. What made this truly special was that Harry had broken his barriers and done as Draco asked because he *wanted* to, reveled in his own selfish pleasure, and refused to care what anyone else would think.

Draco no more expected every day to be like that than he expected every day to be Midwinter. But they had changed again, and if they turned backwards on the spiral, they would also return to this point.

He had never felt so self-confident, so self-satisfied, so violently sure in his life.

“Draco?”

He cocked his head at Harry.

Harry had braced himself on one elbow, his torso and head raised, though his lower body was still comfortably twined with Draco’s. He had a smile on his face that Draco had never seen before, and eyes that were full of light.

“I still think you’re beautiful,” he murmured.

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Chapterlette: A Collection of Glimpses

Lucius sat before his hearth in the study of Malfoy Manor and turned his cup of cold wine this way and that. He could have had the house elves mull it, or Transfigure it so that it retained all the alcohol of wine while having a considerably sweeter taste. But at this moment, he thought what he wanted, or should want, was harsh and unaltered reality.

He had failed.

He drank the wine, a long gulp that did not yield until the liquid threatened to choke him. Then he held the glass out in front of him and watched the fire spark through it, catching delicate, glorious colors in it that he did not deserve.

He had been wrong.

Another swallow of wine, this time nearly enough to finish the cup. Lucius felt his lip twitching, his head spinning with the advent of drunkenness. He would normally never do something like this, but he was within heavily warded walls, and a room where even the house elves knew better than to disturb him. But this was punishment, punishment for failing to recognize when

he had made a mistake. He had kept plunging forward, able to justify every error, able to say that, in truth, what he had done was not so very great a problem. It might even weave more opportunities for him. If the scheme with the Unspeakables failed, he would turn to Scrimgeour. If that one failed—but it would not, could not, when Unbreakable Vows bound them both—he would work his way back into Harry’s good graces. He would tame his son to hand again. Each failure to do so only meant another chance to move forward. He might have to alter his tactics, but that did not mean he had been *wrong*.

He saw now that he had.

He had committed the worst possible sin, one for which he had would have despised his own father if Abraxas had been either weak or foolish enough to do it. He had made Draco see him as unnecessary. There might have been moments when his son would be glad to rely on him, lean on his strength, but Lucius had taught him he couldn’t. So Draco had looked within and found his own strength instead.

He was dependent no longer. He was someone who had faced the Justification and survived it.

Lucius did not know what had led his son to make that decision. Oh, he could guess. It might be a matter of proving his worth to his partner, or wanting to demonstrate his courage. Or he could have wanted a Declaration ritual that Lucius absolutely could not tamper with. But there were other Declaration rituals that were beyond parental influence and still less risky. Lucius thought the risk was an inherent reason Draco had chosen the Justification.

But he could not imagine, still, what the compensation of it might have been.

Draco had become a person Lucius did not know, and that was dangerous.

Worse, he had seen Harry’s eyes shining as he watched him. At the time, Lucius had simply thought that meant Harry was infatuated with his son, and if he could gain Draco back, then he could win Harry back, too.

Now he recognized it for what it was. Harry admired Draco’s strength, and a man who did that would have no need for Lucius’s strength.

He was in a trap, a binding he could not get out of. And he had woven that trap of his own making. He would never be safe again. Even if he courted Harry and Draco back, and preserved the secrets the Unspeakables had blackmailed him on, he could not imagine what would happen if Harry and Draco found out that he had been the one to betray Hawthorn Parkinson’s condition to the Department of Mysteries.

Lucius drank more wine.

Narcissa could have been walking about Silver-Mirror, making preparations for their guests. It was not so very many more days before they would all arrive. And she knew her son was safe, so had no reason to worry over him.

She was not. Instead, she sat before the fire of the reading room where she liked to spend the most time and gazed into the flames, and smiled.

She had done it.

It had taken years and years of effort, years of maneuvering and arranging and yielding on less important matters and, rarely, outright confrontation. But she had done it. She had raised Draco as a wizard who could take his place on his own in wizarding society, and who could do it well enough to choose a ritual both his father and his partner would have disapproved of, did they know all the details. Draco was not relying on their approval. He had broken free of the chains that Narcissa had feared might bind him when she first saw how obsessed he was with Harry, the chains of doing nothing that went against Harry’s good opinion.

And now he had his father to serve as an example, perhaps even an example of failure, if Lucius pushed hard enough. He did not live to worship him as he had when he was eleven.

Narcissa could count her work done.

Oh, she would love seeing what happened in the future years, how Draco, and Harry too, continued their upward spiral, where it led them and what great things they would achieve. But if someone had cast the Killing Curse at her the moment Draco’s

successful Justification was finished, she could have died with a smile on her lips.

She found that she did not want to sit still after all. She stood and went to fetch herself wine, glorying in the sound of her own footsteps. Often, in Silver-Mirror, Narcissa found herself listening for ghosts, the ghosts of her sisters and cousins and younger childhood self.

For tonight, there were only her own.

Snape slowly tapped his glass stirring rod against the side of the cauldron, the final step in brewing the Sunflower Potion. A shimmer, and the potion bubbled and burred, and then quieted. Snape stepped away from the cauldron and drew off the heavy gloves that had protected his hands against stray droplets.

Somewhere in the midst of Hogwarts at this moment, or perhaps even just down the dungeon corridors in the middle of the Slytherin common room, his son was probably getting the fucking of his life.

Snape dropped the thought into an Occlumency pool. He had no wish to think it.

And he had no reason to think that this was bad, he told himself. He had seen the look on Harry's face throughout the day, the expression of self-discovery and absorption in a miracle. Though the Justification might have been what began Harry's intense attention to Draco, Snape did not think the end of the ritual would make it cease. This was a necessary chapter in his son's life, one that the woman who bore him would have denied him when his only commitment was serving his brother. That it had happened was a triumph for all of them. Snape could think that way, even if he did not wish to think of the details.

But his thoughts ranged beyond that, as they had a tendency to do. Snape knew it was a tendency that exasperated Joseph. His mind had worked this way for too many years for him to shut it off, however.

He had seen Draco, today, pierce through a barrier he did not think Harry had a name for. It was the barrier that kept Harry at least able to retreat from the problems of others, to make decisions like the one he had to kill the children under the Life-Web, to push ahead with sacrifices of himself that might cause others emotional suffering because it was the right thing to do.

Draco, if no one else, was inside that barrier now. Harry was twined with him. He would find emotional retreat from him very hard. And if Draco raised an objection against a sacrifice, Snape knew Harry would at least consider it.

Narcissa might approve of that, seeing that Draco's dependence on Harry was at last equally returned.

Snape did not know if he did.

He feared what might happen if Draco died in the war. He would have been concerned even in a time of peace, but this, with the emotional destruction of Harry that would follow in its wake...

Harry could easily forget about everything else in his life if Draco died, including the other people who loved him. He might seek to follow his partner, instead of doing as he had told Snape last year, and trying to detach himself enough from the deaths of those he loved that he could go on, and function, and fight.

That entwining with one another would only grow fiercer from this moment forward. Snape feared it was another mistake that he must allow his son to make.

It was dangerous in another way, too. Snape thought Draco might one day decide to detach himself and find another partner. No, it was not likely, but unlikelier things had happened. And that would destroy Harry as thoroughly as his death.

Love during wartime was never easy. Snape had reason to know. If it turned out that the ending of love during wartime happened —

Snape's gaze strayed across the room and locked on the cauldron full of purple potion he sometimes toyed with, adding more ingredients and seeing how potent he could make it without its boiling over or being utterly ruined.

It was now one of the deadliest poisons he has ever brewed, unlikely to be cured by anything short of a bezoar. Snape had at first imagined it applied to werewolves, but he would and could apply it elsewhere if Draco were ever...unwise.

Connor looked up curiously when Harry and Draco came into breakfast at the Great Hall the next morning. He hadn't been invited to the Justification, of course, since he was Declared Light; even Harry's presence, as undeclared, had tested the boundaries, apparently. But Peter had told him he would be able to sense Draco's Declaration after the successful completion of the ritual. Connor had wondered what it felt like.

Now he knew. It felt like a thousand irritating hands scratching at his skin, like the light flick of beetles' legs climbing up and down his arms. Connor grimaced and scratched, then forced his hand to still as Harry smiled and walked towards him. Draco followed. His gaze was too smug already. Connor would not show him any signs of discomfort.

"Good morning, brother."

Connor could feel his eyebrows rising in spite of himself. Harry sounded half-exuberant, as if he would break out into laughter any moment, and he *never* sounded like that. Even his greetings in the midst of joy were reserved, as if he didn't want to tempt evil by being too happy. But now his cheeks were flushed and his eyes shone.

Draco folded his arms and leaned one elbow on Harry's right shoulder. Harry leaned into him with a luxurious roll of his neck that made Connor stare. *Did Draco put some kind of spell on him? He just never does this!*

Then Draco caught his eye, smirking a little, coolly, and leaned forward more possessively on Harry, and Connor saw his expression past the swarming itch of the new Declaration.

He fucked Harry last night.

Connor sat there, blinking. He was not sure what stunned him more: what had happened, that Harry had allowed it, or that the effect still lingered afterward, when the ritual was over. He could see Harry going a bit wild in the presence of great magic. He tended to do that, since the magic called to his own. But *this*? This scene with Harry acting so much like a new lover, as if he were giddy, as if just—

As if just being around Draco makes him happy.

Draco makes him happy.

Connor stifled an enormous sigh. He had lost the right to play games with Draco, then, and try to antagonize him. He wasn't going to *bow* to the prat, and if he spouted stupid shit about purity of blood Connor was still going to let him know it was stupid shit. But Draco was a part of Harry's life, and he made him damn happy, and there weren't enough people who did that for Connor to have the right to drive one away.

Besides, he thought, he would get at least one funny moment out of this.

He stood and held out his hand to Draco. "Congratulations," he said solemnly.

Draco's eyes widened *most* gratifyingly. Connor let only a tiny smile out onto his face. *He didn't expect me to be the bigger man. He expected me to throw some fit about this. That means that if he reacts badly to this, he's the one at fault.*

Slowly, as if expecting something from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes to be hidden in his palm, Draco clasped his hand. Connor wrung his, never looking away from his eyes, trying to convey that he knew *exactly* what Draco had done with his brother last night—well, if not exactly, enough not to need any more details—and didn't hate it.

Draco looked extremely put out. Connor smiled at him one more time and sat down. "Congratulations to the both of you," he added to Harry.

Harry beamed at him and dragged Draco away to the Slytherin table. Draco looked over his shoulder a few times, as if he expected Connor to be sticking his tongue out at him.

Connor wasn't going to. He had better things to think about, given the new role Draco Malfoy was going to play in his life and the new role he was going to play in Draco's. There was what would have to happen if Draco ever hurt Harry, for instance. He recalled Hermione saying once that she'd found a spell that would tie someone's bollocks together behind their ears, and that she'd considered using it on Zacharias.

Connor thought he would owl her and ask to know the spell.

Just in case.

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Chapter Fifty-Five: A Wind-Drenched Christmas

“She *should*, if she just understood,” said Ginny, her cheeks flushing so much that Harry thought she would fall over. “But she won’t let us. She says that Christmas is a time for family, and Bill and Charlie and Percy are all coming home, so we have to be at the Burrow, too.” She tossed her hair. “Never mind that we could visit you in the morning and the Burrow later in the day!”

Harry thought Molly Weasley’s stubborn refusal to let Ron and Ginny spend Christmas Day with him and Connor stemmed less from love of family and more from worry about what her two youngest children might get up to around Dark wizards, but he didn’t want to tell Ginny that and make her more sour. “I’m sorry you can’t come,” he said instead, and held out the package he’d Levitated behind his back while she complained. “Happy Christmas anyway.”

She stared at him for a moment, absolutely astonished, then carefully unwrapped the gift. She was smiling by the time she had it halfway open, and looked up with a grin. “Thank you, Harry.” He’d got her Chaser’s gloves, made for clinging to the Quaffle better, and even hardening themselves into a stone-like substance if a Bludger tried to hit her hand. Harry felt it was a bit impersonal as a gift, but he still didn’t know Ginny all that well.

“Where’d you get *those*, Ginny?” Ron was coming down the stairs of the Gryffindor common room, his eyes riveted to the gloves, but he relaxed and gave Harry a nod when he saw him. Harry grinned ruefully and held out another package.

“I almost wish you hadn’t seen those,” he muttered, while Ron speedily unwrapped his package.

Ron gave a grunt of both understanding and happiness when he saw his own gloves, this time made for a Keeper, to cast extra warming charms on his hands; a Keeper frequently did less pure flying during the game than the other players, and their fingers could become paralyzed with the cold during autumn or winter matches. He nodded to Harry. “Thanks, mate.” He paused, as if embarrassed, and Harry realized that he probably didn’t have a gift for him.

“It’s all right, Ron,” Harry assured him. “It doesn’t matter. I do wish that you could come visit us for Christmas, but what you give Connor during the rest of the year—and what Ginny did for me when she came to Woodhouse—is too great to be repaid.” He nodded to the gloves. “This is just a small return, the only kind I can make.”

“You’re getting better at the noble speeches, Harry,” said Ginny, and her eyes shone with laughter. “Three years ago, that would have sounded as if you were oblivious to the implications of what you said. Now you actually look human.”

“Well, a large part of that is Draco,” said Harry, curious to see how they would react. Ron opened his mouth, then shut it again. Ginny just rolled her eyes.

“He’s important to you,” she said. “But a prat. He would have more friends if he didn’t act like such an idiot sometimes. Tell him that.”

“I don’t think he cares,” said Harry, startled to hear a little defensiveness leak into his voice, and got another roll of the eyes in return.

“I *know* he doesn’t,” Ginny pointed out patiently. “But then he can’t complain when people don’t fall down at his feet worshipping him the way he seems to want.”

And with that, Harry had to be content. Connor was down at dinner, and he would see him tomorrow when they went to Silver-Mirror for Christmas, anyway, so Harry was going to wait to give him his gift. He hugged both Ron and Ginny and left Gryffindor Tower, leaning against the stone of the wall for a moment as he closed his eyes.

He *did* feel different. Granted, it had been only three days since Draco’s Justification, so perhaps he couldn’t have expected the effects of the ritual to end yet. But this was still so unusual that he had to take notice of it. Contentment thrummed through every vein in his body, and when someone said something bad about Draco Harry found that he wanted to correct them immediately. And he kept noticing—well, beauty. The beauty was only on Draco’s face so far, for the most part, but his eyes tracked beams of sunlight across the floor of the Great Hall now, and just yesterday he’d halted in front of a painting and stared at it, enthralled for the first time with the colors in it.

Harry was a bit frightened to discover what he was like with his barriers down. Did this make him weaker? Surely such a fundamental change could not be *all* positive. And he should retain the ability to lift the barriers back again in case he was in a situation where he needed them, like a battle.

Perhaps the effect would recede with time, he told himself. He and Draco could spend a larger portion of time both together and in bed right now than usual, given the Christmas holidays. And that had to renewing Harry's near-obsessive interest in him. Yes, it would probably fade as they eased further away from the Justification.

He gave himself a brisk shake, and went to find Luna so he could give her her present.

Luna touched the stone of the wall, and listened gravely as she nodded. Yes, this large block was unhappy here among smaller ones. When the Founders raised Hogwarts, it had tried to tell them so, but none of them had the ability to listen to objects. So it had sat here in the walls ever since, unwanted and lonely. It needed to shrink, or the other blocks needed to grow larger, to accommodate it.

Luna stepped back and laid the book of spells she'd found in the library carefully on the floor, studying the incantations and drawings again. She *ought* to be able to adjust the size of the stone without altering the composition of the walls, if she'd read it correctly. If she did do something dangerous and made this section of wall waver, then the stones would tell her. Luna smiled. It was so nice, being able to listen to what things said. She was always surprised, and not a little saddened, that more people didn't try it for themselves.

She aimed her wand at the stone and whispered, "*Aliquantus.*"

A stream of pink light shot out of her wand and circled the block. It shuddered, and then began to resize itself. Luna watched with her breath bated, her wand moving back and forth now and then so that she could speed the shrinking of one side or slow the growth of another. The stone's cries of distress grew fainter and fainter, until it was finally a shape and size that worked well with the other stones. Luna ended the spell and reached out, running her fingers gently down it.

"Luna?"

Harry was there. Of course he was. He had the map of the school, and so he could find her if he wanted. Luna turned around and nodded to him. "Harry. You want your Christmas present now."

Harry paused as if startled, and then used his hand to push the glasses up his nose. "Er. No, I—I didn't know you had one for me, Luna." The Omen snake draped around his shoulders, whom Luna often saw in the Ravenclaw common room, cocked his head to look at her and uttered a long hiss. Harry hissed back, then listened to the response, and muffled a chuckle. "But Argutus says that I would be a fool not to accept it," he added.

"Of course you would," said Luna, and reached into a pocket of her robes, filtering her fingers past scraps of parchment and pebbles that she'd picked up because they remembered interesting things. She found the cord of the necklace she'd braided for Harry, and pulled it out. "These are gyrfalcon feathers," she told Harry. "Powerful protection, you know."

"Against what?"

He is annoyingly specific sometimes, Luna thought, but she was willing to forgive him for that. Most people tended to be annoyingly specific, unless they learned how to listen. "Against rumors and bad ideas," she said firmly, and then waited until he bowed his head so she could drape the necklace around his neck. Harry touched it lightly and smiled.

"I have a necklace for you, too, Luna," he said, and brought it out.

Luna reached out and took it, enchanted. The cord was of a thread she'd never seen before, but it had come from a robe in the first place—perhaps a piece of clothing from one of Harry's Black houses, of the kind that nobody wove any more. There were sunflower petals hanging on the cord, charmed to stay fresh. Sunflowers were a way of wishing someone good luck, Luna knew, the ability to flare brilliantly even in the midst of wind and crisis. She was pleased Harry had thought of them.

But what made it very special was that Harry had braided pieces of his own hair among the flower petals. Luna touched one dark curl, and nodded. It gave her visions of being on Harry's head and bobbing and dipping as he soared past a Bludger. It was very brave of him, giving this up, when one's hair could be used against one in so many dangerous potions and spells.

“Thank you, Harry,” she said. She Levitated the necklace up over her head and settled it at her throat. That way, it would be light and airy in the future, and less likely to strangle her. “I wish you good luck at conquering the Rotfang Conspiracy.”

For just a moment, Harry looked confused. But he didn't pursue the matter and then look bored by her explanation, which Luna had known to happen many times, and which always disappointed her. Conspiracies were like objects; they would be much more fascinating if people just listened. “Thanks, Luna,” he said. “Good luck at—adjusting the size of rocks in the tunnels?”

“Yes,” said Luna. “The Founders didn't always put Hogwarts together right, you know. Sometimes there's a sound of a stone crying out in pain, or a room crying because people are practicing too many of the same kinds of spells in it. Then I have to help.” She gave Harry a severe glance. Even he wasn't beyond censure for this kind of thing. “Your own robes would be pleased if you could get a left hand. They're tired of flopping over your left wrist.”

“Er,” said Harry.

Luna listened for a moment, then smiled. “Oh, but you *are* planning to get a left hand,” she said. “That's good. And Harry? I'm very pleased that you and Draco Malfoy are sharing a bed. That's nice for both of you. Are you redistributing your weight evenly across it when you bounce? Because that's important, you know, to be sure that the bed doesn't always get tired of having the same weight on every spring.”

Harry's face was very red. Luna wondered in concern if a Heat Flea had bitten him. She was about to offer the incantation that could check when Harry said, in a strangled voice, “Happy Christmas, Luna,” and beat a retreat.

Luna made a careful note to check for Heat Fleas later, and went back to work.

Harry woke slowly. He nearly panicked for a moment, before remembering they didn't have to hurry to Silver-Mirror; instead, he, Draco, Connor, Peter, Owen, Syrinx, and Snape had come to Silver-Mirror last night, had a late dinner with Narcissa, and gone to bed. Draco had said that he didn't want to run around in the morning the way they'd had to do last year, and this was better.

His turning over and stretching woke Draco, who liked to sleep with both arms and legs tucked around him lately, as if he were a monkey. It made Harry think words like “adorable,” which he didn't share aloud. Draco liked to be told he was beautiful, but there were certain lines to be drawn even in that.

“Happy Christmas,” Draco whispered, and leaned forward to snog him.

Harry returned it eagerly enough. He didn't know what time it was, and he wasn't about to look away from the kiss to cast a *Tempus* charm. He rolled slowly over so that he lay half on top of Draco, and slipped one hand under his pyjama shirt.

The door flung open.

Harry made a muffled shriek, and, luckily, drew back before he could bite Draco's tongue, though it was a near thing. He turned around and glared at Connor, who stood in the doorway with red and white sparks leaping from his wand, grinning like Sirius in a really good mood.

“What are you *doing*?” Harry demanded.

“What is *he* doing?” Draco said at approximately the same moment, attempting to hide his nakedness behind Harry. Harry clasped his hand and glared at his brother, who didn't go away.

“It's time to come downstairs and open gifts,” Connor announced solemnly. “And I knew that you were awake because I saw Draco go outside earlier.” He nodded to Draco as casually as if they were already brothers-in-law and Connor walked in on scenes like this all the time. “You went outside to watch the sunrise with your mother, didn't you? A beautiful custom. And one that makes you wake up early. I was generous and let you have an extra three hours of sleep. You should thank me, really. All this lying around in bed all day doesn't get gifts opened.”

He shut the door with a bang. Harry blinked at Draco. Draco blinked at Harry.

“I suppose we should go downstairs,” said Harry reluctantly. “Or he's liable to come back in here.”

Connor leaned against the doorway in the hall and tried to keep his laughter down. He wondered how long it would be before Harry and Draco worked out that he had a ward up which alerted him when they were getting too “intimate,” so that he could innocently interrupt them.

It had taken him only a few days to work out that just because he couldn't antagonize Draco any more didn't mean he had to have less fun. He now had a brother to tease. If he was having sex, Harry obviously wasn't that fragile on the subject any more, and he could take a *lot* of teasing. At the same time, he was unlikely to tease back for a while, until he grew more comfortable with the notion that he was not only having sex, other people knew that he was.

Connor liked to think of it as part of his brotherly duties in making sure that Harry could have at least a somewhat sane and normal life.

He trotted downstairs, chortling, and met the impatient gazes around the tree with a satisfied smile. “They should be down soon,” he said.

And if they aren't, then I'll take Snape with me when I fetch them.

Harry watched Connor's face closely as his magic Levitated gifts from under the trees, slinging them to their owners. He saw his brother blink and let his face fall a little when he realized that Harry apparently had no gift for him.

“Sorry for not putting this with the others, Connor,” Harry said, clearly enough that everyone heard. “But there's no way that you wouldn't have guessed immediately what it was, no matter how hard I tried to wrap it.” He turned his attention to the doorway and sent out a silent *Accio*. Connor's gift hurried from the obscure room where Harry had put it, one close beside Neptune Black's paintings of other worlds, and through the doorway.

Connor's face when he saw it made everything worthwhile—even, Harry thought, his interrupting them this morning. His hands trembled as he settled the Firebolt on his lap and stroked it, and his glance towards Harry had turned so bright that it really seemed to outshine most of what was in the room.

Harry grinned. “Happy Christmas, Connor.”

Connor gazed dreamily at the broom, as he might have at Parvati. Harry leaned back against Draco's shoulder, and just barely restrained the impulse to kiss him, not wanting to look away from his brother's glowing face. It had been obvious that Connor was jealous of his Firebolt, though he'd tried not to be. And why shouldn't he have a good broom? He was playing Quidditch this year, while Harry wasn't. He both needed and wanted it more.

“That cost lots of Galleons,” Draco hissed in his ear. “Even now.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed simply.

“Mine should be at least as good,” Draco said firmly.

Harry raised himself on his elbow so he could see Draco's face. “It's not as expensive,” he said. “But I think it's even better. Money isn't the only measure of worth, Draco. You've helped teach me that as much as anyone else.”

Draco blinked, looking both stunned and cautiously pleased, and then unwrapped his gift. Harry watched his face for the moment when he realized what it was. There it was—the flicker of a line across his brow, a sharply indrawn breath, and shadows in his eyes.

“A Pensieve,” he whispered. “But it's already full.”

Harry nodded. The Pensieve had a containment spell on it that kept the silver liquid inside from sliding out. “It's my memories of some of the most painful times in my life,” he said. “And the most joyful.” He thought of the perfect wording a moment later, and shook his head ruefully. “The most *intense*, perhaps I should say. And it's bound to that spell you invented, the one that lets you go inside someone else's memory and feel their mindset.”

Draco's stare at him demanded more information.

Harry kissed him, not caring for the fact that Draco's mother and his guardian sat right across the room. "I've still hidden some things from you," he whispered. "The way I felt about my parents' trial, for example. And some others were always mysterious. I don't think you've ever really understood the way I felt about Connor in first year. I don't want those to be secrets anymore, Draco. So here you are. Whatever you want to know about me, it should be in there. If it isn't, ask."

Draco made an incoherent noise and set the Pensieve aside before lunging forward and seizing him in a kiss. Harry almost let himself be pushed flat before he heard Snape clear his throat.

"Perhaps," Snape said, in a voice so dry it reminded Harry of a desert, "we can continue with this undignified orgy of gift-giving and save the other parts of the undignified orgy for later?"

Harry heard Connor laugh, and had his suspicions about the way his brother had come bursting in on them that morning. He sat back up, clearing his throat, and trying to smooth his hair flat, while he looked at Snape. Understanding the silent command, Snape opened the wrapped package in his lap.

He went very still.

Harry took a deep breath. This was another of those risky gifts, like the forgiveness letter he'd written to Snape last year. It seemed that their relationship was doomed to be so volatile they'd never give each other normal presents. Of course, Harry thought, if they did reach the sock-trading stage they would probably be on the verge of never speaking to one another again.

Snape opened the book, and flipped through it, looking, it seemed, at each page, or at least each clump of pages. Harry waited, his heart loud in his throat and Draco's hand on his shoulder, just at that moment, most welcome.

"Some of these pages near the end are blank," Snape said at last.

Harry cleared his throat. "Ah—those are supposed to be for you to write what works well for us," he said. "And I have no doubt that you could write a book of your own on the subject, at this point."

Snape met his eyes. Harry looked back as fearlessly as he could when fear was trying to eat him alive. The gift—a book called, *What To Do With a Powerful Wizard?: Handling Relationships Between Magically Strong Parents and Children*—was less literal and more symbolic. Harry hoped the symbolism, of his desire to consider Snape a parent and not just a guardian, was actually obvious.

From Snape's small smile a moment later, he supposed it was either so, or Snape had read the reason out of his eyes with Legilimency.

"Thank you, Harry." Snape put the book aside. The gesture might have looked casual to anyone else, but Harry had seen the way his hands were trembling. He relaxed.

The other gifts went more easily; He'd got books for Peter, Narcissa, Owen, and Syrinx, all on various subjects. Peter's was the one that might have been most sensitive, given that it documented wood-carving techniques developed in the years he was in Azkaban, but it only made him caress the cover and look wistful. Syrinx had already opened her book, which was about advanced training for war wizards, and didn't look inclined to pay attention to anything else.

That done, the rest of the gift-giving could begin. Harry wasn't very surprised to open a book on art appreciation from Peter. Now that he could see beauty in physical objects, he suspected Peter would patiently tutor him into seeing beauty in wooden carvings, paintings, murals, and the like. Harry wondered if his days of draining pretty but useless Black artifacts for their magic were over.

Narcissa gave him a curious object that felt heavy in Harry's arms, but slipped and slithered as he unrolled it, so that it took him a long moment to see what it really was. He smiled, embarrassed, over the top of it when he caught a glimpse of "Sirius" and "Regulus" and realized its nature: a copy of the Black family tapestry with his name added. It wasn't magical, so it wouldn't change to reflect the living and dead status of members of the family as the original did, but it did show him bound to Regulus with a dashed silver line, as adopted heir.

"Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy," he said, and she corrected him to Narcissa before he really finished, glancing at him severely. Harry could almost see the wheels in her head turning. *If he will acknowledge himself as adopted Black heir, perhaps he will begin to acknowledge himself as my son-in-law.*

The tapestry was a beautiful gift, woven from some pure black fabric Harry didn't know and with the names done in silver, but it

made Harry miss Regulus something fierce. He put it carefully aside before he turned to the next gift, Owen's.

It was a wooden plaque, empty but for what looked like a depiction of the most recent generation of Rosier-Henlins. Harry blinked at it, then turned to look at Owen in puzzlement.

Owen met his gaze calmly enough. "My mother is pregnant," he said. "I told you that. She's due to deliver in three months. She'd like you to be godfather for the child, Harry. Or—well, if you'll accept, something a bit more permanent than that. An office much like the one you're performing for Marian Bulstrode, where you show my little sibling from the first day he or she exists that powerful magic isn't something to be feared, or revered. The world's changing. My mother wants her daughter or son to grow up in the world as it is, not as it was."

Harry thought he knew what the plaque was. "And if I agree, then it changes to reflect my new status in relation to your family?"

Owen nodded.

Harry went on looking at him for a moment more. He hadn't had as much time to spend with his sworn companions as he'd like. He still barely knew Syrinx. And he hadn't known Michael well enough to prevent the situation that arose with Draco. It was something he'd like to change.

"Thank you, Owen," he said at last. "I'd be honored." He faced the plaque and breathed on it, vaguely remembering that he had to do something like that. Some of the plaques were so sensitive that they picked up the magic from the sound of the words alone, but most needed a more concentrated blast of air. "I accept."

The plaque shimmered, and an invisible hand carved his name into the wood. Harry was startled to see that three lines appeared with it. One dashed one linked him to Medusa's name, and Harry guessed that would be the one signifying his choice to stand in for the child. A thicker, curvier one curled from him to Owen—the sworn companion bond. Harry had no clue what to make of the thin line that curled about the spot on the plaque beneath Medusa and Charles that the child's name would presumably fill.

Owen came and looked over his shoulder. "Oh," he said, sounding surprised. "I didn't know my mother did that. She evidently wants you to name the child."

"She *what*?" Harry was immediately apprehensive. The thought of saddling a wizarding child with something unfortunate for the rest of his or her life immediately filled his thoughts. What if he did it wrong? What if he violated some naming tradition in the Rosier-Henlin family that he knew nothing about? What if—

Owen's hand squeezed his shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry about it," he murmured. "I'm sure you'll do just fine."

Harry, though not so sure, nodded, and opened Syrinx's gift. *A shoe?* After a moment, Harry understood. War wizards were supposed to own few possessions, at least during this stage of their training. Like independent action and unimpeded emotion, the right to them was something they gave up, and then regained at the end of their training. Syrinx would give some of her possessions as gifts, as much to say that she valued the people who received them as for any practical benefit.

When he looked at Syrinx, she was smiling at him. "It's charmed to leap up and kick your enemies in the jaw," she said. "It should break the jaw if I did the charm right." A tremor of anxiety crossed her brow. "I'm sure I did."

"Uh—thanks." Harry set the shoe cautiously on top of the Rosier-Henlin plaque. Luckily, it didn't appear to think the plaque was an enemy.

From Connor, he received a watch made of bronze, which whirled with three-dimensional representations of the planets when he opened it. Connor grinned at him. "Brilliant, isn't it?" he asked. "I found it in Lux Aeterna, behind a ward. It lets the current Potter heir know when the bearer is in danger."

"And what else?" Harry could feel a good deal of concentrated magic in the watch, though not clearly enough to tell what it did.

Connor shrugged, more interested in Peter's gift for him, a book on Animagus training. "Don't know."

Harry thought it wouldn't be a good idea to wear the watch as yet. He wrapped it around the shoe, then took a good look at the gifts from Snape and Draco.

Looking told him nothing. Snape had filled his box with soft parchment, from the sound, so that Harry couldn't tell what it was from the shape. He opened it, and exclaimed softly. "I didn't think you brewed this, sir," he said, tilting the vial he uncovered

from side to side. The golden shine clearly proclaimed the potion to be Felix Felicis, which Harry had never tried to make himself; one slight mistake in the brewing and things would go even worse than they usually did with a volatile potion.

Snape snorted.

Harry glanced at him, and was surprised to note a faint red tinge to his cheeks. *He's...embarrassed?* "Thank you, sir," he said. "Really."

Snape nodded stiffly and looked away. Harry decided he shouldn't call any more attention to it. Snape was against potions like Felix Felicis as much as he was against love potions, at least on the surface; he might not be *fair*, but that didn't mean he would approve of a luck brew that was essentially a way of cheating the odds. Harry carefully slid the vial back into its parchment, and tried to bury his own emotions, as he thought about what it meant that Snape believed that and yet had brewed the potion anyway.

When he opened Draco's gift, he didn't understand at first. The object hummed with concentrated magic, but it appeared to be a perfectly ordinary mirror. Harry turned it back and forth, and still could see only his own face in it. The frame was beautiful, carved ivory with small curlicues around tiny pearls, but had no sigil or lettering that said what it did. Harry gave Draco a doubtful look.

Draco smiled at him, and cupped his hand around the back of Harry's neck, bending his face towards the mirror. "There," he breathed. "What do you see?"

Harry peered close, obediently, muttering under his breath the whole while. "Just myself," he said.

And then he gasped as the image rippled and changed, and color appeared to flow from the side, where Draco had just touched the frame. What was left, when the ripples settled, was—

No.

Harry tried to put the mirror down. Draco wouldn't let him, wouldn't release his grip on either the frame or the nape of Harry's neck. His murmuring in Harry's ear sounded half-feverish.

"*Yes*. That's what I see when I look at you, Harry. When just one person is touching it, it reflects what that person thinks of the object in the glass. But when someone else touches it, then it asserts *his* reality. And you're beautiful to me. You are." Draco kissed his ear.

Harry tried to turn away from the image, but it was hard. The face—that wasn't *his*. It couldn't be. It irradiated his eyes, his hair, practically his skin with light as he had thought darkness irradiated Draco's face on the day of the Justification. He was fascinated by the picture, but it wasn't him. It couldn't be.

He buried his face in Draco's robe, overwhelmed.

"It's all right, Harry," Draco crooned into his ear. "Take as long as you need to get used to this." His free hand swept over Harry's forehead, tugging at his hair now and then. "We've already started on that road. You can admit I'm beautiful. I've seen you staring at some things as if noticing them for the first time. It'll come, Harry. You might even acknowledge yourself as beautiful in a few years without prompting, but I want you to know exactly how I see you."

Harry managed to murmur his thanks, though still without looking up. He was half-afraid to meet Draco's eyes at this moment, and see the burning, possessive pleasure in them.

Draco kissed him again. "Happy Christmas," he said into Harry's skin, more than his ear.

Connor saved the moment, or at least saved his brother from making a right idiot of himself. "We still have some time before the others come," he said brightly, impatiently. And he was right, Harry knew; his other allies would be arriving later that afternoon, delaying because they wanted to spend Christmas morning with their own families or, in Hawthorn's case, because last night had been the full moon and she would need time to recover. "Let's go flying in the wind-pool!"

Harry choked, especially when he heard Draco's indignant mutter about not having a broom behind him. He kissed Draco's chest and sat up, still careful to avoid both his boyfriend's eyes and the mirror. Some changes were harder than others.

Harry woke that night with a start. For a long moment, he lay in his bed, skin tingling, and tried to think what could have awakened him. It wasn't Draco, who rushed soft snores into his ear without moving. And it definitely wasn't Connor sneaking in to play a prank; when Harry chanced a look at the door, it was firmly closed.

But *something* had changed.

A bit unnerved, and wondering if someone had managed to Apparate in past Silver-Mirror's wards, Harry rolled gently from under Draco's guardian arm. Draco turned and hugged the pillow instead. Harry lingered to stroke his cheek and shake his head; he would be back, hopefully, before the cold woke Draco up.

He made his way carefully down the stairs. The celebration with his allies had been louder and more raucous than Harry had expected, if only because Thomas had brought his children along, and Marian Bulstrode could walk now. A child nearly two years old with accidental magic not fully under control, and utterly unafraid of any Black artifacts or magic from the adults, could, Harry had discovered, get into quite a bit of trouble. And then Thomas had stayed for a long time talking about how he had received an invitation to visit Malfoy Manor from Lucius, but had not gone because he was busy writing an article on centaur magic and in the midst of some delicate research. It had been entertaining, but had distracted Harry from helping to clean up the rubbish. He hoped nothing had been left on the stairs.

He reached the main room of Silver-Mirror, lit as always by the golden pool overhead that forever sent its drops of flame down to fill the lamps, and looked cautiously about. No one lunged out of the shadows at him brandishing a wand. Harry frowned.

Then he heard a voice, familiar and not heard in far too long, say, "Harry?"

Heart pounding, he turned. Regulus stood next to one of the paintings, his hand resting lightly on the wall beside it, his face widening into a smile as Harry watched.

He might have repeated Harry's name, but if so, Harry didn't hear it, since he'd practically levitated across the room and gathered Regulus into a hug. Regulus lost his breath, then got it back again long enough to laugh, and returned the embrace.

Harry buried his head against Regulus's chest, silly tears of gratitude making his shirt damp. He hadn't dared think too much about what was probably happening to Regulus in the world of the paintings. He was gone, and there was nothing Harry could do to help him but make sure the Black houses and artifacts were taken care of properly in the meantime. No way to reach him, no way to know if he had succeeded or failed in his quests to heal from the infection around his Dark Mark and to find out what the Slytherin locket had been to Voldemort.

No way to know, but now he was back, alive, warm, real, in Harry's arms. He was *back*.

Regulus chuckled above him. "I was automatically trying to read your thoughts and learn what had happened since I was last home," he whispered. "Sometimes I forget that I have a body, even now."

"I'll tell you," said Harry, pulling back and staring into his face, dazed with joy. "I'll be happy to tell you. But you tell me something first." He took a deep breath. "Did your healing go well?"

"It did." Regulus's face was shadowed for a moment, but it couldn't restrain the smile that burst forth. "The infection in my Mark is cured."

"Then I don't care about anything else right now," Harry said firmly, and clung to him again.

He knew Regulus had probably had disturbing things happen to him, and found disturbing things out. It was there in the shadows around his eyes and his mouth if nowhere else. And he knew he probably wouldn't like hearing some of those things, that Regulus might be the bearer of bad news.

For now, he didn't care. He didn't care about anything but the fact that Regulus was there, one heavy hand stroking his spine, here and back and *home*.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Six: Horcruxes

"But he might not be the real Regulus." Draco sounded calm, but it was obvious that his voice wavered on the edge of breaking apart into shards of anger and concern.

Harry snorted and looked over his shoulder. He'd been trying to adjust his robe in such a way that the collar hid all the bite marks on his neck, and in the end, he'd had to give up. Some of them were simply too high. And now he needed to stop thinking about how he'd received them, or he was going to have a problem on his hands. He gave a little shudder and focused his mind. "I suppose that he's the unreal Regulus then?"

Draco crossed the room and put his hands on Harry's shoulders, staring into his eyes. "You don't know what he might have encountered in those paintings," he said. "You said yourself that you didn't know exactly how they worked or where they led."

"No one does, though," Harry pointed out. "None of the Blacks ever explored them completely. Regulus knows the functions of a few—the one where he originally learned of the locket, for example, and the painting where he went to be healed. He told me it was dangerous at the time. I still agreed to let him go, since his infected Dark Mark was more of a threat to his life than anything else could be at that point. And I'm sure that if there was a danger of one of them sending back a copy of him that only looked and moved and spoke and felt like the real thing, he would have told me."

"Maybe he didn't know," Draco pointed out quietly, and ran his finger over the bite mark low on the side of Harry's neck. Harry bit his tongue to keep from responding. "Did you see what painting he came out of?"

Harry shook his head. "I only felt a twitch in the wards, and woke up and went down to see what had happened. He was standing in the gallery when I turned around. What I felt was him returning."

Draco tucked his arms around Harry and put his chin on his shoulder. "I still want to sit with you when you meet with him, to learn this important information, whatever it is," he said. "Will you let me do that?"

"Of course," said Harry, and kept to himself the thought that Draco could have achieved that without all these ridiculous suspicions about Regulus.

He *knew* that was Regulus. Apart from anything else, he had felt the way the wards danced around him, spinning a web to welcome the Black heir back into the houses. Harry was legal heir, but Regulus had a history of blood and magic with Silver-Mirror, had spent hours of his childhood here, and knew the paintings with a bone-deep wisdom that Harry hadn't had the need to experience yet. It was inevitable that the house would rejoice to see him come back, and would reject an impostor, or at least let Harry know from its reaction that he wasn't the true Regulus.

Sometimes, Draco is simply too paranoid.

Snape had gone very still when Harry told him that morning that Regulus had returned, and in some part of himself, he did not think the stillness had ended, even though he had stood up and moved around the room more than once since then. He had not gone down for breakfast, not that anyone would compel him to the morning after Christmas. He had spent most of his time sitting on his chair and staring out the window that gave an enchanted view of a small wood crowded with leafless trees.

Someone knocked on his door.

Snape took a deep breath, and shook his head, and stood. He had avoided Regulus because he did not want the other man to see the past written in his eyes. Snape had lived through scenes in his dreams that made him wary of how he would behave around Regulus. He had lived one life in these last few months, and Regulus had lived another. It was not fair to expect Regulus to act as Snape would inevitably expect him to act, not fair to saddle a friend with memories of the time when their friendship had been different from what it was now.

Joseph would undoubtedly say he was being cowardly. But Joseph was not here.

Snape opened the door, and nodded to Regulus. Regulus gave him a smile that lit his gray eyes as though he were the second coming of Sirius Black playing a prank. That steadied Snape, a little. If he thought of Regulus as an incarnation of his brother, he could retain an emotional distance from him.

"Severus." And then Regulus did the impossible, and hugged him.

Snape stood rigid for long moments before he realized Regulus was not going to stop the embrace until he returned it. Uncomfortable, he did so, and then slipped free of his arms as soon as he could.

“Severus?”

Snape wished he would stop using that name. It reminded him too keenly of the dreams. But he wished even more that he was not acting like such a coward, so he turned around and nodded to Regulus, and let himself smile the creaky almost-smile he had achieved in the weeks before Regulus went into the paintings. “Hello.”

“You made me wait long enough for that.” Regulus went sprawling into one of the room’s large padded chairs. Snape could almost hear the ghosts of Slytherin Prefects gone scolding him for his inability to maintain a proper posture. “Harry’s told me a little about the Midsummer battle and the Sanctuary, but he said that the parts concerning you were yours to tell. So. Talk.” He fixed a demanding gaze on Snape.

Snape took a seat across from him. Perhaps he could last through this, after all. At the very least, he would make Regulus see why he was acting so strangely, and, perhaps, in common agreement, they could find their way back to a common footing.

“The Sanctuary forces healing on those who come to it,” he said, and heard his sneer soak his voice. “Whether or not they want it.”

“But you needed it,” said Regulus.

Snape breathed through his teeth, and was reminded of why he had always found it particularly difficult to talk to Regulus in this mood. Sirius Black had a malicious edge to his amusement, not so far from what a Slytherin might achieve. Regulus was no wide-eyed innocent, but he could and did act obtuse to subtler meanings, as now, and cling to what he saw as reality.

“Whether or not I needed it is hardly the question,” Snape said sharply. “I had lived without it.”

“Not well.”

His teeth ground down hard enough to make an audible noise, and Regulus gave a low whistle of sympathy. “It must have been hard,” he said, bouncing one hand up and down on his knee, “to be with people you could neither bedazzle with your bollocks about being fine nor scare away.”

Snape wished he knew the actual Evil Eye, the ancient ability to harm someone through a baleful gaze. “I had dreams,” he said. “I could have taken Dreamless Sleep to avoid them. I did not. But they were hard to bear.”

“Dreams?” Regulus tilted his head, eyebrows raising.

“Memories.” Snape told him something he would have preferred to keep to himself, then, because he could not stand the sharply skeptical expression on Regulus’s face, as though dreams should be something anyone could bear. “Memories of the time I spent as a Death Eater, in fact. Currently, I’ve dreamed myself to the point where you went after that damned *locket* and the Dark Lord tortured me because he thought I knew something about it.”

Regulus sucked in a startled breath and sat back in his chair. Snape’s bitter satisfaction at having made an impact on him did not last for long. This was a weakness, a crack in his façade. He should have borne it in silence. He did not want Regulus knowing of this. Joseph was the utmost audience he could tolerate for the dreams, and Joseph knew what they meant and talked through them with him. Snape turned away.

“You know why I didn’t tell you anything,” Regulus whispered, his voice amazingly soft. “You *know*, Severus. I wasn’t sure of your loyalties, and I had to succeed, but it was more than that. I didn’t want you to suffer death or worse torture than you did if you had known something and not been able to keep it away from his Legilimency.”

“By that time,” Snape said, not looking at him, “I had concealed from him that I had reported to the Order of the Phoenix for more than a year.”

Regulus snorted. “Concealed it so well I had no idea.” His hand made a sharp impact on something that was either the chair arm or the useless, delicate ornamental table some idiot had thought to stand beside the chair. “You were an *excellent* actor, Severus, remember? It’s just that sometimes you chose to deploy those skills against your friends as well as your enemies, and when that happened, then no one could tell the difference. Friend or enemy.”

He cut off. Snape sat in silence, staring at the floor. He could feel Regulus staring at him.

“I’m sorry for your having to relive that,” Regulus offered at last, quietly. “But, believe me, Severus, I don’t think you’re weak

for doing that, and I don't care how it influences your behavior towards me.”

Snape could feel his shoulders tense.

“We're friends,” said Regulus. “We were friends then, even though you never wanted to call it so. And we're friends now. I just came back from—from learning disturbing things, disturbing things that I'm about to go tell Harry.” The note of sorrow slipping into his voice was so deep that Snape had no choice but to turn and look at him. His face was tired, long circles slipping under his eyes like afternoon shadows. “I want a friend. I need a friend.”

“I am changed,” Snape warned him, with some difficulty, and then reconsidered. “No. I am changing. I am not comfortable company—“

“When were you ever?” And Regulus had the gall to smile at him.

Snape shook his head, frustrated. “No. I was such uncomfortable company for a time that I struck at one of Harry's werewolves, Regulus. And I acted not like his guardian, but like another helpless child that Harry had to take care of. We're making steps back in the direction of father and son now, but—“

“I know you're changing,” Regulus interrupted him, calm. “Everyone changes all the time, Severus. What's finally happened is that you've been forced to notice.” He offered his arm. “Now. I know Draco will have insisted on hearing what I have to say to Harry. I think it's only appropriate that his father should be there with him, too, to comfort him in this time of crisis.”

Snape rolled his eyes, but took Regulus's elbow. If he did not, he knew Regulus would follow him down the stairs, stubbornly offering his arm all the way and making him look absolutely ridiculous.

Then his ears caught up with his brain, and he halted. “*What* time of crisis?” he demanded, his eyes flitting over Regulus's face. “What exactly did you learn in those paintings?”

Regulus gave a faint, bitter smile more like his old self as a Death Eater than Severus had seen in years—at least in waking life. “Bad news,” he said.

Regulus had asked to speak to him in one of Silver-Mirror's studies, this one devoted to books on Dark applications for Light spells. Harry had largely stripped one particular shelf on healing magic, when he had thought that the Death Eaters might try to turn healing spells against them on the battlefield, but the other books were still there. Harry circled them, looking for something interesting, while Draco remained near the door, seated in a chair that faced it.

A loud gasp from him made Harry whirl around, his magic flaring. He saw Snape and Regulus paused in the doorway, staring at Draco, who had risen to his feet and aimed his wand.

At Regulus, Harry realized, in exasperation. He sighed and took a step forward. “Draco—“

“Look at the floor, Harry.” Draco's voice was tight and strangled. “At his shadow.”

Harry looked. He blinked when he realized that Regulus's shadow did seem thin and stretched, but that was probably the effect of the numerous lamps that lit the study. He shrugged. “What? Draco, I don't—“

Regulus took a step forward.

Harry saw it then. Regulus's shadow followed him obediently, like a good shadow should, but it did not have a human form anymore. Instead, a black dog paced him.

A Grim. Omen of death.

Harry raised his eyes to Regulus's face and stared. Regulus had stopped walking, and was gazing calmly at him, ignoring Draco's wand, ignoring the way that Snape had disengaged his arm and stepped away from him, snarling.

“I was always going to tell you about this,” Regulus began. “I just didn't think last night was the appropriate time. I wanted last night to be a time of joy, Harry, for a few hours.” His smile was the saddest Harry had ever seen him give. “Before the joy had to pass.”

“He’s lying,” Draco hissed. “He’s not the real Regulus. *Look* at him, Harry. Would the real Regulus ever sound that way? Look like that?”

Harry stood gazing into Regulus’s eyes instead of answering Draco. And he still saw the light he was looking for in those gray eyes, the spark of the man he knew. He was still sure this was the real Regulus, but—

“He would if he had to grow up, Draco,” Harry said softly, never breaking eye contact with Regulus. “If he met something in the paintings that changed his world as he knew it.” He paused a long moment, then said, “But you should explain the dog shadow.”

“I will.” Regulus moved to stand in front of a triangle of chairs. “If you gentlemen will sit down?”

Snape did, but with a look of profound and personal betrayal on his face that made Harry wince and glance away. Draco remained standing. Harry stepped up behind him and put his hand on Draco’s right shoulder, stroking gently and murmuring nonsense soothing words. Draco shuddered and tipped onto his heels, molding his back to Harry’s chest. He didn’t lower the wand, but at least Harry was sure he would no longer fire a curse at a moment’s notice.

He nodded at Regulus.

Regulus took a deep breath and reached for his left sleeve, jerking it up. Then he held out his arm and turned it to face Harry.

Harry had feared to see the Dark Mark radiating with lines of infection, not cured after all, even though Regulus had told him last night it was. But the Mark wasn’t radiating anything. It would have been difficult for that to happen when the Mark was gone.

Instead, the same sleek black as the snake and skull had been, a dog stalked Regulus’s left forearm. The design was incredibly well-drawn, Harry had to admit. He could see individual bits of fur, and the dog’s—the Grim’s—eyes were dark pits it was uncomfortable to look at.

“The first painting cured me of my infection,” Regulus said softly. “That was quite true, Harry. The second—“ He cast a glance at Draco and Snape. “There is little I can tell you about its nature in front of people who aren’t the Black heirs. I told you that it was called the execution picture.”

“It killed you, then,” Draco said, and started pulling against Harry’s hand again, trying to get between him and Regulus. “It killed you and sent your dead body back in place of the *real* Regulus. I knew it.”

Regulus’s face registered surprise for a moment, before he barked laughter. Harry thought the echoes went on a bit too long, as if there were a dog howling somewhere, faint and far away. “You take me for an Inferius? No, Draco. I did not die. I met Death.”

“What was it like?” Harry asked, unable to keep his eyes from moving back and forth between Regulus’s dog shadow and dog Mark.

“As I said, I’m limited in what I can tell you with this audience,” Regulus murmured. “But in this case, the appropriate word is *she*. She is female in that world the painting leads to, Harry. And very, very cruel.”

He shuddered, and then shook his head and announced, “If neither of you is going to sit down, I will.” He took the chair nearest Snape, not seeming to notice the other man’s fixed stare. Draco’s wand tracked him. Harry tried to step away and sit down in the other chair, but Draco’s free hand tightened on his robe collar. Harry rolled his eyes and stood still. *If it makes him feel better.*

“She changed your shadow and your Mark?” Harry asked.

Regulus nodded. “So I couldn’t forget our bargain. She made me a trade, Harry. I can’t tell you all the terms. As I said, wrong audience. But she gave me the knowledge I sought, in return for this.” He held up his left arm again, and the Grim seemed to writhe and bend as Harry watched. “I’m marked as Death’s own, now. When I feel the call in the Mark, I have to obey it.” He took a deep breath, visibly bracing himself. “When she calls me on to die, I have to go.”

Harry clenched his fist, making Draco murmur and shift at the tight hold Harry had on his robe. “And is it the necromancer’s gift?” he asked. “Do you know when you’re going to die, and you just can’t tell us?”

Regulus shook his head at once. “No, Harry. Not that. She could call me in five minutes, or a hundred years from now. I promise. I’m not lying about this.” He dredged up a smile that Harry felt compelled to accept as truthful. He did not think even Regulus could look that cheerful about a death he knew would happen soon, and he had never noticed any signs that Regulus was a very

good liar. Even his keeping the truth of the locket secret when he was a Death Eater had involved more lies of omission, from what Harry knew, than commission. “So it’s not really all that different from what anyone else knows or feels about his or her death. This is just—a bit more personal interest in the matter than most people get handed.”

Harry nodded, and tried to ignore the pulse beating in his throat. “And she gave you the knowledge you sought.”

“Yes.”

“What was it? Were the locket and the diary weapons of Voldemort’s, or were they something else?”

Regulus bowed his head and took hold of the arms of his chair. Then he looked up and spoke in a soft, flat voice Harry thought he must have practiced.

“They’re called Horcruxes, Harry. They’re physical objects containing a bit of the creator’s soul. Extremely Dark magic. They can only be empowered by a murder. The murder splits the creator’s soul, and he takes that shard and stores it in—well, an object that he’s enchanted to be indestructible, hopefully. The shards can take on an independent life of their own, and usually do. That’s why you met Tom Riddle in that diary, and why a bit of Voldemort could possess my brother. Horcruxes are *alive*, and not just in the way that a family clock or a Foe-Glass is. They’re fully as intelligent and aware as any human. They won’t know everything their creator knows. Tom Riddle was sixteen when Voldemort made the diary, so sixteen he remained. But they can learn new things, and if they can commune with or possess someone new, they can try to return to independent existence by growing a body.”

Harry closed his eyes. He remembered the grayish lump growing out of Sirius’s side, the possession that Sirius had killed himself to prevent. He remembered Tom Riddle trying to drain Connor’s magic, and Harry’s, so that he could live outside the pages of the diary, or someone else’s mind, again. Oh, yes, he knew all about Horcruxes needing, or wanting, a body.

“That’s the way Voldemort’s stayed immortal,” Regulus went on, voice quiet, implacable. “The Horcruxes each contain a piece of his soul, and his body holds the last. Death showed me the number seven. That makes sense. Seven is a magically powerful number. He split his soul into seven shards—one each for six Horcruxes, and one for himself. It’s impossible for him to leave his body without a piece, of course. And that’s how he survived when you reflected the Killing Curse at him, Harry. You destroyed his body, and an ordinary Killing Curse would have dispersed the soul, but that particular shard remaining was too small to be affected by it. It fled and hid, and possessed Quirrell—made *him* into a Horcrux, almost, except that this bit of soul was more intelligent and older than the others, and always knew exactly what had happened to it. Now he’s come back in full power, but still containing only a shard of a soul.”

Harry opened his eyes again to see Regulus regarding him solemnly. “That’s why the *Avada Kedavra* you tried on him in the Chamber of Secrets didn’t work, Harry. He’ll still live—if you can call that living—as long as one of his Horcruxes exists.”

“So we have to find and destroy the others,” Harry said.

Regulus nodded.

“Four more.”

Regulus nodded again.

Harry shuddered a bit. The battles with Tom Riddle and the bit of Voldemort possessing Sirius had been almost unimaginably difficult. Perhaps the next four would be easier, since he was older and knew what to expect now, but he was not counting on it. *Merlin help us if the other four Horcruxes start trying to grow bodies.* “Do you know what they are? Where they are?”

“Death made me a bargain,” said Regulus, his face disgusted now. “Not a sale. She offered me the knowledge of what they were, or where they were, but not both.” He sighed. “I accepted the knowledge of where they were, Harry. I thought it would do little good if we knew their physical forms, but not where in the world Voldemort hid them. After all, if I’d only known that Slytherin’s locket existed, and not the nature of the traps that protected it, there’s no way I could have stolen it.”

Harry nodded encouragingly. There was an odd roaring sound in his ears. He had wondered what the secret to Voldemort’s immortality was, and how in Merlin’s name they would ever find out. Now it was almost within their reach. Even partial knowledge was better than none.

“She cheated even there, as much as she could,” said Regulus. “She gave me four images, but only two are likely to be useful. One was Hogwarts. The other was a desk in a room that looked old and Muggle and tired—probably somewhere in London, but

even if I'd seen the outside of the building, I couldn't have said for certain. Most Muggle places look alike to me. The third was a dark place, a burrow of some sort, I think, but so dark I couldn't make out the details—“

“And the fourth was a dark house,” Harry finished, his skin prickling. *Those are the images the bird showed me. That was what it was trying to tell me.*

Regulus blinked at him. “Well, almost, Harry, yes. This was a shack, actually, surrounded by trees. It stood on a hill.” He shuddered. “It's the most fragile or obvious hiding place, I think, but Voldemort's protected it well. I could feel the curses just glimpsing it.”

And Harry *knew*, then, where one of the Horcruxes must be, and cursed himself for not seeing it before. “The shack,” he whispered, turning to Snape. “The little shack near the Riddle house, near Little Hangleton. Do you remember? We passed it on the way to the graveyard last Midwinter. It was so powerfully warded and cursed that I didn't dare try to break the spells. Besides, I thought it was only a minor curiosity at the time.”

Snape's face went blank, then stunned. Then it hardened, and he nodded. “Dark magic,” he murmured. “Powerful Dark magic, to guard a place in such shambles. And now we know why.”

“Why he put the spells up, at least. Not why he chose that place. Maybe if we can learn that, we can learn where the other hiding places are, more specifically.” Harry turned to Regulus. “Death didn't give you a good sense of why Voldemort chose the hiding places he did, I suppose?”

Regulus shook his head. “As I said, she gave me as little information as she could. I'm glad that you recognized that house, at least, and I recognized Hogwarts. I don't know what we're going to do about the other two.”

“I might have an idea,” Harry muttered, mind racing. *The bird could help. Perhaps. On the other hand, if it could really help, it would have told me about the Horcruxes and where they were outright. It obviously knows. But I'll talk to it when I can.* “Thank you, Regulus. I—I can't say that I like the idea of your risking your life for this, even now.” He met Regulus's eyes. “But it's enormously helpful. Thank you.”

“She told me one thing more,” Regulus said softly.

Harry immediately went alert. Regulus's hands were gripping the sides of his chair as if it were about to ride it into a storm. Harry swallowed twice before he could get the words out. “What?” he whispered. Draco leaned back against him and turned his head so that his face rested on Harry's neck, mouthing soothing words. Harry hardly noticed. His skin was clammy, and his breath quickened as he watched Regulus.

Regulus hesitated long moments, until Harry wanted to scream at him to hurry up. And then he spoke.

“Voldemort knew he couldn't protect the Horcruxes from every form of physical destruction,” he whispered. “An imaginative enemy could always come up with something he hadn't thought of. So, in addition to protection from common curses, he used a spell that's part of the Unassailable Curses—not even the caster can undo it, or take it back, or break it by any other method than the one acceptable way of breaking it.” He fixed his eyes on Harry. “It might be as simple as a sneezing curse that can only be undone by *Finite Incantatem*, but then, you can only undo it by the *Finite*, not by blocking someone's nose so they can't sneeze; they'll keep on sneezing regardless. And Voldemort cast a curse that said the Horcruxes could only ultimately be destroyed if someone died, as a willing sacrifice, either with the intention of destroying the Horcrux or for love of the person who intended to destroy the Horcrux.”

Harry stared at him, then shook his head. “That's not—“

Sirius. Sylarana.

Harry stopped, the words sticking in his throat, the memories blazing in his mind. Sirius had cast the Killing Curse on himself, died a willing sacrifice for the love he bore Harry and the love he bore Connor, and to stop Voldemort from coming back into the world through him. His last four words before the *Avada Kedavra* had been to tell them farewell.

And he could see, he could see if he closed his eyes, Sylarana uncoiling from his arm and lunging upward at the basilisk, her scream ringing in his ears. *Mine! My human! I defend him from other snakes!*

And then the world trembled and rushed, and he was back in Acies's Defense Against the Dark Arts class last year, with her words on willing sacrifice circling his head like birds of prey.

A life laid down, a limb cut off willingly, a privilege yielded without grumbling, forms the corner and the core of all sacrifices that most wizards trust. Without that corner and that core, sacrifice is usually seen as evil, or, at most, dubious magic. What can be done with blood and flesh and other things not given willingly? A great deal, but not as much as can be done with that yielded. The wizard's will adds its own sanction to the spell or the potion or the ritual performed with that willing sacrifice. The one the sacrifice is performed for grows more willing himself, more able, more powerful. Perhaps he will even be able to survive whatever storm comes after that yielding.

And he had even wondered if Sirius and Sylarana's sacrifices had made a difference in his battles with Voldemort that followed.

They had. They had made all the difference.

Harry shook his head. He was aware that he had withdrawn from Draco, stumbling back against the far wall, and that he'd banged his ankle on something, probably the leg of the chair. He didn't mind. He didn't care. He couldn't think of anything but trying to deny what Regulus said.

"No," he whispered.

"Yes." There came a faint creaking sound—Regulus's hands tightening on the arms of the chair, probably. "I'm sorry, Harry. There's no way around it. Death is cruel, but Voldemort is crueler. To destroy the Horcruxes, four people who love you are going to have to die."

Harry could hear his breath coming out of his mouth in a moan. The worst part, the worst part, was that he had people around him who might be willing to do that, to give their lives up for him.

It's not—it's not right. The sacrifices were supposed to fall on me. Why shouldn't they? The battle with Voldemort is my fight. I'm not alone in it, but why should I have to have company in the sacrifices? Why should anyone be required to do this?

"Or die intending to destroy the Horcrux," Snape said sharply, somewhere beyond the roaring in his ears. "You said that, Regulus."

"I did," Regulus agreed. "But, either way, Harry will almost certainly need to be there. Voldemort sowed his doom the night that he made Harry his magical heir and passed the *absorbere* ability to him. He can eat the magic of the Horcrux left after the sacrifice, and he can either eat the piece of the soul or destroy it by destroying the magic and the anchor it depends on. Without magic and a physical anchor of *some* kind, the soul shard simply dissipates."

Harry remembered the piece of Tom Riddle's soul unraveling, shrinking, shrieking, and disappearing, after the destruction of the diary.

It was—

It was unfair. It was unjust. But he would do what he could to make sure it wasn't.

"I can't believe you're talking as though this is actually the way we'll fight the war," he said, taking his arm away from his face and glaring at both Regulus and Snape. "It's *not*. We'll find some way around this. There has to be a way."

"There is no other way," Regulus said, his voice gentle. "I'm sorry, Harry, but this particular Unassailable Curse can only be broken by a willing sacrifice of the kind I described."

"Maybe Death was lying to you," Harry countered. "You said she was cruel."

"That's possible," said Regulus. "But then she could have been lying about the locations of the Horcruxes, too, and you seem to believe that you have independent confirmation that's not so. Besides, all the other information that my ancestors ever brought out of that painting was true."

Draco was suddenly in front of Harry, gathering him up in his arms. Harry laid his head on his shoulder, but went on glaring at Regulus and Snape past Draco's neck. "I'm not—I'm not going to have people dying just because they love me," he said harshly. "No more sacrifices like that. We'll find *some* way around this."

"And if there is no way?" Regulus asked softly. "We know a way to destroy Voldemort, Harry. We know it works. Twice, it worked. I would be skeptical, too, if Sylarana or my brother was the *only* occurrence, but we have it twice. The first time, Tom

Riddle vanished after your snake died. The second time, the shard of Voldemort managed to leap into Rodolphus's body—probably because he was older and had more experience at possession than Tom Riddle—but when you destroyed that, he was gone. Do we *dare* ignore what that implies, Harry? Do we want Voldemort to ravage our world because we can't bear to think of giving up our lives?"

"I'll give up my life," Harry said stonily. He ignored Snape's thundercloud glare and the way Draco's arms clamped around him, almost hard enough to cut off his breath. "I'll give up my free time, and my learning of other spells that aren't Dark Arts or ways to destroy Horcruxes, and my schooling. But I'm *not* going to let other people die because they love me."

"Even if it's willing?" Regulus said. "Remember, Harry, it has to be willing for this to work. Utterly willing. An enemy couldn't put one of us under *Imperio* and demand that we kill ourselves to destroy the Horcrux. That doesn't work in other willing sacrifice situations; the magic doesn't accept it. So it would depend on our own free wills. And you wouldn't respect our choices? As *vates*?"

Harry became aware he was crying, but he couldn't move his hand up to wipe away the tears because Draco's arm was in the way. And Merlin, how he *hated* to cry, to show weakness in front of everyone. *They* were the ones who were talking about paying the cost, about dying.

"I'm not—I'm not worth this kind of devotion," he said. "Regulus, *no* one is. Can't you see that? I can't demand this of anyone."

"And demanding wouldn't work." Regulus's voice was like water wearing a hole in stone by long and patient dripping, like Joseph's. "It would always, always be choice, Harry."

No.

"I just—I want to work on some way to get around this." Harry shifted so that he could bury his face in Draco's shoulder, and wipe some of the tears off. "But I don't want to say that people have to kill themselves for the sake of defeating Voldemort and that's the end of it."

It's not true. It can't be true. Please, let it not be true. Loving me leads people to their deaths already, when they go into battle. Please, let this not be true, too.

"We'll do research, Harry," Regulus said. "I would never suggest that we start committing suicide just because Death said so. And we have to find the Horcruxes and learn how to break the spells guarding them, too. But once we find them—"

Harry shook his head wildly, stubbornly, and Regulus fell silent with a little sigh. Harry stood there for a moment more, his heart beating hard, and then gently stepped back, extricating himself from Draco's arms.

"I think I'd like to be alone for a while," he said, and walked out of the room before anyone could protest.

Five hours later, Harry stood on the small tower on top of Silver-Mirror that some long-ago Black ancestor had built as an observatory, and stared at the stars, and felt his face twist in determination.

There has to be a way around it. That's all. There are probably going to be more than four deaths of people who loved me in battle. There are not going to be four suicides.

He had spent long enough on the tower, he thought, to persuade himself against the sly little voice that whispered in the back of his head, sounding far too much like Joseph.

You said that you would have to accept their suicides if they were willing. You said you would step out of the way if you believed that Draco did want to commit suicide and he wasn't under Imperius or otherwise compelled.

Harry slammed his hand down on the balcony around the tower. It cracked straight through with the magic in his palm, and nearly fell. Harry took in a deep breath, dragged the pieces back up, and cast *Reparo*.

That kind of suicide is different. For them, done because they want to do it. Or done the way Loki did it, to benefit and strengthen others.

I—I don't want people dying for me. I won't accept it. There has to be some way around this. Sylarana and Sirius were willing to

die for me, but Sylarana didn't plan it. So there might be something there. We can look it up.

I am not worth someone else ending their life that way. A battle situation is different, equal risk to all, but this kind of decision? No. No. I won't.

Harry closed his eyes, then whirled away from the balcony and strode back into the house.

They were going to find a way around this, a way to circumvent Voldemort's horrible spell and not have people die for him.

I can make sacrifices. I'm used to them. But it's unfair, unjust, and wrong to ask someone else to make sacrifices because they love me. Draco deserves better. Snape and Connor deserve better. Regulus deserves better. All my allies deserve better.

I am not worth that.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Repudiation

It was then.

It was then, while he knelt with his head lowered and his eyes focused on the floor in front of him—

His Lord had ordered him not to look up. And while Severus Snape was usually not in the habit of doing what his Lord told him to do, not in thought anyway, and had not been for a year, he knelt, and did not look, and listened.

It was then.

It was then, while he heard flesh tearing, scoring itself open while the Rat's Claw Curse ran up and down Regulus's body like a river of flowing blood in and of itself—

The Rat's Claw Curse was one that the Dark Lord rarely used. It mimicked the effects of feeding rats on the victim's body, neither killing nor draining him of blood, and it lasted longer than many other pain curses. When the victim heard the incantation, he knew he was in for hours of torture. The *Crucio* could snap fragile minds in under three minutes if continuously applied, and most other pain curses could last only ten minutes at the outside, but the Rat's Claw endured, and endured, and endured.

It was then.

It was then, while he knew that Voldemort was punishing Regulus for a crime Snape did not know and did not understand—

He did not understand how *Regulus* could have kept a secret like this, of all people. Regulus was not a particularly good liar. He avoided confrontations and played on his blood when he had need, and he killed hesitantly, but since he also didn't try to gain much power or precedence in the Death Eaters, most of the others rarely worried about him. He was not fun to torture, and their Lord would not thank them if they accidentally killed him in their play and thus deprived the House of Black of an heir and the Dark Lord of access to rare Black artifacts. Regulus sought out Snape too much, and he talked too much. That he had managed to keep from coming to Snape and talking about *this* was not to be believed.

It was then.

It was then, while Regulus arched his back and bellowed and shrieked and screamed, and Snape knew that the only person he had really thought of as his since he had joined the Death Eaters was suffering, was suffering, would suffer and not live—

It was then that his heart truly left Voldemort and embraced something like personal loyalty to Dumbledore.

It was not kindness. It was not compassion for the Mudblood and Muggle victims of the Death Eaters. It was not a reformation of his conscience, a gazing back on the past and a recoiling from his part in it. It was not a pure and shining epiphany during which the Light visited him and made him stop being a Dark wizard. He knew some members of the Order of the Phoenix would think so. He knew Albus would want to think so, and Snape would allow him to use Legilimency and find an answer something to that effect. It was nothing grand, or noble, or philosophical.

It was pure fleshly revulsion that the one note of grace he had found among the Death Eaters was being ripped and torn out of its shell.

It was then, and for that reason alone, that Severus Snape stopped being a Death Eater. Dumbledore would destroy the man who had destroyed Regulus. Snape would run in his train. He would weave all the pretty justifications that were needed later, and make himself believe them.

Against the enemy he could not bring down alone, he would fling a powerful wizard's vengeance, even as he had thought to do to the Marauders when he first joined Voldemort.

He did not jerk when Regulus screamed with pain, because he did not allow himself to do.

It was then.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Rebirth

The graveyard breathed around him, and it was *true*, it was *real*, what he had denied for so long was alive around him again, and the thirteen years he had gone without feeling this had been the time he was dead, not the years when he walked in the company of it.

His Lord's power was everywhere, roaring, restored to a body now, leaping and pouring like black water over the headstones, shaking its head in the mad gladness of a chained beast with its bonds snapped at last. Snape tossed back his head and let it bathe him. He laughed, or found that he was laughing, and did not know how long he had been doing that.

He walked with quick but unhurried steps towards the center of the graveyard. His Lord held court there, still mighty though he was without his throne and his snake. The other Death Eaters drew back slightly when they saw Snape coming.

"Severus." Voldemort's voice hissed the sibilants more than Snape remembered from the last time he had seen him alive. "My faithful servant."

Snape dropped into a kneel, which hurt his knee. He was no longer as young as he had once been. But it did not matter. What mattered was the painful awakening of life inside him again. *Merlin*, how had he lived without this, this circle of darkness that pulsed around him and sang wildly in his brain and found its echo in the darkness within his own soul and the darkness on his arm?

"Have you held true to me, Severus?" the Dark Lord asked. "Have you served me even when the fool Dumbledore thought you were true to him?"

He already knew the answer. The wiser ones among the Death Eaters gathered here would already know the answer. But Voldemort wanted it said aloud. For the sake of the less wise, Snape knew, and for the sake of sealing their bargain anew with the words.

He lifted his head and caught his Lord's gleaming scarlet eyes. Once, he nodded. "I have, my Lord," he whispered. "Dumbledore holds me close to his heart, and gives me custody of his precious children, and denies me nothing. But I have always been yours." He dipped his head to kiss Voldemort's robes.

And he knew the Dark Lord's joy, fierce and feral, echoed his own. Even Voldemort could grow tired of those who cringed and whined and did nothing else, or those, like Bellatrix and Evan, too mad to know the difference between respect and fear. Snape's willing surrender was something he craved, because Snape had made the *choice* to bow before strength, and, in this case, to return to his Lord's side.

"Then rise to your feet, my faithful servant."

And he did, and he let his mouth part in an expression half-sneer, half-laugh, to see how the others drew back from him. He saved the best glimpse for the last, as his eyes traveled the half-ring of Death Eaters and fell on the face of the boy tied to the red-black rock, staring at him with utmost betrayal.

"Professor," he breathed.

Voldemort rested one hand on Snape's shoulder. "Oh, dear, Harry," he said, with a mocking tone in his voice that Snape would ordinarily have found too heavy, but was, now, just right. "Did you think Severus was on *your* side? Did you believe that he was a

wizard of the *Light*? Your adopted father, perhaps?” He laughed, and the other Death Eaters joined in, though Snape doubted they truly understood the joke. “As if Severus Snape could ever be an adopted father to James Potter’s son!”

Harry’s face crumbled with something more than betrayal, then, and Snape rejoiced. He could see his enemy’s face doing the same thing. Harry looked so much like James, especially when he shut his eyes, which weren’t the same color, and cried. Snape had won one victory over his enemies, and those long days of tipping between hatred and something like a wavering affection for Harry were settled now, decisively, in favor of his loathing for the Marauders. His Dark Mark rang like a beaten gong with Voldemort’s pleasure and his own.

“Stop!”

The voice was shrill with fear, and high with hatred, and it was one that Severus knew all too well. He pivoted smoothly, lifting his wand. Remus Lupin had Apparated in to stand in front of the outer ring of Death Eaters, his own wand clutched in a shaking hand and his face pale.

Looking at him, Snape could not imagine why he had ever feared the werewolf. Tonight was not a full moon night, and Lupin could not transform. His hair was gray and shaggy, though he was the same age as Snape. His shoulders were hunched. His eyes were tired, bearing the strain of transforming again and again for month after month. He had never been more than a passable wizard, with much book learning but without much magical strength.

“I’ve come to rescue Harry,” Lupin said, leveling his wand.

“You’ve come to die,” Snape corrected softly, and then glanced at his master. He would nearly die if he could not play with Lupin, but it was true that Voldemort had first choice about assigning prisoners to their torturers. If he gave Lupin to Bellatrix or Evan, then Snape could do nothing but stand back and only join in as his Lord told him he could.

Voldemort’s smile was horrible, and exactly what he had hoped to see. His Lord had not forgotten what he had seen in Snape’s mind the first time they met, then, and the hatred that had driven Snape to his side.

“He is yours, my servant,” he said.

Snape lifted his wand, and struck Lupin’s away with a simple *Expelliarmus*. He heard Harry scream, but that was a small thing, sour even, beside the chance to wreak vengeance on the body of the man who had nearly killed him when he was in his sixth year at Hogwarts.

When he pulled bones from sockets, when he drained Lupin’s body of blood and charmed new liquid to fill his veins as fast as they emptied, when he broke Lupin’s elbows with a single, simple spell, *then* the sounds could mingle with Harry’s screams and make a sweet music indeed.

Snape sat up, breathing hard and touching his forehead. Almost—almost he thought he had been dreaming after he had finished his dream of Regulus’s torture, even though he should be near the end of the visions the Sanctuary had provided him by now. Joseph had already expressed surprise that the nightmares had lasted so long, but then said that Snape must have had dozens of years of pain to heal, which was quite true.

Slowly, his breathing returned to normal, and he shook his head. No, he had not dreamed after the dream of his repudiation, or, if he had, he could not remember it. He had a headache, but that was probably from grinding his teeth as he slept, an old habit. His left arm tingled uncomfortably, but he’d been sleeping on it.

He rose and walked slowly towards the far corner of his room in Silver-Mirror, in search of a headache potion. If he *had* dreamed, he was almost certain it was a dream about the Marauders, an old nightmare, full of gleaming amber eyes down a hallway and a bubbling snarl.

There were still times he wished he could pay Lupin back for that. Peter did not deserve his vengeance, and Potter and Black were beyond it, but Lupin—

Snape drank the headache potion. *Harry would never forgive me if I hurt Lupin.*

But still, it would be sweet, if he turned against the wolf and permitted that to me.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Seven: Sacrifice, Power, and Joy

I will not give up.

After days of study, days of searching, Harry could say that only one book in the Hogwarts library contained the word “Horcruxes,” and that alluded to them only as “Dark magic of which we are forbidden to speak.” There were powerful destructive curses in some of those books—Snape had given him permission to use the Restricted Section—but none that would reverse an Unassailable Curse, and none that could stand in for a willing sacrifice.

Of course, Harry had known that. He tried to tell himself that he had known that. A willing sacrifice was the most powerful of magic, always. Nothing else could have changed the centaurs’ nature from rapists to gentler creatures and allowed him to free them from their web. Nothing else could have enabled Charles Rosier-Henlin to so thoroughly destroy Karkaroff, as he had with the *Pyra* spell; it was sure to kill precisely because it required the suicide-sacrifice of a wizard. Nothing else could have destroyed a Horcrux.

No.

He would keep searching.

A hand slammed down on the book in front of him. Harry blinked at it for a long, stupid moment before he realized it was blocking the words he had tried to read, and that probably meant the interrupter wanted something of him. He sat back, blinking again, and looked up. Draco’s eyes met his, shining with such intensity that Harry blinked a third time.

“What is it, Draco?” he asked. His voice was thready, but that came from hours of not using it. It had been a week since they returned to school, and Harry had not shouted himself hoarse with fury and frustration since the first day.

“I want you to tell me what you’re doing,” said Draco, his voice low and pleasant enough, but Harry could hear an edge within it. He frowned.

“You know what I’m doing,” he said, even as he cast a privacy ward around them. They were hardly about to release word of the Horcruxes to the whole school. “Researching a way to get around the willing sacrifices. Or break an Unassailable Curse without using a sacrifice.”

Draco just watched him. Harry found it hard to meet his eyes, and didn’t know why. He *knew* he was doing the right thing. As Regulus had said, even if four people decided to sacrifice themselves for the sake of destroying the Horcruxes and had no loving connection to Harry, Harry would still need to be there and drain the magic that the soul shard clung to. If he could find one thing to make the task easier, one thing that would ease the agony of those deaths or make them not have to happen at all, then it was his duty to do so. He was twined in this, by the scar on his forehead, and the prophecy that overlapped him and Draco and his brother and Merlin knew who else, and the fact that Voldemort hadn’t simply succeeded in killing him the first time.

“And I don’t suppose you know anything about the monitoring board,” Draco said, still in that reasonable voice.

“Of course I do,” said Harry. He pitched his voice into the earnest tone of a second-year Hufflepuff answering questions in Transfiguration. “It’s headed by Griselda Marchbanks, and it has equal numbers of Light and Dark wizards on it, and—“

“You don’t know that they sent an owl wanting you to meet with them this weekend?” Draco cut in.

Harry shut his mouth and looked away.

“I thought so,” said Draco. “You haven’t been paying *attention* to anything outside the library in the past week, Harry. There’s the owl from the monitoring board. There’s a note from Ignifer Apollonis that I can’t open, because it burns me every time I try. She charmed it so that only you could read it. That came Thursday, and I assume it’s information she doesn’t want to convey by the phoenix song spell. It might be urgent. And there’s the fact that half of Slytherin wants to ask you to play Seeker for them in the Ravenclaw game, despite the fact that Sam’s actually on the team.” He paused for a moment, then added, “And there’s the fact that you’re slipping so badly in your classes that *all* the teachers have noticed, not just Belluspersona and Snape and Pettigrew.”

“You could use her name,” Harry muttered. “We’re behind a privacy ward.”

“I prefer not to slip.” Draco’s voice sharpened. “While you’re locking yourself away from the world, Harry, life is going on

without you. And it *needs* you. Idiot. Or do you really think that finding a way around those sacrifices will mean that you're no longer *vates* or a student at Hogwarts or a Slytherin or *my partner* anymore?"

"This is more important!" Harry hissed. "It has to be. You heard what Regulus said. I've got to be involved in—"

The look on Draco's face stopped him. Last year, it might have been hurt. Now, it was just black fury.

"More important," he said. "So I'm less important than the Horcruxes, am I?"

"Draco, you know what I meant—"

"No, actually, I *don't* know what you mean." Draco drew his wand, not taking his eyes from Harry. "We're supposed to be *past this*, Harry. Before, I could threaten to use binding spells and sleeping spells on you, and you'd sigh and let yourself be coaxed back into a semblance of a normal life. And then you reached the point where you didn't need that, where you were actually thinking of and looking out for yourself, and I relaxed. And then I passed through my Declaration. That means that I won't just threaten you now. I *will* use those binding curses and sleeping spells on you."

"Draco—"

Draco whispered *Consopio*, and Harry had to place a *Protego* before it to fend it off. "Stop this, Draco," he said, anger and fear and worry sharpening his voice to a diamond edge. "*Stop.*"

He shook his head, white-blond hair tossing in several different directions. He didn't look exhausted, or upset, Harry thought. He looked bloody furious. "Do you want me to stop? Fight me, Harry."

"You're delusional—"

"You are, you *wanker*, for denying me what I want from you, for not fulfilling your promises, for acting like a bloody child when you *know better!*" Harry was glad that he'd thought to add a silencing spell to the privacy ward; Draco's yells would have brought Madam Pince running, otherwise. "If you were still suffering from your training and the idea that you had to do everything, I could excuse this. But you're *not*. And it's time that you learned better, Harry, and stopped falling back on that for everything. You've changed. You've grown up. So act like an adult, not a child! And if I need to treat you like a child who needs a nap, then I will." He aimed another sleeping curse, this time nonverbal, but Moody had taught Harry to recognize the wand movement for that one, and Harry deflected it, too.

He could feel irritation bubbling up in him, lava beneath broken pieces of ice. He was angry that Draco had interrupted his research, and he was worried that someone might come around the corner and see, if not hear them, squabbling like madmen, and he was—

He was conscious that Draco was right.

"Shit," he whispered.

He wasn't sure if it was the word or the softness of the word that made Draco lower his wand and eye him critically. Harry waved a hand vaguely to signal the duel was done, and sat down on the chair. Draco tensed, but Harry stared past him, and didn't return to the book. Draco seemed to consider that a reason to lower his guard and take another chair, though his wand remained steady.

"I can't bear it if someone else dies for me," Harry told the air. "Sylarana didn't know she would die, just that she was willing to. Sirius did it for both me and Connor, and to keep the world safe from Voldemort. That was how I lived with their sacrifices. But this—if Regulus is right, I'll either have to live with the knowledge that someone is dying *because* he loves me or ask perfect strangers to give up their lives based on the intention to destroy the Horcruxes."

"And save the world from Voldemort," Draco said, in his own most snide and irritating tone. "You *always* forget that bit, Harry."

"Shut it, will you?" Harry asked, but without heat, which he thought was the only reason Draco actually did it.

Harry sighed. "If this was three years ago, then I'd be able to get through these sacrifices by promising myself suicide at the end, to atone for them." He ignored Draco's leaning forward so fast that his elbow connected with the table, and the subsequent curses. "But that was before I swore to the *vates* path, and entered the joining ritual with you, and built the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and decided that I'll actually have a future." He reached across the table, and Draco's hand was there, waiting for his. Harry squeezed it. "All those things *have* to continue. They matter to more people than just me."

“That’s always your test, isn’t it?”

“Always.” Harry ignored the bitterness in Draco’s voice. That was part of him, and it was not going to change. Harry rather liked that part of himself. “And it would be more selfish to neglect those concerns while I’m researching the sacrifices, or *because* of the sacrifices, when they’re waiting.”

“Or right beside you and willing to tell you when you’re being an idiot.”

“That, too.” Harry stood up, with a sigh, and glanced at the books. Once, he had had a thick bubble that he could use to ignore reality, built by his training and his love of Connor and his conviction that if someone did try to tell him to live differently, it was merely because they did not understand the necessity of Harry’s role. Now, the shells he could build were thin, and liable to rupture the moment reality introduced itself to him. Creeping in like a whipped dog was the knowledge that he had been ignoring: that he couldn’t stop living because of this.

“Someday, you’ll know this from the beginning, without having to reason yourself into it,” Draco muttered, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and steering him from the library. “And without making me miss dinner.”

“You can go to the kitchens, and I’m sure the owl sent from Hogsmeade will be waiting for me,” Harry said, with a shrug.

Draco gave him a long, measuring glance. Harry frowned. *It’s a long time since he did that, like he doesn’t understand me. Usually, he understands me too well.* “What?”

“It doesn’t bother you that I eat food the house elves provide, even though you don’t,” Draco said slowly.

Harry shook his head. “I wouldn’t expect you to change that, Draco. You don’t see anything morally wrong with it, so you’re not being a hypocrite, and you grew up with it, so it’s not as though it’s a sudden habit you adopted at Hogwarts because it’s convenient. What I *can* do is provide reasoned arguments if you ever want to listen, and hope to show you that life can be lived perfectly well without house elf labor. We have magic. We can do basic cleaning and cooking charms without much loss of our time. I don’t think there’s such a large difference between life with house elves as slaves and life with house elves free—except for the house elves, it means a great deal more than it ever will to us.”

“It’s a status symbol,” said Draco. “A privilege. The Weasleys don’t have any house elves. The Malfoys do. It makes a difference.”

“Yes, but I think the difference is stupid,” Harry pointed out.

“And yet you won’t force me to change.”

Draco’s voice was *wary*, now, and Harry wondered how in the world he had gone from scolding Harry about sacrifice to sounding as if he feared to lose an argument about house elves. Harry could not understand why he would be *afraid* of losing an argument. All he had to do was not listen to Harry, if he really wanted to keep the same opinion, and if he changed his mind because the arguments were good enough to convince him, then surely that only proved his desire not to change his mind had been wrought out of stubbornness in the first place, and not reason?

“Of course not,” said Harry, and kissed the side of his cheek. “*Vates*, remember? I’m not forcing you to change, Draco.”

“You would like it if I did.”

“Yes.”

“And you *could*.”

“Could what? Could force you to change?” Harry stopped walking and turned around, gripping Draco’s shoulder. It was Draco’s turn to avoid his gaze. Harry shook him slightly. “Draco, I won’t use compulsion. And you know that. And what else in the world could force you to change?”

“Threats,” said Draco, sounding sulky. “Promises. Growing more distant and colder to me until I do.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s not what I do, Draco.”

“But you know that I will?” Draco cocked his head, and his eyes had returned to that earlier intensity. “They’re tools in a Dark wizard’s arsenal, Harry, and I will use them sometimes. If not with you, with others. And with you, too, if they’re the only way I can get you to stop being an idiot, or come to your senses, or not do something stupid.”

“I know that,” Harry said, beginning to feel faintly exasperated. “Suffice it to say, Draco, that you weren’t the first Dark wizard I ever met.”

“And you’re fine with it,” Draco clarified. “And you won’t force me to change the way I act.”

“No.”

“Why did you ignore me when I half-choked Michael, then?”

Harry shoved his shoulder. “Now you’re being deliberately obtuse. You know there’s a difference between consequences for an action and forcing you to change your behavior. That’s what’s going to happen if you play around with someone else’s emotions deliberately, or for the same reason you did with Michael’s, except that next time it would be a week, and after that a month. That doesn’t mean I’ll enter your mind and try to alter your beliefs, Draco, or chase you down and prattle at you about house elves until you convert. When you jump off a step, you know gravity’s going to pull you down, don’t you? It’s not the stair’s fault if you fall and cut your knee. You *chose* to do it. But the stair won’t force you to jump down, and neither will I.”

“You’re human, Harry,” Draco said, so quietly Harry could hardly hear him. “You can’t expect your decisions and your punishments to have the force of natural law.”

“I’m going to try to come as close as I can to that.” Harry stared into his eyes. “I love you, Draco. I’m in love with you—and that’s the only person I can say that about, even as I love others. I don’t like punishing you. But neither am I going to say that your actions have no consequences just because you’re my partner and my lover.” He managed to say that without blushing. Harry was proud of himself.

Draco studied him with troubled eyes, then tugged on Harry’s arm. “Come on,” he said with forced lightness. “Let’s find your owl.”

Harry let Draco pull him along, much as he let him change the subject. He knew Draco still didn’t really understand. He wondered if he ever would, until or unless he changed his mind on house elves and like subjects.

Perhaps it was like Draco not understanding about the sacrifices. He would claim that if someone wanted to kill himself to destroy a Horcrux, why should Harry worry? It was the individual’s free choice.

He didn’t believe, as Harry did, that death ended all opportunities for change. He didn’t see, as Harry did, the world full of glorious souls packed with glorious possibility, and that the moment a person died, that stripped away the possibilities for them. Harry didn’t want people sacrificing their lives for him because he believed he was not worth it, but, also, he did not want to be the reason that lives full of grander chances ended. Who knew what better things those sacrifices might have done, had they been allowed to live?

Thus why he had wanted his parents to live. Thus why he hadn’t killed Dumbledore until driven to do it in the last extreme. Thus why he hadn’t wanted to turn his back on his brother, Draco, and Parvati even during those few weeks in September when they were driving him mad. He could see himself as a champion of free will and a champion of life. He did not want to be a champion of death.

Which, really, should be selfish and Slytherin enough on Harry’s part to content Draco. Harry wondered if he would ever manage to express it to him in words that would.

Draco should be looking at his book, he knew. They had a Transfiguration exam tomorrow, Professor Bulstrode making sure they hadn’t forgotten their lessons over the holidays, and, as Peter had warned him, Transfiguring other humans was distant enough from becoming an Animagus that Draco’s growing expertise in one wouldn’t help him in the other. He *had* to pay attention.

Instead, he found his gaze continually straying to Harry, who lay curled with his head on the pillow and one arm around his face, in a defensive posture he usually adopted when he didn’t want someone to see his emotions or his tears. It worried Draco that Harry was sleeping that way.

But he had been sane. He had done what he had to do. He'd eaten a late dinner, and answered the monitoring board's request for a meeting with a letter that simply said he would come but bring both Snape and Draco with him, and opened Ignifer's note—it said something about information from her father, Draco gathered, and Harry had immediately contacted her and told her that it wasn't worth bargaining with Cupressus yet, given what he would demand in return—and he'd talked to the rest of Slytherin House about playing Seeker. Draco had been present for the conversation, and he would have said in the beginning that the other Slytherins would win. Yet Harry had spoken reasonable words about practices and fairness to other players and the harmony of the team, and in the end he'd walked out of the common room with Sam still secured as Seeker.

Draco could not understand it—not how Harry had won without hexing people, not why he had wanted to refuse the position of Seeker in the first place when the rest of the Quidditch team was falling over themselves to offer it to him, not why Harry *wouldn't* simply use some of his power to get what he wanted.

So, yes, compulsion was right out, but there were threats, intimidation, and the resource Draco thought Harry most underestimated: the sheer, shimmering power of his magic, which, unbound as Harry carried it lately, made other people practically twitch to be near it. That was entirely natural, the wizardly longing for magic. Harry might not have a Declaration, and he might be making no efforts to recruit more sworn companions as Voldemort had recruited his Death Eaters, but he still had the *power* of a Lord or a Lady, and at base that was what drew other wizards or witches to him. To stand in the presence of such a pure example of what they coveted was enough for some people. It would make others listen. And still others would at least assign themselves as neutral parties in relation to Harry, because Lords were too rare to destroy. One had to put down a mad dog like Voldemort. Otherwise, they were to be spared if at all possible.

And Draco had seen Harry use all of those in the past.

Only when he absolutely thought he had to. Only when he believed something more precious would be lost if he hesitated than if he acted.

Power under restraint was such an alien thing to Draco. He supposed that was the Lucius in him. Narcissa moved more gracefully and elegantly, that was true, but she *moved*, and used the clever words and political connections that were her particular weapons as she saw fit.

Harry could do so much more than any of them, and yet he preferred to do so much less.

Draco put his Transfiguration text down, not even pretending to pay attention now, and folded his hands behind his head to consider Harry. Harry was content to let him have his path, the path of the Dark that was already changing Draco in ways he could notice and, doubtless, in ways that he didn't notice. Certain spells were easier now, others more difficult. He could feel a vague hostility towards any Light wizard, though that died as the days progressed and the wheel of the year since the ritual turned. He found himself more confident, more prone to expressing his opinions. That might have been magic, but it might as easily have been his renewed sense of a place in the wizarding world. He had a solid foundation on which to stand. He was part of a tradition that stretched back generations, and didn't only include Malfoys. He was an adult, in ways that even turning seventeen wouldn't make him.

Harry neither tried to sway him from that road, nor felt inclined to follow it. It was as if he were merely moving in company with Draco, down a parallel but unconnected path.

Yet most people Draco knew argued for their beliefs. Couples ended their love affairs over them. Potter still hadn't approached the Patil bitch again, or at least not on any permanent basis. The state of things between Granger and Smith had settled into something like all-out war. Even Terry Boot's girlfriend, a seventh-year Ravenclaw Draco didn't know, was capable of extended bouts of nasty silence, after which Boot usually apologized.

He and Harry should clash so strongly—Dark-raised and Dark-Declared versus Light-raised and undeclared, pureblood versus halfblood, traditionalist versus revolutionary, ordinary wizard versus Lord-level—that they would be continually driven apart, unless one of them changed his views to support the other. And yet they didn't.

Draco would have felt easier if he could have understood *why*.

Perhaps it's a result of some things that don't change, he decided slowly, as he picked up his Transfiguration text again. Professor Bulstrode would not understand a preoccupation with his lover, no matter who said lover was. *We change, we change all the time, but there are basics that don't. It's the Dark for me, and Harry's love for self-sacrifice, for him.*

Perhaps he should trust to its working, Draco thought, and think less about how it did.

“He is worse than we thought, then.”

Harry simply nodded, not really trusting himself to speak. After some hesitation, he'd decided to tell Jing-Xi about the Horcruxes. If he failed, and Voldemort moved to take over more of the world than Britain, the other Lords and Ladies would need to know the secret of his immortality.

Jing-Xi leaned back in the chair she usually used when they met. Her power crept throughout the room, Harry had found, and wrought subtle transformations, or Transfigurations. The chair grew larger, and with sunbursts along the arms and on the back, or with dark patterns that mimicked the patterns of her waving hair. The stone above the hearth turned rose-colored. A subtle scent of flowers, not ones Harry was familiar with, wafted through the air. Harry assumed they were natural attendants on Jing-Xi, or perhaps on any Light Lady. It wasn't as though he'd ever met one before, to know. Or perhaps she'd made a special study of Transfiguration, or magic of the senses. That might fit with her interests as a research witch.

Before Harry had finished studying the new shape the hearth was sculpting itself into, Jing-Xi leaned forward and captured his attention again. “I will tell the others about Voldemort when I speak to them,” she said. “I will meet Pamela Seaborn, the Light Lady of America, in a week's time. For now, Harry, there is another part of your etiquette training that you have not yet mastered, and should before you make contact with anyone Lord-level other than me.”

“Which part?” Harry sat up nervously. So far, his etiquette training with Jing-Xi had consisted mostly of history, which she'd told him enough of to make his head spin. There was the Pact, which made Lord-level wizards and witches not interfere with each other's magical communities. There were procedures for dealing with wizards and witches like Jing-Xi, whose power grew for decades, and procedures for dealing with wizards and witches whose power had mostly come on them by the end of their second decade, who were more common; Jing-Xi said Tom Riddle had been one of those. There were permissions to be asked before one visited another country that had a Lord or Lady in it, and the reasons those permissions had come about. There was the dizzying dance done to keep those of the Light and those of the Dark away from each other's throats. And there were more names of historical, dead Lords and Ladies than Harry knew if he could remember. But Jing-Xi had spoken relatively little about what Harry should do when he met someone else of his power level in person yet, because, as she had said, she was the only one he would have occasion to meet and not battle for now.

Jing-Xi gestured at the hearth, and then at her chair, which this time was sea-green with the waving patterns done like seaweed, as Harry had thought of the first time he saw her hair. “The signs,” she said. “These are the small, involuntary manifestations of one's magic. They tell a visitor what to expect, and they reassure him or her of honesty. Of course, most wizards and witches of lesser power are surprised or afraid when they see what I do *without* trying—“ she tapped the chair “—so for the most part we keep our magic behind light barriers. In the presence of another Lord or Lady, those barriers constitute a lie. We let them fall. The signs that emerge tell those we meet something about us, our moods and states of mind and health.” She leaned forward and fixed her eyes on Harry. “Each time, I have warded this room so that our magic does not spill outside it. Since I am stronger than you are, you could not destroy Hogwarts by letting go of your power while I am here. Yet that does not happen. You have kept the barriers up. I have no idea what your signs are.”

“I told you about the bird,” said Harry, feeling a touch defensive. “No one else can see it, not just you, and I don't know how to make it become visible.”

Jing-Xi shook her head calmly. “That bird happened only because of the twists that the connection between you and Voldemort has taken since his resurrection. Thomas told me the whole fascinating theory of it. Your signs, Harry, are *yours*. They occur in relation to no other wizard. I want to see them.”

“So would I,” Harry muttered.

Silence. Then Jing-Xi said, with exactly the tone of voice Thomas used when he encountered something completely new, “You don't know what they are?”

Harry shook his head.

He could not have borne pity, but Jing-Xi did not exhibit any. She regarded him with steady dark eyes, then nodded. “I suppose that should not be surprising, since your situation is unusual,” she said. “Drop your barriers, Harry, and we will see them for the first time together. It is an honor. Usually, Lords and Ladies come into their signs so young that they know them thoroughly by the time they meet another of our power.”

Harry swallowed. “I've never dropped my barriers completely before, except during—“ Well, he wasn't about to tell her the

details. That was something shared and private, between him and Draco.

“You cannot hurt the school,” Jing-Xi whispered. “Nor me. If there is anyone in your life you can relax with, Harry, it should be a Lady or a Lord. *Now.*”

Harry worked to still his rapid, panicked breathing, and closed his eyes. He tried, as hard and sincerely as he could, to imagine all his barriers falling, and the magic coming out.

He heard a deep purr as the magic expanded around him. Then Jing-Xi said, “Open your eyes, Harry.”

Harry did, and was startled to find that the room had become bright and deep, the walls splashed with jeweled colors: green, blue, purple, like a jungle dreaming at night. Now and then he thought he saw a tree, but the colors were too abstract to make a true painting. The shadows of animals stalked through the jungle. When Harry focused on them, he saw a snake, golden of scale and green of eye like Sylarana, and a lynx, and a huge black cat with eyes as green as his own, which turned and hissed at him.

“Ah,” Jing-Xi breathed. “That is what your magic does when left to its own devices, Harry.”

“Make a jungle?” Harry tore his gaze away from the circling shadows to face her again.

“*Create,*” Jing-Xi said, severe and serene. She was watching the colors and the animals with an expression of honest wonder, honest pleasure, which made Harry fight to keep from hiding all the magic again at once. A sliding sensation, like raindrops, trickled along his skin. He wasn’t sure if it came from his connection to the magic thrumming all around them, or from her magic interacting with his, or from the fact that someone else was *looking* and *seeing*. “The colors will reflect your dominant moods, I believe. The snake is important to you in capacities you have already explained. The lynx?” One of her tendrils of dark hair waved to point at Harry.

“I think it’ll be my Animagus form.”

Jing-Xi nodded, and held out her hand. One of the dark cats paused in spitting at Harry and trotted to her, delicately extending its nose to sniff her fingers. A bright white spark of lightning leaped between them when it did so. The cat hissed and leaped away with claws that flickered silver, then melted into the colors with the other shadows. Harry realized he was raising his barriers in shock.

“No,” Jing-Xi whispered. “Do not send them away, not yet.”

Reluctantly, Harry forced them down again, and the signs reappeared. Two dark cats followed a golden snake along the far wall, while a lynx played beneath them. A third dark cat coiled in a half-tree and watched Jing-Xi with wariness Harry had sometimes felt on his own features when someone was trying to get him to do something he didn’t like.

“I don’t know what those cats are,” he felt compelled to say.

Jing-Xi smiled and glanced at him. “And I did not know why I changed furniture as I do until I was forty-three,” she said. “Do not worry, Harry. You will figure it out in time.” She sat back and looked at the walls in contentment.

“Should we—“

“Hush,” Jing-Xi whispered. “Your magic is free for the first time in your life, Harry. Enjoy it.”

Harry sat back in his chair and tried. He found it easier to phrase it in his head as words, though; the odd joy and the thrumming traveling his nerves was too new. *This is what I can really do. And it doesn’t hurt anyone. All it wants is to exist by and for itself, to be used and enjoyed. It doesn’t need to answer to anyone else’s call to be worth something.*

His breathing eased, and gold flooded the blue and green and purple like the sun rising in a distant sky.

“Beautiful, Harry,” Jing-Xi said.

And, for the first time, Harry could feel that it really was.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Eight: Missions Accomplished

“If they continue like this, the Quidditch Cup is *ours*,” Katie declared, spooning some potatoes onto her plate.

Connor chewed his own, but made sure to swallow before he spoke. Lately, Hermione, probably because Zacharias had played a prank on her involving it, had been casting impossibly complex hexes on anyone who talked with his mouth full. Ron had already had his mouth moved to the back of his head twice. “I don’t know about that, Katie. Yes, Sam is hopeless, but the rest of the Slytherin team really isn’t bad. They’re just too used to depending on the Seeker, and they haven’t adjusted their strategy to focus on the Chasers and the Beaters yet.”

“You can’t mean that, mate!” Ron exclaimed, leaning over Connor and reaching for the pork chops. “Your brother was the only player on the team worth *anything*.”

Connor shook his head. “Like I said—“

“Then tell me how you expect Hellebore to do anything but hit the Bludger in some direction our Chasers *aren’t*,” Ron interrupted pointedly.

“Well, all right, perhaps focusing their strategy on the Beaters wouldn’t help, either,” Connor admitted.

Ron tore into his meat with a triumphant expression, started to say something, then caught Hermione’s eye and looked down at his plate meekly.

Connor stirred his potatoes and looked around the Great Hall. He wasn’t really hungry, since he’d grabbed a late lunch due to Quidditch practice, and then a nosh from the kitchens to fortify himself for studying later. Besides, lately it seemed as if he couldn’t stop *seeing* things.

He wasn’t sure if it was Harry who had taught him to see that way, or Parvati. Harry had certainly made it necessary in the first place. The brother of the Boy-Who-Lived couldn’t be blind, and there were certain things Harry couldn’t see, even as Connor hadn’t seen certain things when it had been his turn to carry the title. But Parvati was the one who had taught him to tell at a glance who fancied someone else, and whether a couple was having an argument. Connor hadn’t wanted to apply those lessons to Harry and Draco, but since Harry wasn’t going to abandon Malfoy, he’d started to.

He wondered when Ron was going to notice that Lavender had a crush on him, or when Ginny would notice that Dean had a crush on *her*. Merlin knew why Lavender hadn’t approached Ron, since Parvati was the only girl Connor felt comfortable talking to about things like that. But he’d confronted Dean, and Dean had gone all red in the face and muttered something about “respecting Ginny’s grief over Zabini.”

Connor had pointed out that Zabini had been a bloody traitor, and that anyway it had been almost seven months since the siege of Hogwarts and Blaise’s well-deserved expulsion, so why not go and at least ask Ginny for a date? But then Dean started talking about finer feelings, and Connor found reason to be elsewhere.

His gaze went straying down the table, past Ron and Katie’s argument over Quidditch and Hermione’s intent writing of a letter—probably another one to the *Daily Prophet*, to tell them something new she’d discovered or thought of about the Grand Unified Theory—and locked on Parvati. She wasn’t eating much, either, but that wasn’t unusual. The way she toyed with her fork instead of sipping at her pumpkin juice or looking politely around the Great Hall was new, though.

I miss her.

Connor scowled at his plate. He kept missing Parvati, but he wasn’t sure if going up and talking to her would mean that he was apologizing for being wrong. He didn’t want to say he’d been wrong, because he *hadn’t*. Parvati had seen that all her fears were groundless, that Harry had returned to Hogwarts with enough power to level the school but no intention of leveling it. She should be the one to apologize.

Does it matter who is, so long as I break this silence?

Connor chewed the inside of his cheek as he thought about that. He hadn’t thought of it before; he’d just assumed that talking to Parvati would have to include an apology, whether or not he meant it. But if he just went up and talked to her? The worst she could do was ignore him and walk on. And she’d done that for months now anyway.

He made his decision, and stood up, making his way down the table. Parvati looked up quickly at the sound of the bench scraping

back, then turned and stared at her food.

He stopped behind her chair. He could see the back of her neck growing red, and wondered if she was willing him not to talk to her.

“Parvati?”

Her hand tightened on her fork enough that Connor was surprised it didn’t go flying out and clatter against the wall. And now everyone at the Gryffindor table was watching them, including McLaggen. Connor wanted to get somewhere away from his grin, before he went with instinct and punched him. McLaggen was a nasty piece of work. He’d been the one to suggest that they turn Harry over to Voldemort last year, and Connor and Ron had had to sit on him and explain some things very firmly before he saw the light.

He looked back at Parvati, and reminded himself that he wasn’t angry right now, that he couldn’t afford to be. Parvati had turned and was looking at him, really looking at him, for the first time since November.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I want to talk to you,” said Connor. Her eyes widened, and he had to control his reaction; she was so *pretty* when she did that. Her eyes were so big and dark. “In the abandoned classroom on the Charms corridor.”

“Why?” she whispered.

Connor wouldn’t let her hide behind ignorance. If he took a risk by talking to her, then she was going to take the same risk. He folded his arms and frowned at her. “You know why.”

Parvati looked down and spent a minute shredding her napkin. McLaggen, the obnoxious piece of shit, went on grinning. Connor could feel his own neck flushing, but he didn’t move. He was Harry’s brother, and that meant stubborn. And he was a Gryffindor, and that meant brave.

“All right,” Parvati whispered.

Connor started, then remembered where he was, and nodded. “Good,” he said, and marched away from the Great Hall, heading for the Charms corridor. He wouldn’t let himself think about whether this was a good idea or not. He’d suffered in enough silence and in enough impatience. It was time to talk to Parvati and resolve this once and for all, rather than leaving it in this endless drifting space where neither of them knew what would happen next. He wanted his girlfriend back.

Parvati came in quietly, barely stirring the air around her. Connor sat with his back to the door, in a desk, tracing one hand through the dust. He wanted to see what she would do if she thought he hadn’t noticed her. He had forced the matter, but it had to be her choice to talk about this, on some level, or it would never happen—or, at least, it wouldn’t happen the way Connor wanted.

Thank you, Harry, for teaching me that.

She paused. Then her footsteps shuffled nearer and nearer, until Connor could pretend he’d just noticed her. He turned around, and spent a moment or two gazing at her. Her hair was braided with a pink ribbon he’d given her for her birthday last year, and she looked at his face and then away again, as if she didn’t know where to glance. She wore a perfume that Connor was fairly sure was some sort of flower, but he had never bothered to learn what sort it was; he only thought of it as “Parvati’s perfume.”

He stood up. She stood there. A few moments passed, until Connor realized he would have to begin.

“You’re not acting very much like a Gryffindor, you know.”

Parvati jumped as if stung, and then scowled at him. Well, Connor had meant the words to sting. He folded his arms and mimicked her scowl. She mimicked his arm-folding.

“I don’t know what you mean by that,” Parvati said, voice turning icy. “Though I would very much *like* to.”

Connor heard the hardness in her voice, and had to fight to keep from smiling. *There* was the girl he loved—well, liked. Parvati stood her ground. She didn’t run. She should have come to him long before this. He thought she would have, except for what

coming to him would mean admitting.

“You’re not acting brave,” he said. “Were you that scared about being proven wrong? Harry’s my brother. You should have known I wasn’t going to abandon him completely. When I saw you were wrong, then I was on his side. And now you’ve seen that he isn’t going to destroy the school.”

Parvati stirred restlessly, but didn’t answer him.

“Well?” Connor pushed. “The only answers I can think for your waiting this long are that you were scared or stupid, and I know you’re not stupid.”

“It changes *everything!*” Parvati suddenly flared at him, and her hands dropped to her hips. “Don’t you see, Connor? If I admit Harry’s right, then I have to fight beside him. I have to accept Malfoy and all the other Dark wizards and allies he’s got with him. I’ll have to do without house elves and order my meals from Hogsmeade like he does and perform my own cleaning charms, and I don’t *want* to. I grew up with house elves. I like house elves. I’ll have to start thinking differently about centaurs and goblins and all the other magical creatures that I’ve despised because it’s *comfortable* to despise them. If he’s right, then I have to change myself, and I *liked* the person I was.”

Connor blinked. “But you don’t have to change everything,” he said. “Harry doesn’t make people do that. You could accept that he’s not evil and still be wary of Dark wizards and eat the meals the Hogwarts house elves make and—“

“I *know* he doesn’t make people change everything,” Parvati interrupted with a sigh. “That’s become obvious. But *I* would have to change everything, Connor, because that’s the kind of person I am. I can’t stand hypocrisy. I don’t like being wrong, either, but hypocrisy is worse. All my principles have to be in accord. It’s partly because he would be my brother-in-law, but it’s not just that. I was horrified when I found out Dumbledore abused Harry, because that meant I’d been condoning child abuse by following him, even though I didn’t know it. So all my principles have to align and flow from the same place.”

“No, they don’t,” said Connor, because it was the only thing he could think of to say. He hadn’t thought of adopting Harry’s principles that deeply himself. Maybe some day he would stop eating meals prepared by house elves. When they weren’t in Hogwarts would be a good time. And he got principles of free will and treating others well from him, but that was just common sense, wasn’t it? And he had accepted that Draco mattered to Harry, and he would treat Draco that way from now on. But the rest could wait, and since Harry wouldn’t force anyone to change unless they advanced to the point of murder like the Ministry had, Connor saw no need to force *himself* to change.

“Yes, they have to.” Parvati swept a hand through her heavy hair, nearly disordering the ribbon that tied it. “For *me*, they do, because that’s just the way I am. And I’ve talked to Padma, and she’s the same way. But she doesn’t have a problem, since she’s always followed Harry, so it’s not much of a change for her. It’s a bigger change for me.”

“So you’re going to start ordering food from Hogsmeade?”

Parvati nodded, looking unhappy. “Yes, but that’s expensive, and our parents can’t afford to keep sending me money, so I’ll have to perform some cooking charms, too. And get better at conjuring food, and Transfiguring it. I’ll be eating a lot of fruit for a few weeks.” One of the things Professor Belluspersona had showed them how to do was Transfigure dust into apples and pears. They tasted dusty, though, and even the best in the class, Hermione, could only make them taste like slightly rotted apples and pears.

“You don’t have to,” said Connor.

“Yes, I do,” said Parvati, her face taking on a stubborn cast. “I can’t believe something and do things that contradict that.”

Connor frowned at her. “So you think that I’m being a hypocrite because I believe that house elves should be free but I eat Hogwarts food?”

“I didn’t know you believed house elves should be free.”

“Well, I *do*.”

“Then you’re being a hypocrite because you eat Hogwarts food.” Parvati paused. “Unless you’re someone like Malfoy, who can believe one thing but do the opposite. I think he believes all the awful things he used to say about Muggleborns, but he at least treats them civilly now.”

“I’m not a hypocrite,” Connor muttered.

“So you believe one thing but do the opposite?”

“No!”

“So you *are* a hypocrite.”

Connor glared at her. Parvati glared back. Connor tried to remind himself that this was one of the things he loved about her—well, liked a lot—that she would retort and think she was right instead of just folding in an argument the way a lot of girls would. But all he could think right now was that when people converted to Harry’s principles, they seemed to pick up his arguing style, too. Parvati wouldn’t have cared if Connor was like Malfoy, but he wasn’t, so she expected better from him, the way Harry expected better from someone who accepted the Grand Unified Theory.

“You’re stubborn,” said Connor at last.

“I’m a stubborn witch who’s going to apologize to Harry and get a lot better at Transfiguration,” Parvati agreed calmly. Connor realized he should have talked to her before two months had passed. She’d had too much time to think about what she’d do. “And you? What are you going to do?”

“I want you to be my girlfriend again.”

“We can do that,” said Parvati. “But you need to think about not eating Hogwarts food, and cleaning your own bed.”

“I don’t know cleaning charms.”

“I can teach you.”

“I’m horrible with Transfiguring dust into food.”

“I’ll share my fruit.”

“I don’t—it’s just *convenient*, Parvati, that’s all.”

“I’m sure Harry will help you buy food if you need to. And you have the Potter fortune, too.”

Connor sighed. Both my brother and my girlfriend are determined to hound me. *And when I confronted Parvati, I gave her the courage to make this change she was hesitating about, so in a way it’s my fault.* “We’ll see.”

Parvati gave him a brilliant smile and reached out to clasp his arm. “And we’ll argue about it until you *do* see.”

Being the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived is hard, Connor lamented, but then Parvati kissed him, and he could put his arms around her and kiss her back, and that was different enough from anything he’d done in months that he didn’t think about the argument for a while.

Parvati approached Harry on Saturday morning. It was technically a Saturday he was supposed to visit the monitoring board, Connor knew, but there had been some problem with the Light members of the monitoring board refusing to accept the presence of Draco and Snape at their next meeting. So Harry had written to them, and they’d written back, and he’d written again, and they hadn’t settled their dispute enough to agree on a meeting date yet.

Parvati marched straight up to the Slytherin table while Harry and Draco were eating breakfast and arguing about something. Knowing them, Connor thought, it could be anything from the monitoring board to Quidditch. Draco saw her first, and he hissed and drew his wand, leaning on Harry in a way Connor found funny. It practically screamed *Mine!* about Harry, and if anyone else in the school did still fancy Harry and want to date him, Connor thought they would know they’d lost their chance, just from looking at Draco.

Plenty of other eyes were watching the Slytherin table now. Parvati cleared her throat in what was almost silence. There were still a few conversations going on at the far side of the Gryffindor table, and one at the Hufflepuff table centered on Zacharias Smith, but Parvati’s voice was loud and defiant enough to override them.

“I wanted to congratulate you, Harry,” she said.

Connor could see his brother’s eyes narrowing. He would be expecting an insult of some sort. Draco looped his wand in a lazy flick that Connor recognized as the opening move of a Severing Curse, and Harry’s hand gripped his wrist and forced it up at the last moment, so he couldn’t complete the spell. Connor didn’t like the fact that both moves were practiced. *Is Draco always that wand-happy?*

“For what?” Harry asked, politely enough.

“Because you’ve changed my mind.” Parvati cocked her head at him. “You were right, and I was wrong. You’re right about house elves needing to be freed, if the only reason they think well of us is that we’ve enchanted them to think that way. And you’re right about centaurs and goblins. They’ve been free for months, but they haven’t attacked us. And the Ministry should never have legalized werewolf killing.” She hesitated, and Connor could almost *smell* her gathering her courage. “And the Light owes you a debt, because we followed a man who treated you so badly, and for so long,” she said, forcing herself through the words. “So I agree with you now, and I’m going to start Transfiguring my food.”

Harry looked utterly gobsmacked. Connor treasured the expression. It wasn’t often he got to see that on his brother’s face.

Before he could say anything—not that Connor knew how he could do anything but accept the apology—there was a movement at the Ravenclaw table. Terry Boot stood up and moved away from the bench so that he was standing at Parvati’s level, though still a distance from her. “And I wanted to say that she’s right,” said Terry. “I don’t know if I can start eating food that house elves haven’t prepared yet, but I’m using cleaning charms on my bed and my clothes already, Harry. And you’re right. It doesn’t take long. There’s no reason that we should have to depend on house elves when we have our own magic.” He coughed and looked around, as though he didn’t know why the entire Great Hall was watching him, then gave Harry a stiff nod and sat down again.

Someone moved at the Hufflepuff table. Susan Bones stood up and bit her lip as Connor watched. She was flushing to the roots of her blonde hair, and since she had very clear skin, it was immediately noticeable.

“Um,” she said. “Um. My aunt was wrong, Harry. I thought you should know. And I’m learning cleaning charms so I can take care of my bedroom.” She paused. “Um. That’s all.” She sat down again with the look of someone spared execution.

Connor turned around to watch Harry’s face. He looked as if he had suddenly seen three phoenixes fly through the room. He took his hand from Draco’s wrist, using his shoulder, from the looks of it, to block some other spell, and leaned across the table to clasp Parvati’s arm.

“Thank you,” he said, using a subtle charm on his voice that made it seem to sound in the ears of every person in the Great Hall. “I know how much it cost you to admit that. Change is never easy, and a change so fundamental to the way we live especially isn’t.” He looked straight into Parvati’s face. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to make you understand how much I appreciate this.”

Parvati smiled in a way that would have made Connor jealous if he hadn’t known that Harry was only interested in Draco, and Parvati was only interested in him, and Draco would have drawn and quartered anyone else who touched Harry with romantic intent, anyway. “Your eyes say it pretty well,” she said, and squeezed Harry’s hand. “Thank you. It took me forever to make up my mind, but Connor gave me the courage to do it yesterday.” She turned her head and fixed her eyes proudly on Connor.

And then everyone in the Great Hall was looking at *him*. Luckily, Connor had four years of practice in dealing with that. He nodded back to all their looks, and ignored the frankly disbelieving expressions, like the one that came from Hermione.

What? He hoped his manner conveyed that silent message. *I give people the courage to declare their minds all the time.*

Inwardly, of course, he was beaming, and he let the beam flood his face when Parvati walked away from the Slytherin table and gave him a kiss, and then Ron clapped him on the back hard enough to stagger him, and some of the people in the Great Hall actually started *applauding*. Headmistress McGonagall joined in, too, her eyes more than proud.

Connor grinned, and kissed Parvati back, and waited until they were done before he went away to fly, because flying was the only way he knew how to deal with joy this extreme.

Dart and roll and dip and *turn*, and the turn whipped him around so fast that Connor felt as if the blood were sloshing in his head. He pulled up, laughing.

He wondered that Harry didn't fall from the Firebolt he rode, since he didn't use it that often. Connor, of course, rode the one Harry'd got him for Christmas all the time, when Ron wasn't taking turns on it, and he knew how to master it. By now, he knew almost everything about it, including how to stay on when it turned upside-down because he gave it the wrong command.

The wooden broom and Snitch that Mark had sent him, which he'd enchanted to dart around like the golden Snitch, drifted past him. They were slower than the real thing, but they gave him training in catching things that were almost invisible, since they didn't shine. Connor put out his hand and caught them both at once, laughing again. He had a fast broom under him, he had the Pitch to himself to practice, why shouldn't he be happy?

A yank centered behind his navel, so hard that Connor gasped. His first thought was that he was falling from the Firebolt, or that someone had hexed the broom to tip him off. Then he recognized the colors dancing all around him, and he realized he was in the middle of a Portkeying.

But I checked the broom and the Snitch for Portkey spells—

But not for time-delayed Portkey spells, or ones that only activate when two objects are put together.

He was cursing when the colors spun him out in an unfamiliar place, and he let go of the wooden broom and Snitch as soon as he could. He turned his head quickly to take in his surroundings, clamping his legs on the Firebolt. *From now on, no opening unfamiliar gifts in the post*, he told himself sternly.

He hovered above an enormous garden, which made him think of Indigena Yaxley, which made him tense up enough to cause the Firebolt to swerve to one side. But none of the plants reached for him and tried to devour him, so that was reassuring. The garden was mostly snow and rock, anyway, with the black stones arranged to thrust above the snowbanks in what Connor supposed was some sort of artistic pattern. He didn't know; he'd never been interested in gardening, and the estates at Lux Aeterna were under the care of the brownies.

There was one clear patch in a corner of the garden, he saw. An enormous bush grew there, obviously protected by warming charms from the winter, and white blossoms nodded on it. Other flowers grew in a circle around it; Connor could see their colors from here. He bit his lip and tried to remember what he could about plants like that from Herbology. The big bush was hawthorn, wasn't it?

"Welcome, Connor."

He whipped the Firebolt in a circle. A man had just rounded a stone wall that Connor assumed backed up on a house, though the wall tingled with wards that rendered the building itself invisible. He had a large grin, and dark eyes, and dark hair, and Connor hadn't seen him often, but the first time was by the lake in Hogwarts the night he found out he wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived after all, and that was hard to forget.

"Rosier," he said, and hoped that his voice didn't shake. A Gryffindor was supposed to be brave. He was too busy concentrating on the other man's wand hand to notice if his voice *did* shake.

The Death Eater laughed, and undid his left sleeve, tilting his arm so that Connor could see the Dark Mark. "Really," he said. "I would have thought you would be wari-er of someone writing to you with the name of *Mark*."

And Connor felt like a fool, but at least he was only a fool. He wasn't a crazy bastard.

"You're a crazy bastard," he told Rosier.

Rosier didn't appear to appreciate hearing this, for all that it was true. He turned his left arm so that Connor could no longer see the Mark—and that was fine, he didn't want to look at it, it was all *ugly*, and made uglier by the red pattern around it, as though it were infected—and drew his wand.

Connor put one hand on his own wand, but he knew he wouldn't be able to stand up to most of the curses Rosier threw. He'd used a Severing Curse on Hermione in the Midsummer battle, and Hermione was magically stronger than Connor was. So Connor should only meet Rosier spell for spell if he absolutely had to.

A deep buzzing rode his ears. He wasn't sure if he was afraid or not. Trembling raced through his muscles, but that could be from the adrenaline that was crashing into his veins. He could *feel* it coming, and it made him remember that this man had been there when Harry's hand was cut off. Connor wasn't sure he could fight him, but he wasn't sure if he could depend on rescue, either, so

he would have to try.

And if he'd wanted an easy kill, Rosier *really* shouldn't have transported him aboard his Firebolt.

Rosier cast a curse that bloomed in racing tongues of blue flame. Before it was halfway to him, Connor was safely away, spinning his broom around in a circle that was usually used to chase an unwilling Snitch. The flames sprouted past him and then died uselessly in midair.

Rosier used a lightning curse. One couldn't outrun a lightning curse, as Moody had taught them in those thirteen frantic days before Midsummer, but one could fool an enemy into putting it where one wasn't. Connor dodged to the left, and so Rosier cast the curse to the left, but by then Connor was blasting away to the right.

He wondered if he should race away across the landscape, in turn. But he had no clue where he was, no clue if there were other Death Eaters around, and no idea if perhaps Rosier could take the wooden broom and Snitch and use them to get inside Hogwarts's wards. If he did, then it would be Connor's fault. And there were the people who might be in the house, too. Maybe Rosier had killed them all, but maybe not.

And the thought lingered in Connor's mind that if he could kill or wound Rosier, then he wouldn't be able to hurt Harry in the future.

One thing, at least, he had to do. So while Rosier incanted a long and complicated pain curse, Connor swept in low to the ground. Rosier paused to watch him, and laughed, as if he were wondering if Connor would crash his broom and saw him the trouble.

Connor was looking, though. He found the wooden broom and Snitch lying in the snow, and he flicked his wand, thinking, *Incendio!* A moment later, they were charred ashes, and Rosier wasn't going anywhere using them.

Rosier didn't like that. He snarled, and some cutting curse caught Connor across the back. He yelled, and rose straight up into the air, cursing between his teeth at the pain. It hurt like *fire*, it hurt like *hell*, it hurt like a hit by a razor-tipped Bludger right across his muscles and flesh—

It made him really *angry*.

Professor Snape had told him once that when he was angrier, or thinking about defending Harry, his magic got stronger. He turned around and aimed his wand in Rosier's general direction. The spell he wanted to cast didn't need to be aimed directly at Rosier.

“*Calefacto!*”

The ground around Rosier heated, the snow rising in a cloud of steam. A moment later, Rosier gave a faint yelp. He might find the pain pleasant, from what Harry had told Connor, but at least the steam blocked his vision and gave Connor a moment to circle and think about what spell would take the crazy bastard out.

Not a spell.

Connor debated for a single fierce moment about whether or not this was right, but he had even less time to think about it than he'd had in the Midsummer battle. As the steam dissipated, he leaned over his broom and caught Rosier's eye. Rosier had his head upturned, and was laughing, and quoting some poet. Connor made himself not pay attention to that. Instead, he swung his will like a whip, sending home a lash of compulsion directly into Rosier's brain.

Drop your wand.

Rosier's hand opened, and his wand tumbled to the dirt. At the same time, his thoughts began to writhe in Connor's hold, fighting him. Connor grimaced. The feel of his mind was unpleasant, pulpy. The only time he'd felt something more disgusting was when he'd briefly tried to compel Voldemort in Sirius's body to let him go, when that madman had captured him in third year and tried to use him against Harry. *That* had been dark and stinking corruption, and this wasn't much better. It was very hard to compel someone insane.

And what he should do with the compulsion...

Connor swallowed. He knew what he should probably do, especially since Rosier hadn't just hurt Harry. He'd hurt Hermione so badly she had to spend months in bed, and before that he'd caught her last winter and done something she still wouldn't talk

about. So Connor should make sure he couldn't cause any more trouble.

His morals fought against it, though. Could he look into Rosier's eyes and send the silent command *Die*, and really mean it?

He'd never tried. He'd just controlled people's bodies and changed their thoughts.

Rosier very nearly fought free from him; his mind made a flapping fish look dry. Connor took a deep breath, and started to turn his Firebolt back to where he could clearly see Rosier's face.

"Enjoying yourself, Evan?"

The instant shock of hatred that flooded Rosier's mind made Connor lose his grip. He cursed and spun higher, clutching his wand as he watched a woman stride from around the wall and towards Rosier. She was smiling, he thought, but she looked so strange that it was hard to be sure.

This was Indigena Yaxley. Connor knew it by the green tendrils in her hair and the way two thorns trailed behind her like obedient puppies. And, from this angle, the shadows in her skin were so prominent that she looked like a walking bush. He shuddered and flew higher.

Rosier was snarling at Yaxley, the kind of low sound Connor thought a rabid werewolf would make. Yaxley didn't seem at all bothered by it. She halted a few feet away from Rosier and gazed at him. Connor couldn't see if she was looking at one specific place on his body, or something he carried.

"Having bad dreams, Evan?" she all but whispered.

Rosier screamed, snatching up his wand, and the next minute Yaxley burst into flames. Well, she tried, at least. Her leaves writhed and danced, and then the fire went out. Yaxley shook her head as she drew her wand.

"Really, Evan, you must learn to control yourself," she murmured. "Fire is such a pedestrian weapon. I had thought my thorns taught you more refined methods of pain." She looked up at Connor and waved a hand at him. "Hello!" she called. "Sorry for this, but we did have to perform a test, and you were made the subject a long time ago. I would have been here sooner, but—"

Someone else came around the stone wall. Connor blinked, and fought the urge to rub his eyes. *Mrs. Parkinson? What is she doing here? Well, I suppose it could be her house...*

He'd met Hawthorn several times now, most recently at Christmas, and she'd always impressed him as a kind and thoughtful person, even though she was Dark. He did not know what to make of the expression on her face now, as she gazed at Indigena Yaxley. Yaxley watched her back as if she had all the time in the world.

Hawthorn and Rosier cast curses both at once, though Hawthorn's was red and Rosier's was black. Both hit Yaxley and bounced, the tight shield of plants beneath her skin doing the work, Connor supposed. He flew in a tight little circle, trying to decide what he should do. Curses were flying now, incredibly fast, and he knew he wasn't good enough to go and help. And he wasn't sure if he ought to attack Yaxley or Rosier, either. He didn't know who was more dangerous.

Then Rosier turned away from Yaxley and lifted his wand to the sky. Connor braced himself as a red zigzag flew out. This was a Hunting Curse, and it would follow him wherever he went on the broom. Rosier had probably only waited to use it because Hunting Curses didn't cause much pain, and he wanted to play.

"Evan, honestly," said Yaxley, like someone annoyed by the actions of a small child, and pointed her wand at the Hunting Curse. It dissipated. She closed her eyes in the next moment, bowing her head and laying her wand across her left arm. Connor had to admit to a reluctant admiration, that she could simply stand there and ignore all the magic that Hawthorn was firing, and the other woman's enraged, hate-filled screams.

The next moment, Rosier howled as if stung by bees, and then Apparated out. Yaxley glanced up at Connor and waved again.

"We'll see each other. I look forward to the meeting," she said, with a smile, and Apparated herself. And then Connor was hovering over Hawthorn Parkinson's garden with melted snow beneath him and the sizzle of curses fading around him, and the cut across his shoulders stinging like hell.

Hawthorn lowered her wand only slowly. She was looking at the hawthorn bush with the flowers around it, Connor saw. Her face was blank, but slowly filling with emotions he didn't want to see.

And he needed help.

“Um, Mrs. Parkinson?”

Hawthorn shook her head sharply and glanced up. A moment later, the frightening expression was gone, and she gave a sad little smile.

“This is not the way I would have chosen to bring you to my home, Mr. Potter,” she murmured. “But, nevertheless, welcome to the Garden. If you’ll come down, I’ll heal your wounds, and Apparate you back to Hogwarts.”

Connor nodded, and told himself his wariness was of no account. Hawthorn had been a Death Eater. That didn’t mean she still was. He took the Firebolt down slowly, as the cut hurt more and more, and plowed a trail in the snow as he landed.

Hawthorn didn’t appear to notice. She was looking at the hawthorn bush again.

Then she shook her head and turned to Connor, her mouth thinning. “I don’t know how they got through my wards,” she said. “But I will learn. And I will find and kill Indigena Yaxley.”

Connor shivered, and not from the cold.

The next moment, Hawthorn was the kind woman he had met at Christmas again, circling behind him to exclaim softly over his wound, and mix scolding for staying in the battle with praise for how well he had done. Connor relaxed. He was used to mothers.

He did wonder why Rosier had wanted him here in the first place, and what Indigena Yaxley had come for. But, well—

Rosier is a crazy bastard. And Yaxley is the Thorn Bitch. Do either of them really need a reason for whatever insanity they planned? They were both mad enough to become Death Eaters.

He was much more interested in the cessation of pain from his cut, and then what he would say to Harry—well, try to say—to avoid a scolding when he returned home.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Fifty-Nine: Hail, Joy

Harry put his forehead in his hand. “Right,” he said, but his voice sounded hollow even to him. “So you received a wooden Snitch *after* you received a silver Snitch from a man you knew was Rosier?”

“Yes.” Connor sounded sulky and defiant and embarrassed all at once. He had sounded that way ever since Hawthorn brought him back to the school and explained to Harry, in quiet but emphatic terms, his little adventure. Harry had then been forced to deal with Connor’s explanation, which emphasized what he called “heroics” and played down what Harry was inclined to call “stupidity.”

He would have asked Hawthorn to remain and add details, but the look in her eyes, frozen and dark, had made him realize how badly she needed to be alone. She had just realized that her daughter’s murderer was still alive, her vengeance still incomplete, and unlikely to be completed any time soon, if the way that Indigena resisted her curses was any indication.

There were words Harry could have spoken about vengeance and obsession. The latter passion was one he knew himself, in at least half its variations. But he had thought it best to let her go.

I can’t dictate the terms of her emotions to her, especially when the biggest step she took to get over grieving Pansy turns out to be a false one. And who knows? She may yet get to kill Indigena in battle. We’re enemies.

So instead he sat in the Room of Requirement, the quietest place he could find on such short notice. The Gryffindor common room and the Slytherin one were both full of students studying or playing, since the weather outside was too foul to encourage anyone to go there, and Draco was studying Animagus training in their bedroom and wouldn’t want to be disturbed. And anyway, he would have been too eager to help punish Connor.

“Why didn’t you *tell* me about this Mark person?” Harry decided that was the most important thing to settle. He could accept his brother being this mistaken, actually. It wasn’t even as bad as the willful stupidity Connor had set himself on in third year, when

he had understood the general terms of the situation between Harry and Lily but refused to find out specifics. Harry couldn't figure out why Connor hadn't told him about Mark at all.

"Because his information matched the information that you were sending from Woodhouse, and I thought he was a real person," Connor explained. "And—well, I knew you would probably say it was dangerous, Harry. And you knew I was writing someone. A friend."

"I didn't know about the name, and the gifts."

Connor scoffed. "Tell me that you would have thought the name actually a *clue*, Harry. Yes, it was a pun on the Dark Mark, but there are *real* people named Mark, you know."

Harry controlled the impulse to grab his brother by the shoulders and shake him. For one thing, he only had one hand, and that meant it would hardly be an impressive gesture. For another, perhaps he wouldn't have picked it up, either. He had to admit the justice of Connor's observation.

But the Snitches were something else again.

"Why did you continue corresponding with him when he left Woodhouse?" he asked, controlling his own impulse to ask more questions about that. Connor had already admitted that he knew nothing about Mark but what "Mark" told him, and it was extremely unlikely Rosier would have given any information away when he started his little game in Hawthorn's garden. Harry wondered if Connor had yet worked out that Rosier's accurate information about Woodhouse meant they had a traitor somewhere in their ranks.

"I wanted to. He wrote me as a friend, not just because I was the brother of the Boy-Who-Lived." Connor shrugged, but the expression on his face was not entirely mutinous; it was wistful, too. "I'm sure you don't need reminding of this, Harry, but it gets a little lonely being in the shadow of that name."

Harry caged words that would have done more harm than good behind his teeth, and nodded. It would have been worse for Connor than for him, even, because Connor had had twelve years of believing that he *was* the Boy-Who-Lived, while Harry's training had managed to insulate him from jealousy and loneliness for nearly that long.

"That makes more sense, then," he said. "But the *Snitches*, Connor."

"I tested the wooden one for Portkey spells!" Connor folded his arms. "And other spells that I thought could harm me. But I didn't think to look for a time-delayed Portkey spell. Tell me that you would have thought to look for it, Harry. Look me in the eye and say that."

And then something very strange happened. Harry's first impulse was to sigh and glance away, again admitting the justice of what Connor said.

What he said was, "I wouldn't have *needed* to look for it, because I would have been suspicious about the second Snitch I received after the silver one, and taken it to someone like Peter, who could help me look for spells like that."

His tone was snappish, even. Harry blinked. Connor, sitting across from him, seemed taken aback.

The next moment, Harry held up his hand and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Connor. No. I didn't even know time-delayed Portkey spells were possible. But Rosier consistently does the impossible." He leaned forward. "I'm glad that you're all right, more than anything." *Even though I want to yell at you for being stupid.* But the yelling would only make Connor more mulish and stubborn and devoted to argument, and right now Harry needed the details of the battle from him. "Now, tell me everything that you can remember about the conversation Rosier and Yaxley had."

Connor relaxed and did. Harry bit his lip hard when he heard Yaxley's comment about bad dreams. He knew a man who had had more than his share of those in the past few months.

"And how did Rosier react?" he asked.

Connor shrugged. "He went mad. I don't know. I thought it was a reference to a private joke."

And there's the infected Dark Mark. Harry did not yet know what to make of that. Snape's Dark Mark had been infected before the Midsummer battle. So had Lucius's, Hawthorn's, Adalrico's, and Peter's. And Regulus's had been infected before he departed

into the paintings. Harry had assumed at the time that it was some new trick of Voldemort's, and had ended when Harry cut the hole in his magical core, blocking his ability to reach out to his former Death Eaters across that distance.

But perhaps the potions Snape had brewed to ease the pain of the infected Marks both before and after the battle had had their effect. Lucius, who hadn't taken those potions until he was able to enter Hogwarts, had had the infection longer than the others. Rosier, meanwhile, had been without them entirely, and the red tracing Connor described around his Mark sounded familiar from the infection patterns Harry had seen.

Of course, there was the question of why Rosier and Yaxley would have lured Connor to Hawthorn's garden at all, and why Yaxley's question had made Rosier so angry, if he already knew the infected Dark Mark was connected to his nightmares.

"Harry?"

"Hmmm?" Harry looked up, to see Connor pushing his chair back from the table the room had conjured for them, and looking apologetic.

"Do you need any more details, or can I leave? Only I should tell Parvati that I'm back. Merlin knows if she's heard anything by now, but I want to tell her myself that I'm all right."

Harry nodded and smiled. "Yes, we're done. And be sure to tell her thanks again for her announcement this morning."

Connor's face softened, and a proud smile overtook it—a smile that Harry had sometimes felt on his face when he looked at Draco, or seen on Lucius's when he looked at Narcissa's. "She's something, isn't she?" he said quietly, and then turned away and left before Harry could answer.

Harry stood. He would contact the other former Death Eaters—well, he would speak face-to-face with Peter and Snape, and send a letter to Lucius—and ask them about bad dreams and infected Dark Marks. He expected a negative answer, though. Snape's dreams had been Sanctuary dreams, from what he knew, and Joseph would have been able to sense if there were evil intent within them. And none of his other allies had reported nightmares.

But there was the chance of—

What?

Well, he really could not say what, unless he knew what Yaxley and Rosier had planned. There was the question of Snape's dreams, and the Dark Marks, and the traitor in Woodhouse.

And there was the moment when Harry had snapped at Connor, allowing his anger and sarcasm brief rein, instead of the sympathy that he knew were most effective after the initial scolding.

Harry shook his head as he left the Room of Requirement. *That one, I don't understand. Has some other barrier broken in me? Was it a sign that I'm letting myself go more? Joseph will know. I should seek his opinion on Snape's dreams, anyway.*

"No," said Joseph firmly. "Severus's dreams were normal for the Sanctuary, Harry. They brought him face-to-face with bad memories he'd suppressed. It's usually only those memories that any person faces, since they've had a chance to get past and heal from others. The rare exception is torments that keep recurring as if they were still happening, and then the dreams take care to show those entrenched sorrows from another angle. And the dreams have ceased now. He told you that?"

Harry nodded. "He said he'd returned to having dreams that he can hardly remember unless they're particularly vivid, and that's the normal state of things with him." Snape had scowled when he asked, and that more than anything else had reassured Harry he was growing stronger, beginning to escape from the long prison of his memories. The half-hysterical defensiveness he'd displayed at the beginning of the autumn term was still clear in Harry's own memory.

"That is Severus," Joseph agreed. He leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of him. "And you had some other reason for coming to talk to me today, Harry. What was it?"

Harry grinned ruefully. "Am I that obvious?"

"Now, you are."

Harry nodded and leaned back, half-closing his eyes as he sought to describe his unusual outburst with Connor. Joseph waited. Harry had learned to like the listening silence that surrounded the man, silence of a different quality than that around Vera, which always suggested half-heard answers. If nothing else, when Joseph was waiting to speak, he wasn't actually speaking the complex statements that made Harry reevaluate himself often and sometimes hate him a little.

"I spoke to Connor for one moment without controlling my emotions," Harry began carefully. "I told him that I would have taken the mysterious gifts he was receiving, which endangered his life today, at once to someone more experienced with Dark magic so he could check them for unknown spells. But the truth is that I might not have, so I was being hypocritical. Besides, it wasn't the best thing to say at that point in time. Connor needed comfort and gentleness and caring just then. He'd just been kidnapped by Rosier and nearly killed, for Merlin's sake. So I don't know why I said it. I wondered if it was a sign of something else strange happening in me, a barrier that's been let down which I didn't know was falling."

Joseph said nothing. Harry waited until he couldn't stand it any longer, and then peeked from under his eyelids so that he could see the expression on Joseph's face. Joseph had his mouth slightly open, and then he broke into delighted laughter as Harry watched. He blinked.

"Er. Sir?"

Joseph held up a hand and shook his head. Harry waited for the laughter to stop, smiling himself in the meantime, and trying not to let worry conquer his gladness at the sight of so much merriment. Was something wrong? Had he broken some barrier Joseph hadn't anticipated him breaking?

Finally, the laughter stopped enough to let the Seer speak. Joseph still had traces of it in his eyes and around his mouth as he leaned forward and fixed his gaze on Harry.

"What you have done is entirely normal," he said.

"For what stage of barrier-breaking?" Harry asked.

"I mean, *normal*," Joseph said. "We all make slips of the tongue, Harry. We all say insensitive things at the wrong moment. And we're all hypocrites sometimes. I've had a rather forceful reminder of that in the last five months, talking with Severus. He would have been breathing fire if you'd tried to have dreams and hide their contents from him in the same way he did with you. Yet he had no problem preserving those memories for conversations between us, and he deliberately made the conversations as uncomfortable for me as he could—the one thing he would have insisted that you not do in your own healing."

"So that means... what?" Harry waved his hand in the air and let it fall.

"Welcome to the real world, Harry." Joseph no longer had the laughter in his expression, but he smiled with his eyes and his lips and his whole face, the most sincere and deepest smile Harry had seen in a long time. "You've advanced to the point where you can make mistakes and not feel such guilt over them that you castigate yourself for days. And it's with your brother, no less, once the whole center and pivot of your existence. That is such a good sign that I cannot quite name how important it is."

"But—" Harry had a sudden horrible vision of himself prancing through the world and hurting people without realizing it. Merlin knew he did enough of that already, because he simply didn't *understand* some of the principles others took for granted. "Does that mean I'm doomed to be a hypocrite and inflict wounds on souls?"

"No more than all of us," said Joseph firmly. "And yes, Harry, that does happen—with me, with Severus, with your Malfoy, with your brother, with you, with *everyone*. What I think you've failed to understand this time is that those mistakes aren't unforgivable. One can be selfish and make up for it later. Or someone can take a wound that stings one day and forget about it entirely the next. Not everyone holds grudges for a lifetime. Not everyone will hate you and plot vengeance against you for a slight. And you need not beggar yourself, in time or money, making extravagant gestures of sympathy and appeal and submission to those you've wronged."

Harry blinked at the far wall. He'd known that all his life, of course, but it seemed like a revelation to him.

This is the first time I've felt it, I think. Before, I might have believed it, but it was only an intellectual belief. This is like the difference between someone telling me I can fly on a broom and actually doing it.

"So I don't have to be perfect," he whispered.

“If there are any traces of that remaining in you, Harry, get rid of them,” Joseph responded, sounding serious now. “There is no way for you to be perfect anyway, but in the waters you’ve chosen to swim, it’s especially important. If you flinch from every instance of hurting someone, you can’t argue for free will in any capacity. If you try in haste to repair every mistake you make, you’ll cause worse wounds. And if you think that you’re doing all you can and no one can blame you for certain moves or motives, then you’ll end up selfish without even realizing it. Someone can *always* blame you. Escaping blame isn’t the thing that matters.”

Harry immediately thought of the Horcruxes, and how his studying obsessively about them must have seemed selfish to Draco, and perhaps also to Regulus, who had risked his life for the information and felt so bad on the day he gave it to Harry. And what would have happened if Harry had insisted on intervening in Loki’s sacrifice, simply because it made him feel bad to watch the death and he wanted Loki to live? Selfishness, again, though he could tell himself it wasn’t because he was rescuing someone else from certain death and rescuing the pack from having to become cannibals.

Everything is selfish from some perspective.

Ideas he hadn’t had before cracked like lightning across his mind. *And what I need to do is establish a perspective I can trust. Self-critical, of course, because a vates needs to be. Honest, because I need to detect lies in myself. But critical of others, too, because they’re not always whitewashed, and able to make declarations and enforce certain boundaries when they’re hurting others—or me, I matter too—and able to forgive myself when I’ve done something that isn’t really all that great a mistake.*

He leaned forward and put his head in his hand.

“Harry?” Joseph had crossed the room in one stride and crouched beside him with his fingers resting on his arm.

“I’m all right,” Harry whispered. “Just give me a moment.”

He was seeing a new vision in his mind, which was also a very old one: the winding path of possibilities, twined in green and gold, the colors of Dark and Light, leading away before him, providing a chance to correct mistakes once made, and the more glorious for mistakes and errors and other times when the walker would slip and fall, flowering with all the grander chances and potential inherent in the soul.

Only this time, the path was his.

And he imagined that twining with all the paths that other people could take, snaking among them, intersecting with certain threads and cutting off others and tangling in a complicated relationship of snarl and counter-snarl with still more, and whirling apart and around and continuing on, but always coming back, dancing with Draco and his enemies and his friends and Connor and the centaurs and the house elves and the dead and Voldemort, because they all shared the same world. The dead, if nothing else, had a mental share in the world of the living.

He would still need to be careful, because his mistakes could cause more damage than the mistakes of others, thanks to the responsibilities he’d picked up. But he had the opportunity to do more good, too, and he would never fulfill those opportunities if he never took a risk and expanded his boundaries to learn what he could do. He had before only used confrontation and direct consultation when pushed. Even the conversations with Joseph, which had done him so much good, had taken Snape giving him a push to enter.

But that was silly. His own word should be enough. His own dedication should be enough, helped along but not solely provided by others. He had to be active in dancing his own path, because no one else was going to do it for him without making him less than he could be in the process.

A wave of light crashed into his mind.

And that’s why Lily’s treatment of me was wrong. I said once I mourned for all the people she could have been. But she took away the people I could have been, too. And that was wrong, as wrong with me as it would have been if she’d done it to Connor, if Lucius had done it to Draco, if Parvati’s parents had done it to her.

People had told him that before. Harry had been willing to mouth the words.

Now, he *felt* it.

He realized he was crying, or, at least, something like tears rimmed his eyes. He touched them with a finger, and wondered if they came from sadness or joy. Was he thinking more about the past and the waste it had been, or the future and what he could still

have, now that he knew this?

He did regret, fiercely, certain parts of Lily's training now that before he had valued, especially his ability to withdraw behind emotional walls. How much of life had it kept him from?

But he would not allow the regret to destroy him, any more than he could allow one obsession to consume him. He was changing, growing, and if she had marked him, she made up an increasingly smaller part of who he was. He had said as much when he defended her at the trial. Then, though, he had not thought of growing more. He had believed he would always retain the exact same balance of Lily's training and his own thoughts, the new ones.

He hadn't. He was moving on, had moved on already, and was starting to begin a new life.

He could make mistakes now, and it was all right. He could do normal things if he wanted to, and it was all right. And he could make the decisions that he still needed to make, because he was *vates* and this was war, and it was all right. And he could defend those decisions, because he needed to trust himself.

It was all right.

He stood and shook his head. Joseph drew slowly back from him, his eyes wide, focused in that way that Harry knew meant he was looking at the complex of his soul, not the surface of his body.

"I—" And Joseph was silent and shook his head. Harry wondered if he could explain what he saw. It was all right if he couldn't. Harry didn't think he could describe his own vision to the Seer right now, either. Perhaps later, when it wouldn't feel like blasphemy to put it into words.

He smiled at him, said, "Pardon me. There are things I need to do," and then turned and made his way rapidly back down the dungeon hallways, to a door he'd shut behind him not an hour before.

Snape looked up sharply from his purple potion when a knock sounded on his door. He cast the last Permanence Charm he needed to keep the belladonna from reacting with the palm leaves while still watching the door mistrustfully. Who could be coming to see him at this time of day, on a Saturday? Harry had been here not long ago. Snape had no detentions planned. And he didn't want to talk to Joseph right now, because it would undoubtedly turn into a lecture on the morality of brewing poisons.

Whoever it was knocked again, and then Harry's voice called out, "Severus? Please, I need to talk to you."

Snape rapidly cast the standard stasis spell that would keep the potion in exactly the same state he left it, and then strode across his office. He could hear a catch in Harry's voice, and that he had called him by his first name without prompting—

He flung his door open, and found Harry leaning against the wall with his head bowed. Snape reached down, ready to gather him into his office, support him from falling, or do whatever else needed to be done.

Harry lifted his head.

Snape could only stare, transfixed. He had never seen pure, unclouded joy in Harry's eyes before. He was not sure he had seen it at all for fifteen years, since the day on which most people believed Voldemort to be defeated forever.

Harry laughed, and then flung his arms around Snape, a hug neither companionable nor consoling. Snape did not know what to make of it, and stood there, arms frozen, hands twitching.

"Thank you," Harry whispered. "I finally understand why you brought my parents and Dumbledore to trial, why you did it for the sake of my past as well as my future. And I forgive whatever anger I might still hold towards you. *Thank* you, Severus. Thank you."

Snape could put his arms around Harry's shoulders then, but it was half a nerveless fall; he didn't have the strength to keep them aloft any more. He closed his eyes, and wondered if this was what it felt like to have one of the more recent wounds in his soul heal itself.

"What brought this on?" he did manage to whisper.

“Joseph.” Harry’s voice had a sound of song. “And I’m sure sometimes I’ll want to curse him as well as bless him, because being this open to the world means that I’m going to make a lot more mistakes from now on. But that hardly matters right now. I’m just—I feel *human*. Can you believe it?”

Snape was the one who needed the support of the doorway then. There were no words he had less expected to hear while he lived.

Harry held on a moment more, then spun away, as though he were a Snitch, too small and too light to stay in one place. “I have to go do something else,” he said intensely. “I’ll tell you about it after dinner. But I have to do it now.” He started to run away up the hall.

“Is it dangerous?” Snape called after him.

Harry whirled around to smile at him, but didn’t stop running. “Not this time,” he said, which made no sense, but he vanished before Snape could stop him.

He stood there a long moment, staring after Harry, and realizing he had no idea what would happen next.

He went slowly back into his office, and shut the door behind him, then stood there, at a loss. Brewing a poison had suddenly lost its appeal.

And the most irritating thing was that he could not even say *why*.

“*Are you ready?*”

Harry nodded, then realized Argutus wasn’t looking at him, with the angle he was draped around his shoulders, and said, “Yes.” He held his breath as Argutus shifted further into position, swinging his neck and head around like an extra arm.

There was a dark shine in his scales, a softened, blurred four-point star. Harry concentrated his attention on it, all his will, and then leaped forward.

He drew up his magic and dropped all but the flimsy barriers that Jing-Xi had said would prevent others from seeing his signs. He didn’t want to unduly disrupt the life of Hogwarts, but he wanted to have as much strength available to him as possible.

He brought his magic down like a hammer on the last of Bellatrix’s curses on his left wrist.

The dark star in Argutus’s scales flared, sending out sharper points of blackness, trying to anticipate every curl of his power and deflect it. Harry heard a hissing in his ears that had nothing in common with Parseltongue. The curse hated him, or, at least, it hated any attempt to break it, and it wanted to remain where it was, and pollute his flesh, and prevent him from getting another hand.

Harry didn’t want it to remain.

He wove his will into his magic, envisioning it as strands of white silk, as delicate and yet as subtly strong as the material of a spider’s web. He wrapped his wanting and his desire and his objection to having the curse remain around the end of his wrist, and then he drew it tight. The sharp points of the dark star were cutting through his strands as fast as he could spin them, but that was all right. They were simply not numerous enough to cut through them all.

Harry wove tighter and tighter, and caught and crumpled one dark green point, and whirled in towards the center of the curse.

And then he was *within* it, seeing and understanding the spell in his mind even as he watched its reflection shift and change in Argutus’s scales, and he wanted to laugh aloud. Bellatrix had been clever. This part of the curse *depended* on desire. The person who broke the curse had to want to actually break it. And the curse’s outer shell was designed to softly discourage that, to cast the perception that everything was better off just as it was, and changing was too hard.

Harry brought up his image of the green and gold path in defiance of that passivity, a soft and seductive trap he knew all too well, and the curse hissed like someone sucking in his breath.

By my desire and by my will, this is the end, Harry replied, and then slammed forward, as strongly as he had when he had to break the egg-shaped stone the centaurs favored to save Draco’s life, as strongly as he had when he wanted to set the house elves free,

as determined as he had been to drain Voldemort's magic and cut a hole in his magical core.

This time, though, for himself.

And the world did not end, and he did not fall down writhing in self-doubt and self-blame and self-guilt.

The curse did end, though, with a ringing expansion of black that covered Harry's sight for a moment. He had to close his eyes. When he could look again, the first thing he glanced at was Argutus's scales.

They reflected only a normal left wrist, without magic of any kind on it.

Harry dropped back on his bed, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed, until he was short of breath and tears ran down his face again. Argutus crawled from his neck and shoulders onto his chest to be more comfortable, a great warm length of glimmering flesh and muscle.

"That was fun," he said. "I think I should look into curse-breaking for the goblins. If they are all that fun, then I want to work for Gringotts. They would not have to pay me, except in dead rabbits."

Harry stroked Argutus's head, and Argutus flicked out his tongue to touch his hand. Harry held up his other wrist, his left wrist, and looked at it.

It served no one anymore for him not to get a hand. Just because he broke the curse for his own reasons, just because he sought a little of his own pleasure and his own joy, did not mean it would cost others their happiness.

Oh, there were decisions he could make and pleasures he could seek that would, of course. Voldemort was the living exemplar of that. But he would learn them, and know them, and keep away from them where he could, and keep dancing along that path his epiphany had shown him.

For the first time he could remember, Harry had the sense that life was there to be tasted, and taken, and sampled, and he wanted to live as intensely as he had ever wanted anything.

And if it becomes necessary for me to die in this war or to destroy a Horcrux, then I know what I'll be giving up, for the very first time. And if someone else dies as a sacrifice, this, this is what they'll be giving up.

The horror he'd felt at the thought of someone else dying sharpened into sheer appreciation of what such a death could mean. Harry took a deep breath, and then forced himself past that moment and into the moments that lay beyond it.

And the free yielding of such splendor as this is the greatest sacrifice, the grandest decision, anyone could make.

If people have to die to destroy the Horcruxes, they will be heroes. Heroes in a way that I don't think people can be just by living, or by dying.

But he would continue researching ways to get around that prohibition and the Unassailable Curse more fiercely than ever, now that he knew what it could entail giving up.

Harry sat up and stretched. Draco would return from dinner soon. Harry would need to eat, and he would research on Horcruxes for an hour, and he would do some schoolwork that really needed to be done.

Draco shouldn't have to push me back into life anymore. Now that I know it's always there to be lived, I'm going to do it myself.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty: Prometheus Unbound

Draco opened the bedroom door slowly, keeping his wand out. Harry hadn't been at dinner, and Professor Snape had come in looking more than a little shocked, as if he had seen a unicorn gallop through the dungeons. Draco couldn't discount that something had happened to Harry. It probably wasn't something *bad*, because otherwise Professor Snape would have looked murderous, but even merely "unexpected" was often also "inconvenient."

He'd even approached Potter and asked, but Potter, the prat, hadn't known anything. Draco had stung him with an insult and gone away. He was sure that he would have known more than Potter about Harry if Harry were his brother.

The bedroom appeared empty at first, but then Draco realized the curtains were drawn on the near side of the bed. He steeled himself to find Harry wounded or sick, and yanked them open.

Harry turned his head towards him.

Draco actually *dropped his wand*. He was just glad that no one else was in the room to see that wholly embarrassing and rather unnecessary episode. He didn't immediately reach down and pick it up, either. He couldn't take his gaze from his partner's face.

Some shadow that had lingered in the back of his eyes had gone away. Some tension that had always hunched his shoulders had vanished. Some darkness that had—

And then Draco decided he should stop using metaphors and actually ask Harry, because Harry had lifted himself onto his knees, reached out, caught Draco's shoulder with his hand, and leaned forward to kiss him. Or, well, all right. He'd ask him when the kiss was done.

Draco responded automatically, lifting one arm around Harry's shoulders. He realized his hand was shaking. He finally broke free, panting a little, and said, "Talk." And now his voice shook. He couldn't recall Harry ever kissing like that, like it wasn't a chore or a means to relax but something he really *wanted*, perhaps even *needed*.

Harry laughed. And even the laughter was different. Draco told himself it couldn't be and he was imagining things, but the laughter sounded in his ears as defiantly different, no matter what he thought.

And now he was repeating himself, if only in his head. He fixed his eyes sternly on Harry's face and waited.

"I was a hypocrite to Connor today," said Harry, sitting on the edge of the bed and swinging his legs. Draco's puzzlement increased. He couldn't recall Harry making many excess movements, either, or at least not out of joy. They usually expressed worry or fury or fear. "I snapped at him when I should have known how to hold my tongue, since he'd just had a traumatic experience—"

Draco snorted.

Harry eyed him. "Rosier kidnapped him and tried to kill him."

"Well, perhaps I can concede it was traumatic, then," said Draco, and inclined his head an inch. "But I'm more interested in the impact this experience had on you, Harry, thanks."

"So I snapped, and I shouldn't have," Harry continued, this time crossing his legs and bouncing the right up and down on the left. "I went to Joseph, to ask if some barrier had broken that I didn't know about. He laughed at me, then told me it was normal, and *everyone* is a hypocrite sometimes. And—well, it was like the tide of the lessons that everyone has been trying to teach me broke over me all at once. I realized that I *can* live, and that I *can* be normal, and that I *can* make mistakes and not lacerate myself over them, because everyone makes them. I realize that I wanted to live, really." Harry tapped his left wrist. "And I realized, after I went and finally forgave Snape for bringing my parents to trial, that I wanted to break the last of the curses on my wrist. So we did, Argutus and I." He gestured to the end of the bed. Following his gaze, Draco saw the Omen snake asleep on top of Harry's trunk.

"So, Draco, what do you think?"

He turned back around to see Harry sitting eagerly forward, eyes fixed on his face.

Wanting his approval. *Demanding* it, where before he might have hinted at best, or sat there with his eyes meekly downcast and accepted whatever criticisms Draco wanted to make.

Draco reached forward gently, and cradled Harry's cheek in his hand. Harry grinned a bit.

"You can touch me more firmly than that," he said. "I won't break."

Draco shook his head, not sure how he could convey what he wanted to say—"I know" would sound inane—and then kissed Harry thoroughly, persistently, *deeply*. Harry leaned back and moaned, opening himself to it, more trusting and with more barriers lowered than Draco had ever seen him give. Tears stung his eyes, but he was already putting them aside, especially when images of snakes and cats began to waltz around Harry.

They had at least an hour before anyone else required their presence. And there was only one way Draco knew to make Harry really understand what this change meant to him.

He climbed onto the bed and drew the curtains closed around them, shutting out the worry, shutting in the joy.

Connor leaned around Hermione and stared at Harry again. Harry and Draco had just come out of NEWT Potions and were debating whatever Snape had had them brew today. Draco was grinning like a fool, so much so that it interfered with his side of the debate. Harry made wider gestures with his arms than Connor had ever seen him make, and slammed his fist into Draco's shoulder when he apparently said something particularly inane. Connor shook his head in wonder. *Something's different with Harry, but I don't know what it is.*

"Hermione?"

She glanced up from her Potions book. Connor and Ron had waited to collect her before they went to lunch, but Hermione didn't seem as concerned about eating or walking down the hall as trying to improve a performance that was no doubt already perfect. "Hmmm?"

"What's—I mean, does Harry look different to you?"

Hermione turned around and gave a critical glance back down the hall. Then she shrugged. "Oh, that. He's happy, that's all." She added something about "powdered bicorn horn" and went back to frowning at the text. "It doesn't *say* to stir counterclockwise on that potion," she muttered. "How did Harry know how to do that? I hope Professor Snape hasn't been giving him extra lessons simply to make him better, when he doesn't need any help. That would be unfair."

Ron snorted and straightened up from the wall. "This is *Snape*, Hermione. When has he ever been anything but unfair?"

Connor couldn't stop looking at Harry. He hadn't seen much of him yesterday, but he would have thought his little adventure on Saturday would still weigh heavily on his brother's shoulders. And now—

"Did he say why he's happy, Hermione?" he asked.

"Something about learning things," said Hermione, and then stuck her nose pointedly in the book and headed down the corridor towards the Great Hall, avoiding bags and feet by means of specially-trained Hermione senses. Ron followed her, leaving Connor to hover indecisively. He wanted to ask his brother, but he wasn't sure that Harry wouldn't resent him interrupting the debate.

Harry caught sight of him just then, though, and waved him over. Connor trotted slowly nearer. Draco frowned and put a hand on his wand, but it was Harry's wide smile that made him wariest.

"Sorry I didn't tell you yesterday, Connor," Harry said, not sounding all that apologetic. "But I was busy writing letters. The situation with the monitoring board is ridiculous. We're meeting this Saturday and that's that." He shrugged. "I'm better, though. I decided to forgive Snape and break the last curse on my left wrist, and the moment I can decide on which kind of artificial hand I like best, I'll be getting one and learning how to use it. I'll want to Transfigure it into flesh eventually."

Connor just stared.

He had never known his brother this happy, this fully human. Whatever had happened had slammed down barriers Connor would have said would never fall, if someone had asked him on Saturday.

"Connor?"

Harry had waved his hand in front of Connor's face, looking concerned. Draco was leaning on his shoulder the way he had the first morning after they shagged, his eyes just daring Connor to say something stupid. Connor shook his head and snapped out of his spell. Whatever had changed, he was, of course, happy for Harry. And he wondered if Draco realized yet that more and more people would find this changed Harry attractive, and possibly make offers for him. The courting ritual wasn't irreversibly binding until Halloween of this year, if Connor understood correctly.

"Congratulations, Harry," he said, and held out his hand. Harry shook it, then pulled him into a hug. Connor was near enough to hear Draco growl softly. He rolled his eyes and deliberately held onto Harry a little longer than he normally would. After all, now

he knew it wouldn't make his brother uncomfortable, and Draco could stand to learn that sometimes Harry wanted to hug other people.

"Thanks," said Harry as he let go. Then he smiled. "Oh, and Connor?"

Turning away to catch up with Ron and Hermione, Connor paused. "Yeah?"

"I found that ward you put on Draco and me to warn you whenever we're doing more than kissing," said Harry, voice still pleasant. "If you *ever* do something like that again, then the ward will make sure you get images of what we're doing instead. Full-color images that won't go away no matter what you do."

Connor shuddered, while Draco laughed. It was one thing to know that his brother had a sex life, Connor thought. It was another to know that he was willing to discuss it, and it was another thing altogether to *see* it, especially when it involved a *Malfoy*.

Maybe Draco isn't the only one who has to get used to a changed Harry.

"Uh, I'll remember that."

Harry nodded serenely at him and walked towards the Great Hall. Draco followed him. He must have thought they were at an angle where Connor couldn't see them, because, for a moment, he had the *soppiest* expression on his face. Connor would have said, if forced to describe it, that he'd fallen more deeply in love with Harry just over the course of the last few moments.

Damn Parvati for making me see things like that, Connor thought, and gave himself a clout on the ear to, hopefully, forget it, and went on to lunch.

Owen shut the door of the classroom slowly behind him. He had received a message from his brother, a brief warble of phoenix song followed by an equally brief five words, asking him to meet Michael here, in this small room they'd adopted as their private place. It was little more than a broom closet, but it worked, especially because they weren't in the same House and Owen spent so much time apart from his brother since he'd chosen to remain Harry's sworn companion.

He had expected many things when he came here, including the rage or regret Michael usually expressed, or demands for gossip about Draco. Owen always refused to provide the last, but that didn't stop his twin from asking.

He had not expected tears.

He cast *Lumos*, since the room had no windows. Michael sat with his head bowed in his folded arms on one of the desks, trying not to cry and miserably failing. His sobs were quiet, though. If Owen hadn't heard his brother sob before, he didn't know that he would have recognized the sounds.

He moved up behind Michael and rubbed his arm. Michael continued to cry without acknowledging him for a moment, then turned with startling violence and embraced Owen. Owen curved his own arm around his brother's shoulders, and they stood like that.

Then Michael broke away from him, stood up, and intoned a curse Owen hadn't heard him use since their fifth year at Durmstrang. The desk disintegrated, floating down into a pile of dust and sand.

Michael aimed his wand at three more desks and did the same thing. And then he stood there, flushed, and panting, and tearful, and obviously hating the fact that he couldn't hide his tears any more.

"Are you quite done?" Owen asked.

"It's hopeless, isn't it?" Michael asked dully, and slumped to the floor. "I saw them today. Draco's *never* going to leave him, is he? When the *vates* changed, for whatever reason, he bound Draco to him for good."

It disturbed Owen that Michael would only call Harry *vates* and not by his name, but at least he could discuss him at all; when Harry had first released Michael from his oath, he would only say *him* in a tone of spitting contempt. Owen sat down beside his brother. "I think it was hopeless even before that," he said, and rolled his eyes when Michael glared at him. "Well, I do. You know my opinion. If our roles were different, if you had known Draco before last year, if Harry wasn't the kind of political leader he is—if, if, if. The point is, by the time you met Draco, it was clear what their roles were, and what one you were going to

choose. You really shouldn't have sworn to Harry if you knew that you couldn't control yourself around Draco."

"You're only this sensible because you've never been in love," said Michael sullenly, and buried his head in his arms.

"Maybe I am," said Owen. "It doesn't change the fact that you took on a certain set of responsibilities and then betrayed those responsibilities." His voice grew stern in spite of his resolve to remain sympathetic. "You were a sworn companion, Michael. And like I said, you shouldn't have taken up those duties in the first place if—"

"Yes, I've heard this from you, a hundred times." Michael stood up and paced restlessly around the room, pausing to kick viciously at a desk that still existed. Then he spun around and stared intently at Owen. "Tell me this. What do you think of Draco now?"

Owen sat back, half-lidded his eyes, and thought about that. He hadn't thought much of Draco at first. He was important to Harry and had an accepted role in his life, and it wasn't Owen's place to speak badly about him, or offer his opinion at all unless it was asked for. Of course, he *had* his opinion, and that was that Draco sometimes displayed flashes of blinding power and insight, but was far more likely to display flashes of blinding stupidity, and needed Harry much more than Harry needed him.

In the past few days, watching them wheel around each other like a pair of dragons in springtime, Owen had revised that opinion, but he hadn't put words to it until now.

"They need each other," he said quietly. "They rely on each other in ways beyond the obvious. And sometimes I can see that strength in Draco that I was missing before, when he casts a spell in NEWT Defense Against the Dark Arts, or looks at Harry and thinks no one is watching. He hasn't learned that you can be quiet and still be strong, yet, I think. He's inclined to blare it, but that kind of blaring usually contains arrogance and conceals no strength at all. Now he's starting to shine in the quiet moments, too. Strong *and* loud at the same time. He's learning. Slowly, but learning."

"And now you think—"

"I think I can see why you claim you're in love with him, yes." Owen looked up at Michael. "I still think you were stupid to do what you did."

Surprisingly, his brother ignored the statement Owen thought he would take offense to and latched onto the other. "*Claim* I'm in love with him?" His face flushed, and he bit his lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

Owen let out a small breath, his eyes locked on Michael's. "It's not the kind of love Mother had for Father, or he for her," he said. "It's not the kind of love Harry and Draco have. You want someone to shelter, Michael. I can understand that. But Draco isn't someone who would be content to shelter behind you. He wants to fight beside his lover in battle. This is the first time I've thought he might actually be able to do it, mind."

"And that means that I'm in love with—what?" Michael laughed sardonically. "The reflection of the *vates* I see in Draco?"

"An illusion."

Michael stared at him for long moments, and then turned and slammed out of the room. Owen winced a bit as the door crashed behind his brother, but he had no intention of retracting what he'd said.

Sometimes he wished he could be kinder, softer, more prone to sympathetic words of the kind that their mother had shared with their father. But he had too much of Charles in him, and Michael had too much of Medusa. And Michael was not head of the Rosier-Henlin family, and did not have to think about the consequences of what he said and did in the same framework.

He *had* chosen to be a sworn companion, though, with all the glories such a thing implied.

He could not complain because the costs of the glories were more than he would wish to bear.

Owen stood, gently snuffed out the *Lumos*, and left.

Henrietta did not dance out of the classroom, but that was only because it would be undignified for a professor to dance.

When she got back to her private rooms, she *did* cast a spell that Transfigured the walls into billowing cloth, like the sides of a

tent. Then she had to cast stabilizing spells to make sure Hogwarts didn't collapse around her, but that didn't matter. She had also conjured tea and biscuits, biscuits of a kind she didn't often eat any more, biscuits like her mother had made for her long ago. One crunch, and the chocolate filled her mouth and bubbled around, nearly dripping down her chin. Henrietta closed her eyes and moaned softly. It always did taste better this way, when made with a witch's magic, then when prepared by the hands of house elves. Harry was right about that.

Harry. Harry. *Harry*.

Henrietta gave into temptation and sang a small song. There was no one around to hear her, since she had silencing spells in place on her quarters already. That way, no students could hear her cursing them when she marked up their essays and found out that they were making the most elementary mistakes with Transfiguration. *She* had learned things very fast, why couldn't *they* learn them very fast?

The history song was an old one, about sworn companions accompanying one of the ancient Lords who had actually given a damn about them down a long, dark trail. That had been the Lord Gyrfalcon, who had wanted to destroy Death itself. He had been a corrupted necromancer, not keeping his vows, but he had kept faith with those who followed him. There had been seven of them in the end, Lord Gyrfalcon, his lover Lord Julian Parkinson, and five sworn companions who would not turn back and would never slow down.

Henrietta only got through one verse before she broke into laughter, though, and then cast soap bubbles out of her wand and twisted them into interesting shapes. She took another bite of chocolate biscuit and licked hastily to keep the chocolate where it belonged, inside her mouth, making things sweet.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if the chocolate did drip down, though, she thought, unless a student came to her door and saw her like that. She could stand to lose a bit of the taste. The whole world was sweet, right now.

Harry had changed, and had become what Henrietta had always known he could be—someone who had all the virtues of the ancient Lords without having to Declare.

She leaned back, folded her hands behind her head, and hummed another snatch of the history song. She had watched Harry all week, and there was no doubt that he paid more attention to people around him now and less to his fear of hurting them. And his magic! He had worked Transfigurations that surprised him, but not Henrietta. Lord-level magic took some strange paths to get where it needed to go, and there were a few barriers that could be broken by sheer strength. Harry couldn't break them while he held himself back and restrained his power for reasons Henrietta couldn't understand, but let his magic fly and he had a sudden violent improvement.

He hadn't yet seen his Animagus form, though, he confessed to her. Henrietta was not worried about that. It would come in time.

Harry would survive this war. That was partially because of the change. Now Henrietta had more faith that he would eliminate his enemies before they could do him harm.

But it was also because, if she had had any doubts remaining about Harry, they had just been sealed off. She was his, loyal and close and collared like a running hound. And she was happy to be so.

She wondered if anyone she passed in the halls daily knew that only her love for Harry held her back from cursing them all. She was still a Dark witch. She still had all the contempt for Light wizards that she ever had. She had learned a grudging respect for some of them, especially Headmistress McGonagall.

But if Harry ever asked her to kill McGonagall, Henrietta would not hesitate.

It was very simple, really. There was the rest of the world which was loyal to Harry, Henrietta's comrades. And there was the rest of the world which was not, and would have to go through her to get to him. And if Harry wanted that part of the world dead or maimed or tortured, he had only to ask.

Henrietta smiled at the ceiling. It was not *her* fault if none of them saw that. They should have paid more attention to the history songs—the ones about the only way dragons had ever agreed to serve wizards, the ones about the courtship of Lord Julian and Lord Gyrfalcon (and what a terror they had been, two Dark Lords united in power and in purpose), the ones about the sworn companions who had stayed and fought for a Lord or Lady instead of running.

Love bound her, love made her tame, and within its chain she was free.

Aurora was waiting.

She had not liked the peremptory tone of Harry's latest letter, the one demanding that they meet in the Ministry that Saturday, or he would know why. It was not like Harry to demand at all. Aurora worried about what it might have cost him, or who might have put him up to it.

But the monitoring board had come, and a few of the Dark wizards had filed in looking excited, as if they had secrets. Aurora had pegged them at once. Harry might have insured that Griselda, and not Aurora, had power over the board itself, but he could not deprive her of her eyes. They were likely candidates for the ones who had put him up to this.

Narcissa Malfoy, in particular. She moved as if treading on a burning cloud, her eyes too bright and her head so high it was a wonder she didn't bang her nose on the ceiling. And she sat down on her side of the table and looked directly at Aurora with a smile she'd never shown before. That made Aurora immediately wary.

And then the door opened, and Harry came in, walking between Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape as if he had not a care in the world.

Aurora half-stood. Now she *knew* something had happened. Some of the shadows had vanished from Harry's face, and he wasn't cringing in any way or form. He looked at everyone else in the room before her, in fact, nodding to his Dark allies and not bothering to do more than look courteous to the Light wizards. He looked less than that when his eyes passed over Marvin and Shadow.

Then his gaze focused on her.

And he looked at her as if she were a respected enemy.

Aurora squashed her impulse to say something. She inclined her head to Harry instead, and sat back down. Harry took his seat across from Griselda, not releasing her eyes, and used his magic to widen the two chairs next to him, so that Snape and Malfoy could sit down. Aurora had made sure the chairs were a bit narrower than usual on purpose, to see what his reaction would be.

He was responding like a Lord, that was what he was responding like.

Aurora bit her lip in vexation and sat still, her heart pounding hard. At least she knew that Lisa Addlington and Shadow would somewhat curb themselves this time, and talk more softly. That would make the points she hoped to score with Harry easier. If she could show that her influence on them could be wielded for his good as well as his detriment, Harry would be more likely to trust her.

But Harry didn't let Griselda speak, though that had been the procedure at their last meeting. He spoke instead, and his voice was firm, respectful, quiet, and utterly unlike anything he had used before.

"I've decided that the monitoring board should meet on a regular schedule," he said. "Every other Saturday is reasonable, I think. That allows me time to complete my schoolwork, and means I am not leaving Hogwarts at some unreasonable hour of the day. My education is important to me, of course, as an underage wizard." That was said so blandly that Aurora didn't note the sarcasm until a few moments later. "And I would also like other Light wizards on the board."

"We agreed to these," said Aurora, speaking before she thought.

"Oh, I know," said Harry, his eyes, which had turned to look at others, swinging back to meet hers. "But I have come to realize it's not a good idea to let my enemies have control of me, Mrs. Whitestag. And that was what I did, under some misguided idea that my enemies could hate me and yet offer me rational advice."

"None of us hate you, *vates*," said Lisa, earnestly.

Harry snorted. "I don't think 'dislike' and 'want to control my actions and strip me of my family' is really all that different from hatred, Mrs. Addlington," he said. "I do have Light allies who would like a place on the monitoring board, yet would hold firm to their allegiance. Laura Gloryflower, for example. A few of the Griffinsnest family. Paton Opalline. I did not ask them before because I felt that I could not have them with me." Harry laughed, a small, chilly sound. "Does that make good political sense? Of course not. They are my allies. I owe them more than that."

“And what about keeping a balance of different kinds of wizards on the board, Harry?” Aurora asked. They were losing him. The dragon had woken and snapped the reins, and he would fly if they weren’t careful. “We need halfblood and Muggleborn members, and I have never heard of your having any close Muggleborn and halfblood allies.”

Harry smiled charmingly. “I am halfblood myself, Mrs. Whitestag,” he said. “I think that should count for something. And some of the Opallines are adopted Muggleborns, or halfbloods. They are an enormous family. I’m sure Paton would be happy to send me some of his relatives who fit those requirements if I asked.”

“I don’t think you know what you’re doing, Harry,” Aurora said gently, while behind her the others rustled and buzzed in a panic. “You need these members on the monitoring board to reassure your Light allies.”

“I can offer them my word and my behavior,” said Harry. “If they aren’t reassured by that, they won’t be my allies, anyway.” He looked bored now. “I *am* reorganizing the board, Mrs. Whitestag. So far, it’s been almost nonsensical. When we met, you imposed restrictions on me that no rational person would have agreed to, including that I come here without my guardian. Our meetings are irregular, delayed by bickering that doesn’t suit the adults I thought we were. Or almost-adult, in my case.” Harry smiled like a shark. “I’ll be of age in less than seven months, Mrs. Whitestag. You only have until then to supervise me. To make it count, you should accept the regular meetings with half Light and half Dark wizards as the best compromise I’m willing to make.”

Aurora stared around the table. The Dark wizards looked smug. It was obvious they’d all known about this. The goblins looked on the verge of laughter, as much as Aurora could read their ugly faces. The centaur, Bone, stamped his hoof slowly, his gaze fixed on Harry and filled with approval. Griselda seemed to be watching a sunrise. And none of her allies were ready to help her, because they were caught too off-balance by the winds of this hurricane.

Aurora took a deep breath, and turned slowly back to Harry. Whatever had awakened him, she would find and eliminate it if she could, but to have the chance to do that, she needed to stay close to Harry. And she was the most important Light member of the board, ultimately, since she was the leader. She was the one who could persuade the others to accept conditions they might hate. She was the organizer. She would not object too much, lest she be cast off the monitoring board.

“You are right, *vates*,” she said, catching Harry’s eye. “The monitoring board has not so far performed its designated purpose. If you think it needs reorganization in order to do so, that is what will happen.”

She ignored the clucking and squawking from her allies, staring at Harry, willing him to accept this.

Harry gave her a lazy, self-satisfied smile that said he knew what she was doing, and *appreciated* it, damn him.

Someone put the notion of his own power into his head.

And from that, her course was clear—at least her goal, if not the way she would need to tread to get there.

Somehow, I must get it out again.

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Chapter Sixty-One: A Different Kind of Birthing Bed

“I don’t know if the *Daily Prophet* will publish it,” said Harry. It was all he *could* say, after he had finished reading Hermione’s letter about house elves. It stunned him and moved him and made him feel as if he had been neglecting the magical creatures who might have suffered most under their webs and their direct subjugation to wizards. His hand shook as he lowered the paper to the table.

“Oh, I thought they wouldn’t,” said Hermione calmly. She sat on the other side of the table, with books from at least six different parts of the Library spread out around her. There was one about Dark magic, two on fantastic beasts, one on old Ministry laws, and three Harry hadn’t had the chance to read the titles of, but was sure were all different. “I was thinking of sending letters directly to the owners of the house elves themselves. A letter-writing campaign. And letters could go to the *Quibbler* and the *Vox Populi*, of course.”

“Especially the latter,” Harry had to add. Dionysus Hornblower had not made up his mind if Harry was an evil traitor or a kind liberator yet this week, but he would pounce gleefully on the issue of house elves no matter which way his judgment fell. Harry studied Hermione’s letter once more, then glanced up at her. “I’m humbled that you’ve cared about this so much, when I haven’t paid that much attention to it,” he murmured.

Hermione shook her head. “Why shouldn’t I care about it? The more I look at house elves under their web, the more I think that some of the ways wizards treat house elves apply to how they treat people like me, too. We don’t suffer as much, but there’s a sense that our magic is just—there. House elves can do *wonderful* things, and most people don’t bother to wonder about that, or to think why magical creatures who can perform such marvels without wands would ever have agreed to serve them. And they don’t want to think about how magic sought us out, either, if it’s only supposed to concentrate in pureblood lines. And the fact that we can make our way into the wizarding world successfully when we didn’t even know it was there for the first eleven years of our lives is overlooked, too.” Hermione’s face took on a look of exultant rapture. “I’m thinking of writing a book studying the way that Muggleborn children grow used to the wizarding world, you know. It’s not ever been studied. There are a few books that are supposed to help us adapt, but they’re full of nonsense.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s you, Hermione,” Harry said, and felt one more shimmer of awe run through him, joined by a frisson of happiness. At least he knew that other people were adopting his cause as their own, even if he didn’t pay enough attention to them. It made him want to go and do wonderful things to help inspire still others. “I’ll get started on writing my own letters.”

“Good.” Hermione pushed a long scroll across the table towards him. Harry unrolled it with both hand and Levitation Charm, and glanced at it curiously. It seemed to be a list of names.

“House elf owners,” Hermione explained without looking up; she was already looking at a book that had *Arts* somewhere in the title. “The ones who don’t have any connection to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow yet, and aren’t your enemies, either. The neutrals we need to convince.”

Harry smiled. “Thanks, Hermione.” As he stood, he caught sight of Zacharias Smith hovering near the shelves. Harry wondered if he should scowl or give him an encouraging look. He didn’t know the current state of things in the intellectual war between Zacharias and Hermione. He thought they were talking to one another again, but Zacharias still found small points to argue about, ignoring the larger issues that Hermione wanted to raise with him.

In the end, Harry settled for nodding to him and hurrying out of the library with his list of names. He would make plans for writing letters for an hour each day, and sending Hedwig and other school owls out with them in the evening. That wouldn’t take much more time than his studying of Horcruxes did.

It had been more than a week now since he’d discovered that he could matter as much as the next person, and he could feel the insight slipping away from him, sometimes. There were moments he wanted to go back to the way he had been, flinging himself into obsessions without pausing to consider what might be the better course. And he had snapped at Draco sometimes, and been inconsiderate when Connor asked him for help on Transfiguration homework, so he was definitely no longer as good at balancing his needs and the needs of the world as he had been.

But the point was not to cling to the insight. The point was to live it, and there were ways that focusing on the house elves might help him do that.

It was a few days after he’d started posting the letters that Padma approached him at breakfast with a very strange expression on her face. Harry swallowed his scrambled eggs—he’d finally figured out what shops in Hogsmeade could be trusted to cast the proper warming charms, and that made his meals considerably more pleasant—and cocked his head at her.

“Did you send my parents a letter about their house elves?” Padma asked without preamble.

Harry frowned for a moment, considering the mental list of names, then shook his head. “That was Hermione,” he said. “Why? Is something wrong?” He couldn’t imagine Hermione being less than polite, and the Patils were Light wizards well-disposed towards Muggleborns, so they wouldn’t take it as an insult to get post from one of them. He hoped.

“She sent this,” said Padma, and held it out.

Harry considered the sheet of parchment. Hermione had talked to him about them, but he hadn’t seen one so far. It was a list of “Eleven Facts You Might Not Know About House Elves,” and the logo above it, which picked out Elvish Liberation Front in elegant letters, marched across a shield which a scowling house elf gripped.

The facts were true, as far as Harry could see, including Number Four, which asked if the reader knew that warming charms were actually faster than similar house elf magic, though sometimes they didn’t heat bread and drinks as thoroughly. He handed the list back to Padma. “What’s wrong? Did it make your parents uncomfortable?”

“Well.” Padma shifted her weight. “They wanted to know how much you supported this. How much the Elvish Liberation Front was Hermione’s idea and how much it was yours.”

Harry shrugged. “Well, I support it, of course. But the main idea was Hermione’s, and the main bulk of the work has been Hermione’s.” He looked around Padma with a smile, to where Hermione was holding forth about E.L.F. in the middle of the Gryffindor table. Ron looked bored, but Connor was listening, though with the reluctant expression on his face that Harry knew to be his brother’s way of trying not to let what he heard affect him. Harry looked back at Padma. “I am sorry for any discomfort your parents are experiencing. Hermione chose owners of house elves who weren’t already in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, not people whose children attended Hogwarts. If your parents are uncomfortable hearing about the Elvish Liberation Front, I’ll ask her if she’ll refrain from sending them post.”

“But you won’t make her stop.” Padma had her lip between her teeth and was worrying it.

“No.” Harry drank his pumpkin juice to hide his smile. This was exactly what he had hoped would happen when he first started thinking about freeing the magical creatures. The Centaur Committee and the Goblin Board of the Ministry were good starts, too, in a way, but Harry’s rebellion had forced them both to happen. He wanted to see other witches and wizards growing passionate about the differences in equality between magical species without prompting. It would probably take the will and intelligence of a Hermione to found each organization, though. “I can’t. E.L.F.’s not mine, but I do think what she’s doing is great.”

Padma blinked, a bit. “All right,” she said slowly. “Only, I think the letters annoyed my mother.”

Harry shrugged. “Hermione’s goal isn’t to annoy people.” *At least, that’s not her primary goal.* Anyone who merely found the reminder that house elves were enslaved annoying would be annoyed, and irritated, and worried at. “Like I said, I’ll ask if she’ll leave your parents off the next round of post she sends, but I don’t think she’ll agree to it.”

Padma left with a faintly puzzled expression on her face, as if she thought that could have gone better but wasn’t sure how. Harry turned around when someone tapped him on the shoulder, and found himself face-to-face with Draco.

“Are you going to send post to my father?” Draco’s voice was casual, but he hadn’t yet learned how to control the set of his shoulders, and Harry knew he was tense.

Harry shook his head. “He was in the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. He knows all about house elves. And I don’t want to seem as though I’m acknowledging him.” Lucius Malfoy kept sending Harry letters which recommended courses of action Harry wasn’t comfortable with, including listening to Lucius’s side of the story. So far as Harry could tell, Lucius’s side of the story had a great deal of misplaced pride and unconvincing attempts to grovel.

Draco half-closed his eyes, and then said, “And what about me? Would you like it if I stopped eating meals house elves had cooked? If I cleaned my clothes instead of letting them do it?”

“Yes.”

Draco’s head snapped back as though he were preparing to be offended. Harry raised an eyebrow at him. “You said, would I like it if you did? Yes, I would. I didn’t mean I would badger you into doing it.” He turned back to his eggs, and tried to conceal his laughter. He wondered when Draco would notice that, in fact, Harry had been casting the charms to clean his robes, and not house elves at all; Harry regularly used a spell that cleaned all the cloth in the room.

The next time he remarks on how much more convenient house elves are than charms, I’ll tell him, Harry decided.

Draco was looking at a forkful of sausages as though he didn’t enjoy contemplating the source of his food. He stuffed them into his mouth when he saw Harry looking and made exaggerated sounds of pleasure.

Harry shrugged and ate some more. Perhaps he and Draco would have an argument when he found out about the cleaning charms, if only because Draco would be angry at being duped. But Harry had to admit that he was looking forward to it. If he no longer lived in his careful little world where his main purpose was not offending others, then he had to accept the bumps and bruises that would come with that.

Harry opened his eyes, and blinked. He stood in the middle of a snowy field, with flat, silvery grass stretching in every direction about him, and shadows from the moon carving deep lines into the silver. He turned slowly around, lifting his head now and then,

trying to see more than moon and stars and snow and drifting clouds. It was difficult.

I haven't had a dream this vivid in a while. I wonder what will happen next? Harry braced himself for an attack by Falco or Voldemort.

“Harry.”

That voice rang bells along his skin. Harry turned in the direction it came—from behind him, but he suspected it would have been from behind him no matter which way he faced when it first spoke—and took some time to recognize the creature who poured towards him. It was a heat shimmer of green and gold, like rippling leaves marked with sunlight and tossed by wind. But the enormous eyes that stared out of it, green and gold as well, he remembered.

“Dobby,” he murmured, feeling a bit ridiculous in addressing a creature who was so far beyond his enslaved self by that house elf name.

The green eyes widened in what Harry thought was an expression of pleasure, though. “I need to hear it,” he said, as if reading Harry’s thoughts. “To remind myself of what has been, of what still is, and of what will be for others of my kind. I am roaming in other times now, and the past is easiest to forget.” The eyes pinned Harry with sudden intensity. “I see that you are at last beginning to move on helping other house elves, as wizards choose to call us.”

“Yes,” said Harry quietly. He didn’t think he could say anything else, or in any other tone, confronted by the enormous shapeshifter that wizards had caged and trapped in one form for so long—surely as great a sin, chaining something that mutable, as the work they made the house elves do for them. Harry himself had benefited from that work, and had Dobby’s help before he freed him. The debt he owed, as a wizard, was so great that Harry didn’t think he could pay it back by acting as *vates*. He would have to do what he could and hope it made a dent.

“You have waited.”

“I have,” said Harry simply, and guilt coiled in him like a whip. He took a deep breath and did his best to ride it. There was simply not enough time in the world to feel guilty for everything, but for this, he owed more than most. He *had* put off attending to house elves and their needs, even when he promised Dobby that he would think more about that.

It would have been easy to make excuses, to say that the werewolf problem had been more pressing, made so by Loki’s actions, and that, when he had enough magic to replace the linchpins in the northern goblins’ web, of course he had had to do so. But the fact remained that he had given a promise and broken it.

Dobby studied him with those enormous eyes, mirrors of a sun Harry had never seen, for a moment more, and then formed and held out a hand. “I’ve brought you into the midst of dreams to show you a chance that might help you make up for your mistakes,” he said. “Death and life mingle in the air tonight, as they cross whenever one of us is born.”

“Born?” Harry asked, even as he clasped the hand with his own. For a moment, just a moment, the skin under his own felt like the familiar, rubbery flesh of a house elf. Then it seemed to melt and change. Harry grasped after it, not understanding, until he saw his own body falling like rain.

“Yes,” said Dobby. “One of my kind is born tonight, born into slavery. But there is a chance that we may free him, and his mother, without violating anyone’s will, for death also lurks close tonight.” He paused, and Harry tried not to yell as he felt his arms shred from his shoulders into rain, into light, into sound. “The birthing bed is far away, so we travel as music.”

Harry thought about closing his eyes, but by then, he didn’t have eyes to close anymore. He was a spasm of sound, of packed thought, of song that he could not hear because it was himself.

He could hear Dobby’s song, though, changing chords and monstrous shifting tones, and as they flew through star-scattered darkness, with Dobby’s music drawing him along in its wake like a dragon hatchling by its mother’s side, Harry shivered with awe. The music extended further and wider and wilder than he had ever known. How had the ancient wizards even dared to think that creatures with souls like this should serve them? How had they dared to ask?

Of course, they didn't ask. They just enslaved, and then made both themselves and the house elves forget about the origin of the slavery. It's easier to live with if you don't have your guilt staring you in the face, after all.

They turned through whirling darkness and whirling symphonies, and finally settled into place in a dim room. Harry stared around. Nothing seemed familiar, though he could make out white walls that resembled those of some rooms at Malfoy Manor.

But it was the sight in front of him that captured his attention—and was supposed to, he reminded himself sharply.

A female house elf lay gasping in a crude bed of cotton and rags. Other house elves surrounded her, moaning, their large hands moving over her forehead in trembling tenderness. Harry could see the blood soaking the rags around her, flowing from between her legs. He looked at Dobby, who had manifested as a green-golden shimmer at his side again, but seemed invisible to anyone in the room. His great eyes were fixed on the birthing bed.

“This is the moment when life and death cross,” he murmured, sounding like a catechism. “Every life we bring into the world involves danger for the mother. Every life we give to Life is one that we may also give to Death.” He detached a small slice of himself from the rest of his body, and Harry had the impression of a finger lifting to touch his lips. “Do you feel it, Harry? Do you feel *her*?”

Harry thought he meant the female house elf, and reached out obediently. But, perhaps because he was still transformed into music, his magic couldn't connect with the mother's suffering.

He started to say no, and then noticed the shadow in one corner of the room. It was an elegant black dog, smaller and slimmer than the one that followed Regulus, but in all other ways similar. The pointed muzzle aimed at the birthing bed. The eyes were glittering dark pits. Harry shivered. He had never seen Death before, and if someone had asked him to imagine her, he would not have imagined something so patient, so cool, such a poised hunter.

“This is the moment when life and death cross,” Dobby said again. “And this is the moment when we may do what I will ask you to do without violating anyone's will, because the owner has resigned his claim to the mother. He believes she will die, and the babe with her. Will you save them, Harry?”

Harry glanced again at the black dog. “And *she* won't have something to say about it?”

“She is only one of the forces in this room,” Dobby pointed out. “Life may yet win. She cannot *prevent* that from happening.”

Harry vibrated slowly, which he thought meant a nod right now. “And if I put myself into the contest, then I'm struggling against her?” He could remember what that kind of struggle had cost Voldemort, and he was not sure that he wanted to enter it himself. He didn't understand house elf magic at all. More than that, he did not want to end up with the kind of thirst for immortality that struggling against death seemed to imply.

“Only as healers do,” Dobby said softly. “As all life does, as the mother and her babe are doing even now. I ask you to struggle against death, and I ask you to cut the webs for this pair of house elves as you do so. Is that so great a sacrifice?”

Harry began to breathe more easily. And as he looked at the black dog, almost the image of the one Regulus carried on his arm and at his heels, it was much easier to think of Death as the cruel bitch—literally, in this case. She was a shadow, a powerful shadow, but not one he had to give in to. And if it came down to a contest between life and death, Harry knew which side he was on.

“Very well,” he said softly. “But won't the other elves attack me when they see I'm there?”

“I will explain to them,” Dobby said, and then Harry melted out of music and back into his bodily form.

He bent over the laboring house elf, while around him he heard a chorus of gasps and squeaks. Gently, he pulled the rags aside, and caught a glimpse of the baby's head, smaller and rounder and greener than the head of the only other newborn he'd been this close to, Millicent's sister Marian.

The mother's hand found and gripped his. Harry looked up and met her enormous eyes, gleaming like lamps in the dimness.

“Save Jiv's baby,” she whispered. “I is too weak to make it.”

Harry returned her fierce clasp without answering, and then looked back at the baby. The head was in the wrong position, he thought; that was at least part of the reason the mother had lost so much blood. He didn't dare touch it with his hand, and not only because he thought his wrist would be mashed to a pulp before the mother, Jiv, was done with it. He simply didn't know what he might break, what clumsiness he might perpetrate with his fingers.

He let his barriers down, and called fully on his magic. It came and flooded around him, and Harry shaped it with his will, instead of a spell. He knew of no spell that would do what he wanted, though a midwife probably would.

Arrange the baby so he can come free. Patch her wounds so that she can live while I work on the web.

He felt his magic flow forward around him, thick as a tide of blood, as determined and as patient. It met a force as determined and as patient. Harry looked up at the black dog in the corner of the room, and found her dark eyes focused on him, seeing him. He let out a slow breath, and told himself that Death saw everyone, all the time. She gave her personal notice to few. Even Regulus had had to work for it.

She will not make me die any faster, Harry reassured himself. *There are other lives at stake here*. He looked down at the bloody, torn green flesh, one more time, and then set his magic free to do as it needed to. Trails of glimmering, pale light, like spiderwebs fleshed in dew and sunshine, slid between Jiv's legs, and the baby cried weakly as the power urged his head gently in a different direction.

Jiv tried to sit up and see what was happening, her grip increasing on Harry's hand as she did so.

Harry waited a moment to be sure that he wouldn't just erupt in a cry of pain, then pushed her gently flat again. "Lie down," he whispered, and reached out and touched the web that bound her.

This wasn't like Dobby's half-tattered web, worked at and torn already by the work of Decus Lestrange. This was whole, and the thick strands of the slave web under the one that confined Jiv's power and magic made Harry wince. Jiv was so convinced she was a servant, born and made only to be so, that if her master walked into the room right now, she would try to leap to her feet and ask him what he wanted.

Harry moved his fingers in Jiv's clasp, trying to stroke her palm, a reassuring, soothing motion, and heard her cry again as the baby shifted position. Her long ears flapped, and her jaw worked.

Harry focused on the web. He remembered what he had done to break Dobby's web, the double slicing, and sought for weak points.

There. There was one of them, at the foot of the web. The wizard who owned Jiv had resigned his claim to her, convinced, as Dobby said, that she would die. And Harry could use that, unraveling the web that no longer had an anchor from that point of least resistance.

He swirled down in that direction, his magic pacing and preceding him. At the same time, he could feel his magic working to let Jiv's son emerge into the world, and if he concentrated, he would suddenly see a collage of blood and muscle and skin and Death's waiting presence. He tore himself away from that, though, and back to the web.

All his power was up, and flung into the task. Harry felt fully occupied as he hadn't done since the bursting of the phoenix web.

Then he forced himself to stop thinking about it, and turned to the task.

The first coil he slit easily enough, sliding down and through the linked slave web and magic-binding web. He felt Jiv convulse, her fingers pressing on his, but the sensation grew more distant as he entered the second knot of the web.

This one towered over him, slick and glistening like a fish, the two strands twined so tightly into one another that Harry didn't see how it was meant to come undone. Of course, it had never really been *meant* to come undone; those ancient wizards who wove the web had not wanted house elves free. But now Harry had to climb this mountain in the moonlight, and he was going to do it.

In the end, he did it with less finesse than he would have wanted. He shaped a pair of enormous jaws, not unlike the ones he had attacked Tom Riddle with in the Chamber of Secrets so long ago, and *chewed* through the mountain. He felt silk gum up in his teeth and spin through his brain, looking for a hold. Harry brought up his *vates* beliefs in defense against it, blazing.

The web snarled and swung away, dissipating and tattering further the further it moved. Harry hoped that meant it wouldn't be able to find a host at all, as it probably could in a wizard's mind more amenable to compulsion.

The sides of the web in front of him now led away as a helix, dancing separately from each other but crossing back together. Harry separated the jaws into two pieces, two skating figures that slid up and down and around each loop of the helix. It was important that he not lose track of which was which.

Up, down, around, upside down; his perception split and dizzied him as the figures skated, and dragged knives behind them. Harry was drawing on more magic than he had in a long time, the pull centering in his chest and his heart. It felt good, though. Now he knew he was *using* the magic, not merely wasting it, or locking it up and refusing to wield it, as Jing-Xi had told him

rather sharply was what he had done in the past.

The web began to unravel in front of him, enough of it cut now so that its stability was compromised. Then the helix strands crossed over each other, and brought the skating figures briefly back together, and Harry gasped as he was rudely thrown into a union of all his magic, straining birth and staring Death and laboring heart and crushed fingers and unweaving tapestry.

He shook his head, and the perceptions shrank to manageable levels. He could still see his magic working to save Jiv's life if he looked, and feel his body if he wanted, but right now he was not looking and he did not want.

His perceptions sliced the last of the web, and then turned around, sensing an enemy behind them. Harry understood when he saw the net of autumn colors unfolding over Jiv's legs. The web had replicated itself, reaching for the new house elf entering the world, to make him a slave from the moment of his birth. It would not settle on him if he died, and the newness of it made its weaknesses apparent, but Harry still could not allow it to begin to bind. Jiv's son was too fragile. The promise of freedom and the nearness of death would reach out to him at the same time as the web, asking a young brain to deal with too many factors.

Harry stretched, throwing his momentum and his magic behind him, to break the strands of red and gold and orange.

And then a mightier power swirled around him like a stream in flood around rocks, and swept past him, and ate the web. Harry gaped for a moment, then understood. Jiv's magic was free, and she no longer thought of herself as a slave. She was acting to save her son and herself.

"Get out, Harry," he heard Dobby's voice say.

Harry pulled all his magic back together with a clap that sounded in his ears like thunder, though probably less impressive than that in the real world, and gasped; it felt strange, alien, to have only one perspective now, one way of seeing things. He opened his eyes and flexed his hand, and watched as, for the first time in countless generations, a mother house elf used her magic to serve her child instead of her master.

The magic resembled Dobby's only in the shots of green and gold that Harry could see drifting through it; it was much closer to blue-green, so that he seemed to watch the scene underwater. The magic curled and claimed the young house elf, dragging him the right way around at once. Jiv knew the proportions of the baby's body as she knew her own, Harry thought, and did not need to perform the same delicate, probing work that his magic had tried.

The web flexed forward like a stingray. Jiv's magic covered and *cored* it, and the web exploded into scattershots of light, small darting fish that hurried away in a panic and were gone.

Then Jiv's magic swung around again, in a current, and Harry had one moment of seeing her cradling her son in her arms, her head bowed, her ears flapping in that familiar house elf way, while around her the others cheered.

In the corner, Death bowed her head, and the black dog became a shadow, became a note of music, became nothingness. Harry felt a cold touch on the back of his neck, and she was gone.

Jiv and the baby began to expand. Their dark green skin turned to blue-green, and Harry saw a rising tidal wave of magic and water and light and foam. The wave crested, turned on glittering silvery toes, and then flowed outward into the universe. Harry wondered what forms Jiv and her son could take, what they would do, and was both glad and sad that he would never know. He would have *liked* to see it, but some knowledge should be beyond the reach of wizards.

Dobby touched his shoulder and turned him around. Harry smiled into his eyes, which were smiling back at him.

"You are still *vates*," said Dobby, as if making a prophecy. "This is still what you want to do for the rest of your life."

"It is," Harry said, and then blinked. He lay in his bed, his muscles sore, aching, his arms clasped around Draco, murmuring the words into Draco's hair.

"What is?" Draco asked with a yawn, only half-awake.

"Go back to sleep," Harry whispered. "I'll explain in the morning."

Draco obeyed. Harry lay there, and grinned at the ceiling of the four-poster, and felt the exhaustion of magic used and exercised in every part of him.

I am vates. That is still the core and the heart of what I want to do with my life, the most important thing. Thank you, Dobby, for reminding me.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Two: Wood and Bone and Blood and Iron

Draco flexed his fingers in a slow pattern that his mother had taught him the last time he visited her, to make himself calm down and think about something else. It kept him from snapping immediately at Harry, who sat with his arms folded on the other side of the bed and didn't seem to understand what he'd done wrong.

"Well, I don't see it," he said at last. "How could you free a mother and a child? House elves are valuable, and house elf children can work within a few days of being born. The owner wouldn't have given them up."

"He already had," Harry said promptly. "The webs over the house elves link to the owners' *intentions*, which I didn't know. He believed she would die in childbirth, and the baby with her. He'd resigned his claim to them, and that's why Dobby and I could step in and interfere." He shrugged. "It doesn't make any difference to the free will of the owner. In one sense, they would be gone from his control. Now they're simply gone from his control in another sense."

Draco braced himself. He could tell he and Harry were going to collide, and he didn't want that, just a few days before February second and the fourth courting ritual. "Harry," he said.

"Yes?"

Draco licked his lips and leaned forward. "It makes a large difference. If you had saved their lives and maintained the webs, the owner would have wanted them back, don't you think? And if he had known there was a way they could survive the night, he would have never resigned his claim to them. You lied, at least by omission, by not waking him up and telling him the truth."

There was silence for a moment. Draco, who had expected an angry outburst, was surprised. He watched Harry sit there with head bowed, and wondered if it was possible that he was actually thinking about this.

Then Harry lifted his face, and Draco recoiled a bit at the look in his eyes. He told himself to be still and not flinch, though, even when the shadow of a snake draped over Harry's shoulders. If he backed down from Harry through fear of his magic, he would never be an equal partner in their disputes. He would always have only the opinions that Harry allowed him to hold or express, and no others. He was striking a blow for his own freedom by not flinching.

That didn't stop him from wanting to yield just so that the thick flow of magic over him would turn sweet. But those instincts were only instincts, and he could control them. Draco breathed softly, his eyes fixed on Harry's face.

"I should have *maintained* the webs?" Harry asked softly. "Do you realize that asking me to do so violates every commitment I have as a *vates*, Draco?"

"I thought you already did that," said Draco. "By violating the owner's free will, I mean. He should have known, and should have made the decision to let Jiv and her son go with full knowledge of what was happening." He paused, and then flung the words. "If nothing else, they might make Harry so angry as to throw him off-balance. "Or are you afraid that he'd refuse, and you'd have to abide by the respect for wizards' free will that you promised, and that means that you'd have to see that freeing house elves is wrong-headed?"

Something burst behind him. Draco thought one of the bedposts had cracked clean through. He still did not let himself back down. At the moment, his trust in Harry was a fragile thing, as likely to splinter as a bedpost was, but he *still* would not yield. Harry was Harry, and Harry would never hurt him.

"Freeing house elves is not wrong-headed," said Harry softly, after a long, ominous pause. "If their service was something natural, the ancient wizards would never have had to put a web on them to compel their slavery in the first place. And though I would have argued with the owner had he maintained a claim to them—I wouldn't have had a choice, because then the webs would likely have been too strong for me to cut through—I don't think that what I did this time was wrong."

"Why not?" Draco challenged him insistently. If Harry couldn't defend his position in an argument with him, then he wouldn't be able to defend it with political rivals. Draco was doing him a favor, really.

"Because I would have had to *actively* help in the enslavement of house elves," said Harry. "I would have had to heal Jiv and her

son and haul them back into their webs. You maintain that the owner would have wanted to keep them *if* he had known I could save their lives, and not otherwise. And why should I save their lives just so that he could keep them?"

"Because—" Draco paused.

"I already know that I'm not going to like whatever you have to say next." Harry's face was frozen. "Just say it, Draco."

"Because a wizard's will is more important than a house elf's will," said Draco. "Because he deserved the chance to know it. Because I still think that a wizard's allegiance should be to his own kind, Harry, and you owed Jiv's owner more responsibility than you showed him."

"I see." Harry gave him a nod, then stood and walked towards the door.

Draco couldn't help it; he called out after him, "Where are you going?"

Harry looked back at him. "To *think*, Draco. That's all." He paused for a moment, and spoke words that he probably meant to be comforting without any softness in his face, which meant they weren't comforting at all. "It doesn't involve giving you the silent treatment again, or leaving you. If I did either of those things, you'd know." He held up his hand so that the Black ring on it shone, and Draco imagined he would probably strip it off as a sign that their courting ritual was done, if he should decide to do so.

Then he shut the door of their bedroom, and shut Draco off from him for a time. Draco lay back on the bed, and thought.

At one point, he saw a glimmer of scales move past the bed, and Argutus raised his head up to look at him. The Omen snake let out a long, breathless hiss that was probably the equivalent of a scolding in Parseltongue, and then hooked himself around the handle of the door and went after Harry.

Draco scowled and rolled over to push his face into the pillow.

What had Harry *expected* him to say when he told him about this? He knew where Draco stood. He knew what Draco thought about Mudbloods. It was one thing to treat them politely in public, and another thing to actually think them equal to pureblood wizards. Draco didn't. Their magic could be the same. Their blood never would be, and neither would their heritage. There were dozens of things that Draco, raised in a pureblood environment, knew and accepted the way that a fish knew and accepted water. Granger would never know them. Hannah Abbott, from Hufflepuff, violated them all the time, minor rules of politeness about staring and what words one used in public. Merlin, even *Harry*—

And there he stopped, because if someone had asked him to judge Harry on behavior, without knowing anything about his blood, Draco knew what he would have said. He would have called him pureblood.

He rolled restlessly off the bed and pulled on a set of clean robes; the ones he wore were too rumpled for his taste now, and covered with sweat from the fear he'd briefly felt once Harry's magic spread throughout the room. As they settled around his shoulders, Draco relaxed. There was something *soothing* about wearing clothes cleaned with house elf magic. He would make sure to tell Harry so, the next time he saw him.

He didn't dare go in search of Harry, so he set about arranging the components he would need for the Imbolc ritual. It still wasn't for a few days yet; he had plenty of time to find them and then persuade Harry to come near enough so that the ritual could start. Perhaps, in a way, it was a good thing they were having this argument now. There was no other courting ritual that would fit angry words so well.

Harry was still "thinking" at breakfast the next morning. Draco did make his comment about robes cleaned with house elf magic, and Harry turned and stared directly at him.

Of course, Harry then said, "I use a cleaning charm that cleans all the cloth in the room, Draco. Including your robes. House elves haven't touched anything in our bedroom for months." And that stole all his triumph.

Draco turned away with a helpless scowl. He ate a few bites of pancakes, took a few sips of pumpkin juice, but the savor had gone out of all of them. Then he burst out, "And what's going to happen to families who can't *afford* to give up their house elves, Harry? The ones who'll have to buy food and cook it on their own from now on? Have you thought about that?"

Harry turned and stared at him. "Draco," he said a moment later. "Did you really not know?"

“Know what?” Draco demanded.

“It’s something I suspected, but Hermione confirmed it,” said Harry, small puffs of breath escaping him that made him sound unattractive and impatient. Draco considered telling him so, but decided that not interrupting might be the best course of action right now. “Owners of house elves *do* give them money to buy food, but it’s smaller amounts than they’d have to spend on food on their own—Knuts instead of Sickles or Galleons. The house elves take that and use it in markets run by house elves who are bound to harvest and take care of the food, rather than clean and care for a single specific household. They buy the food cheaply, but it’s still good. The house elves take the money back to whoever owns the fields. That’s the way that a few pureblood families have profited all these years, really: supplying the house elf market. They could raise the price at any time, and they have, sometimes. That’s part of the reason that some pureblood families, like the Weasleys, stopped owning house elves. It was cheaper for them to conjure or buy their own food, especially when they had a good Transfiguration wizard, than send the house elves to buy it.”

“That’s not—“ said Draco. “You’re lying. You must be.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“My father never mentioned anything like that.”

“Have you asked him?”

“Why would I ask him about house elves?”

“My point is made.”

“Sarcasm doesn’t suit you, Harry,” said Draco. He jabbed his fork into his pancakes and glared at them, wishing he didn’t have to think about them being made from flour and—other things that house elves bought at a house elf market, run over by squashy green fingers.

“Oh,” said Harry softly. “And here it was going to be my new way of facing the world.”

Draco shoved his plate back. The food didn’t taste good any more. “If you knew about this,” he said harshly, “why didn’t you do something about it years ago?”

“Because I *didn’t* know,” Harry said. “I wasn’t curious enough either, Draco. I’ve taken what steps I can to rectify that, but they’re very small, and some of them are undoubtedly too late. I’ve benefited as much as any wizard who attends Hogwarts by the fact that house elves are slaves here. And Merlin knows, now, what I’ve done to other species that I didn’t even realize at the time. The wizards who wove those webs were clever. They hid the house elf market and the webs themselves so that their descendants, us, would never even have to *think* about where our food came from and how our world got along. And thinking about it hurts, and involves self-blame, and will take years to heal. I do know that. I’m not demanding that everyone change right now if they object to changing. That’s the reason that I haven’t simply broken all the webs on house elves in Hogwarts with a wave of my hand. But I’m not going to join in this weaving as a deliberate affair any more. That’s the reason I didn’t go to Jiv’s owner and tell him I could save her life, and her son’s life. Either I would have had to let them die to make a point, or I would have had to conspire to put them back under webs if he decided that he wanted them his and alive. There are some things that my allegiance to other wizards and other wizards’ free wills can’t command, Draco, and active torture of another species is one of them.”

Draco shook his head. “It’s simpler than you think, Harry,” he whispered. “Or more complex. I’m not sure which any more.”

“Tell me which.” Harry’s voice had calmed a bit, no longer a raging tide, but more like calm, flowing water. “I’d be happy to listen, Draco. None of the arguments I’ve heard so far for keeping house elves as slaves sound reasonable to me, but maybe one will. Talk to me. Make me see the situation has some side I haven’t considered.”

“It’s part of our heritage,” Draco said quietly. “Can you understand that, Harry? My family is different from a family like the Weasleys, who let their house elves go. And I know that you don’t care as much about family heritage, given that you renounced your last name and that you don’t seem to even care about Black treasures except as a source of magic, but you should understand this. House elves are ours like the dances are ours.”

“But the dances are a matter of training and binding yourselves,” said Harry. “This trains and binds another species.”

“That doesn’t make a difference in the eyes of a pureblooded wizard considering his heritage.” Draco made a vague gesture with his arm, and wished he could put what he meant into words more easily. “They’re all the same. The house elves are a piece of it, neither more nor less important than the rest, that speaks a message about the family’s wealth and purity of blood to another family.”

“It’s a message written in wasted lives, Draco.” Harry’s voice had acquired the passionate, quiet tone Draco had learned to fear. “I don’t think that’s worth either the ink or the parchment it requires.”

“But it’s *there*,” said Draco. “And you said yourself, Harry, that you’d benefited from the enslavement of house elves. So you ought to be able to understand this. How can you expect people to think differently about it when you yourself haven’t thought differently about it until now?”

Harry watched him thoughtfully for a moment. Then he said, “I can’t expect them to change their minds on the spot. What I can do is keep presenting the truth—and presenting *myself* with the truth. If I make assumptions, change them. If I make a mistake, atone for it. If I benefit from the services of house elves in some way I don’t even notice right now, stop it. This path isn’t ever going to end for me, either, Draco, any more than for a typical pureblood wizard, unless I actually manage to free all house elves in my lifetime, which frankly I would be surprised to see happen. There will always be something new to discover, something I neglected, something I should have thought of before and feel like an *idiot* for not thinking of. I have to change my thinking, test it. I’ll throw ideas off a cliff and see if they shatter. And if they don’t, they still have to be tested, again and again.”

Draco shuddered. The notion of doing that to his own mind and thoughts revolted him. There was no *rest* in it, no peace.

And this was the kind of thing that Harry wanted to do for the rest of his life?

“Excuse me,” he muttered, and stood, pushing back the bench, and fled from the Great Hall. He could feel Harry’s eyes on his back the whole way, not condemning, but faintly puzzled, as if he did not understand why what he had said had scared Draco.

He can face up to that, maybe, Draco thought, as he leaned against the wall outside the Hall’s entrance and tried to catch his breath. *But how can anyone else? He’s asking the rest of us to share that path? How can he?*

What scared Draco most was that he couldn’t stop thinking about the house elf markets, now, and how his family *did* pay for their food, just in small coins. And how it was a web that bound the house elves to serve the Malfoys, and not magic and pride and purity of blood that awed them into doing so, as Draco had been taught was the case.

If he could not stop thinking about those things, did that mean they would eventually draw him down the path to join Harry? That he would come to agree because those thoughts would not stop whispering in his head, would not stop confronting him with inconvenient truths?

That was a frightening thing.

Draco felt the pull of the Imbolc ritual the moment he opened his eyes. He rolled slowly over and looked at Harry, who had spent the night with him, though he had spoken of little before they laid down and went to sleep. Harry lay with his cheek pillowed on his hand, his breathing soft and slow and deep. The Many snake curled around his throat, and the Omen snake wrapped around his legs, both shifted their heads to look at Draco.

The moment Harry opened his eyes, and their gazes locked, the ritual would begin.

Draco took a deep breath, and scrambled out of bed. He had to go to the loo first.

As he moved, he glanced at the small table next to the bed, where he’d arranged the materials he would need for the ritual. A branch from the Forbidden Forest marked the presence of wood. There was a delicate owl bone saved from Potions, and a corked vial of mouse’s blood, and an iron heart bought from a shop in Hogsmeade. Harry had either not noticed as Draco slowly accumulated them, or had chosen to say nothing about them.

In a short time, Draco knew, he would have no choice. The ritual already swayed and flowed around him, insistent as a tide. This was a different kind of pull than the one at the Breaking of Boundaries, which wanted them near each other. This one felt like a call to battle, the horn that marked the beginning of ancient wars between Dark Lords and Light Lords.

And it should, Draco thought. This was the Presence of War.

He shut the door of the loo behind him and raked his fingers through his hair, striving to slow his breathing. The Presence of War would affect him the wrong way if he weren't calm. Draco would enter the battle half-hysterical, and determined to win, when that wasn't the ritual's purpose at all. It was to show up the differences in the minds of the joined partners, make them see and feel where their deepest disagreements lay, and how they might function as comrades in battle despite that. Just as this year's Walpurgis ritual, the fifth one in the cycle, would reaffirm them as friends and lovers, the Presence of War was meant as an exploration of the relationship they would share when they fought.

The depth from the Breaking of Boundaries would still be there. Draco was almost not looking forward to that. He and Harry would slide into each other's minds. This time, though, the magic would guide what they saw.

And it would not all be wonderful.

"Draco?" Harry was knocking on the door.

"I'll be right out," Draco shouted, damning his voice as it shook, and hurried to relieve himself. He wouldn't have time for a shower. That was all right. The Presence of War was in the room, gliding shadows of curses haunting the walls, and one was rarely clean on a battlefield, anyway.

He finished, and washed his hands, and then opened the door. His eyes met Harry's.

Harry gasped as the ritual sliced the air between them, as their minds opened and slid into each other's. Draco braced himself with one hand against the door, blinking dizzily. That was the only way he could keep hold of his own body as his head turned and his thoughts blended with Harry's in a context that made having just one opinion seem bizarre.

He swam down into a chasm of guilt he hadn't known existed. Harry did harbor some guilt about having benefited from house elf slavery from so many years, and he was determined to help lift house elves' webs partially so that he didn't have to suffer any more. It was a selfish motive that he didn't seem to have considered. Draco spun and showed the chasm to Harry, wondering what he would say about it.

Harry's answer was to expose a tiny nugget Draco hadn't been aware of in himself: that even if he came to believe Harry was right, he would still act as if he were wrong, and refuse to think about it, much the way he refused to think about his father killing Mudbloods, because to do otherwise was to lack family pride. *And is avoiding humility any better a motive than avoiding guilt?* Harry asked.

Draco flinched, but felt his anger rising to sustain him. He just had to balance that anger, keep it cold instead of burning hot, so that the Presence of War wouldn't urge him and Harry into an all-out battle. He replied, *At least I know what I am. I've always been a Malfoy. That's always been important to me.*

Even though your father disowned you? Harry spun out skeins of memory: Draco's decision to go to Harry during the rebellion, his joy and relief when Draco had come to Woodhouse, Draco's spiteful reply to Lucius that had probably encouraged Lucius's own stubbornness. *And is being a Malfoy more important to you than I am?*

Draco snarled at him. *That's not a fair question, Harry.*

I think it deserves an answer.

Then I think I deserve an answer. Is being vates more important to you than I am?

Harry, infuriatingly, swung into cold anger as if he'd been swimming there all his life, tumbling down through cascades of light while he considered, without letting up on his irritation with Draco. *It's the most important task I have,* said Harry at last. *That doesn't mean it's more important than you are. I put people and tasks in different categories. That's like asking if breathing is more important to me than eating. They both matter vastly to me. I might die more slowly if you take one away from me than I would the other, but they're both necessary to sustain life.*

This was why Draco hated arguing with Harry, because he managed to make everything sound so *reasonable*.

Harry tossed back images of Draco sulking in a corner, or hitting Connor with a hex that turned his hair purple, or something else juvenile. He disliked arguing with Draco because Draco often acted like a child, or believed something was right and just wouldn't admit it.

I'm not a child nearly as often as your brother is, Draco snarled. And you go along with it, you know. Or else why play that prank where you told me that the charms on your Firebolt meant you couldn't rescue him and he drowned?

That was a mistake, said Harry. I'm sorry for it. How many bloody apologies do you need, Draco? Fourteen? Sixteen? Ten?

I need you to mean it. I need you to care enough for me in the first place that you wouldn't have agreed to play the prank just to appease your brother.

And if I agree to do something just to appease you? How is that different?

I'm your partner. I should matter more than your brother.

Just the way that I matter more than your father and your family name. I see.

You have no idea what it's like. You're not pureblood.

I can see into your mind at the moment, Draco. I have an excellent idea of what it's like. I'm seeing it in all the particulars. Harry's voice grew edged with acid. It seems that most of what it 'means' to be pureblood doesn't have its own significance. You define yourself in relation to your opposites. You couldn't be pureblood if there weren't Mudbloods. And you couldn't raise yourself above other families if there weren't families like the Weasleys who were poor. You depend on them for your existence. Your history songs and your dances and your manners are so wound into them that without them, you'd have no context to put the songs and the dances and the manners in. And that's really fucking pathetic, Draco.

Draco knew he was wounded, that if he thought too seriously about Harry's words, he had the potential to let them go too deep. So he defended himself by reaching for the tangled knot of emotions that still lay closest to Harry's center. *And you? Have you thought about what it means that you could have beauty and wealth and power and pride, and you ignore it all because—why? You don't find them of inherent value? Have you ever thought that someone else valuing them might be right? That thousands of wizards down the generations valuing them might mean you should give them another look?*

Because they're not important to me. Harry's voice had a sound of self-satisfaction that Draco hated. At least before his latest change, he might retreat and admit that Draco could have a point. Now, he trusted his own impressions enough to stand his ground.

And you love that about me, admit it.

Harry's voice sounded as if it were coming from the center of his mind. Draco started. He hadn't thought Harry had slid that far, that deep, that fast.

I have. He felt Harry's presence turning like a snake in a burrow in the center of his mind, nudging at the core of his beliefs. *You'll always be something finer and stronger than you want to allow yourself to be, Draco. When the situation calls for it, you can rise into that strength. You'll fight and defend me from your father because I matter to you. You'll choose between your family and me, when it wasn't right or fair to force you to do so, because you didn't concentrate on the rightness or fairness of the circumstances. When you think about what you want, and are persuaded that it's time to make an effort to achieve it, you soar. The rest of the time, you're content to creep on the ground, or sulk and wait for the person arguing with you to get tired of the argument. That's it, isn't it, Draco? The problem with your making a change isn't that you're incapable of thinking anyone who isn't a pureblood is right. It's that—*

Don't you dare say it, Harry Potter, Draco warned him.

It's laziness. And fear. Fear of what such an immense change would mean, laziness about making that change at the deepest levels of your being.

Draco rushed him.

It was a physical charge, a short one that ended with him tackling Harry to the floor. But it was more a mental charge, one that carried him over the barriers Harry had put in the way and landed him squarely in the center of Harry's own mind.

He could see glittering justifications stretched all around him. Harry had his own fears, and chief among them was yielding to the longings he sometimes experienced, for freedom and beauty of his own, or to lie back and not take life so seriously for a morning, or to just do the easier thing, like letting house elves feed him. He hadn't destroyed those desires. It wasn't that he never felt them. Instead—

Draco laughed. *You think I'm afraid of something ridiculous, Harry? Look at yourself! Do you really think wallowing in bed for a morning would mean that you go on wallowing the next day, and the next day, and the next day, and never experience self-denial again?* He snorted.

I got over those, Harry defended himself. I'm growing better. I value pleasure now, and I know that I deserve it.

Not all the time. Draco nudged and poked some more. You still have those ridiculous fears. You still hope your noticing of beauty will go away. You still welcome the backsliding you'll do, because it proves to you you're human. You've finally reached the point at which you count yourself equal to other people. Well done. Now acknowledge that most of the time you're better than they are, more. It's lying if you don't, and burying your head in the sand. It means that you get frustrated at them for not making 'easy' decisions that are really only easy to you. You're not everyone, Harry, and it's silly to pretend you are. Count yourself extraordinary.

Confront your fears.

You first.

The Presence of War snorted around them like a well-satisfied horse, and Draco started. He'd been so caught up in the argument that he hadn't thought of keeping his balance, only the battle. And now Harry was aware of the pulsing magic, too, and he stilled beneath Draco, his fish-like thoughts stirring the water with their tails.

What comes next? He asked it as though he hated to ask Draco anything, but Draco was the one who knew about the ritual, so he had to. Draco gloated in the knowledge, and received a lash of fiery anger back. That would be so magnificent if Harry ever let it out in sex, he thought.

Does everything come back to fucking with you?

It comes back to fucking with you, Draco corrected, and then stood. Harry rolled his head to track his progress as Draco went over to the table beside the bed and gathered up the branch, the bone, the vial of blood, and the iron heart. When he carried them back over, Harry sat up.

What are those?

Honestly, you should be able to see. You're in my head. But I'll indulge your own laziness. Draco grinned at Harry's snarl, and laid the objects out on the floor. *Now. You have to choose one of them.*

And do what with them?

Just choose, first. Feel drawn to them. Listen to what one calls you.

Harry's eyes narrowed; he suspected Draco was making fun of him. But he turned and looked at the objects, reaching out, his hand hovering over them.

Draco let his breathing slow, and turned his own attention to the objects. The iron heart didn't call to him. Nor did the vial of blood. But that meant his hand swerved towards the bone and the branch, and he knew, he just *knew*, that whichever one he chose wouldn't be the one Harry chose.

Sure enough, his hand closed on the bone, and Harry's on the branch.

What does that mean? Harry demanded.

Draco replied before Harry could dig through his mind looking for the answer, which would have been uncomfortable. *The four objects all have different meanings. The ritual is called the Presence of War, but it used to be known as the Bonding of Wood and Bone and Blood and Iron. He turned to face Harry, folding his legs in front of him. It has to do with facing war, and which object you consider to be the way you fight. Iron is strong, but more brittle than most metals; it needs to be forged into steel before it can take blows. That's the war of someone who would rather do anything than surrender. And blood flows everywhere, but it dries. That's the war-way of someone who would rather shed the blood and then forget about it. Vengeance answers for all. Last time pays for all,* he added, on an inspiration; he knew that Harry knew the phrase from the justice ritual he'd used on his mother.

Harry nodded slowly. *And the bone?*

It means that I prefer digging out conflicts. Draco gave the bone a light twitch. I can break. I'm more fragile than the iron is, even. But bones are usually surrounded by ligaments and flesh and tendons that protect them and prevent them from snapping simply from the ordinary stresses of life. I like to surround myself with that context, and then dig far enough down to feast on the bones of my enemies. I prefer allies, not acting on my own.

The wood? Harry turned the branch back and forth in his hand, as if to admire it. He probably was, Draco thought.

You're alive. You change and grow around conflict. I can do that, too, but bone grows with less force and more slowly than a tree does. A tree can break a branch and still be mostly alive, while a broken bone has to be reassembled. Draco reached out and laid his hand on Harry's arm. Of course, you also bow before storms, and can drop individual branches to keep the roots and the trunk thriving. So you'll compromise more readily than I can, and listen to others' angry winds more readily than I can.

And that means we're not right for each other?

It does not, Draco said, barely resisting the urge to snap. We needed to see into each other's heads instead of just choosing wood or bone or blood or iron so that we would understand each other's choices. The Breaking of Boundaries confirmed our essential likeness. This confirms one of our essential differences. And now we have to live with it, instead of backing out.

Harry caressed the branch for a moment, looking thoughtful. Then he leaned forward and kissed Draco, hard.

Draco was happy enough to return the kiss, even though he pulled back a moment later and said, *We still have things to talk about, you know, and you also know that you'll end up compromising before I will.*

And you know that you'll shatter before I will, and that I'll be there to reassemble you, Harry retorted.

Draco smiled in spite of himself. *So long as that's clear.*

It is.

Draco lay back, and settled in for a debate on the ethics of house elves, Mudbloods, and whatever else Harry wanted to discuss. Hard satisfaction, rather like a bone itself, shone in his chest.

They were not perfectly matched. But Draco thought he would have been more worried if they were. There was no way that their wildly disparate lives could have shaped them that well for each other. "A perfect match" would have meant large discrepancies, somewhere, they were ignoring.

And now they knew each other better, and their arguments could proceed on the basis of confidence instead of ignorance.

They might not convince each other for a long time. But they were *speaking*. And if one of them was bone and the other wood, at least they had good reasons for being so.

Draco could live with Harry being a tree in battle, if only because he knew he was flesh where it counted.

I did hear that, you know.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Three: And Fire Goes Free

"Harry!"

Harry jerked his head up. He was becoming more attuned to joy than to anger now, at least if the anger wasn't confined in a ritual Draco had told him only later was called the Presence of War, and the joy in Hermione's voice was *transcendent*.

"What is it?" he asked, as she ducked around a shelf and avoided Madam Pince's glare as if by accident. She pushed a piece of parchment into his hand and stood beside the table, bouncing from foot to foot. Harry, glancing over her shoulder, saw that Zacharias had followed her and hovered near the door of the library, blinking now and then. He wouldn't often have seen her like this, Harry guessed.

"Just read the letter," said Hermione. "It's not from one of the people I sent 'Fourteen Simple Spells or Charms That Can

Substitute For House Elf Work’ to, but I think that doesn’t matter. Wait until you see who it *is* from. More people are hearing about E.L.F., Harry!”

Harry smiled and shoved his book aside. He’d been researching the ethics of willing sacrifice for some means of getting around Horcruxes, but he could afford to take a few minutes and see what had made Hermione so excited.

The letter was written in a flowing, wavy script Harry had never seen before, and blue ink. He half-closed his eyes as words about blue ink came back to him, from the books that Aurora Whitestag and Griselda had insisted he study. The color meant a desire for peace and reconciliation, and was often used for treaties. The script, though—he couldn’t remember seeing a mention of that anywhere.

Dear Harry:

I know we have met before, but it was not under the best of circumstances. When I heard about your desire to free house elves, I persuaded one of my allies, of the Fiona family, to send a copy of his letter on the subject to me. I had not received one, for obvious reasons.

I find your arguments compelling. Given that I try to live, always, in accordance with the ideals of the Light, I would not like to think I had enslaved house elves, even accidentally. But I am not convinced by the idea that the webs have endured since ancient times and have induced the desire for natural servitude in the elves, rather than preyed on it. I would like to meet with you and discuss this further. If you manage to persuade me, I would free my house elves.

That last is on my honor as a wizard and a faithful follower of the Light.

Of course, it would be wrong, according to the ancient dances, for you to visit me alone and without an introduction, and most of your allies would find my estate—painful, given the number of wards that are up to protect my family against Dark wizards. Therefore, I would ask that you bring my daughter with you. She knows the place, and can reassure you of both the position of the wards and my good intentions. I look forward to the visit.

*Yours in the Light,
Cupressus Apollonis.*

With an effort, Harry kept himself from balling up the parchment and throwing it across the room. He did manage to summon a smile and look up at Hermione with that smile firmly in place.

“That’s brilliant, Hermione,” he said.

“No, it’s not.” Hermione narrowed her eyes and leaned forward to stare into his face. “What’s the matter, Harry? Don’t you think he’s sincere?”

At one point, Harry might have lied to make her feel better. Now, he shook his head. “No,” he said. “He’s still angry that Ignifer refused him by becoming Dark. He cursed her with infertility. And now he wants me to bring her along when we go to his estate in Ireland. I think this is just another ploy to get her back.”

“He doesn’t say anything about that,” Hermione pointed out doubtfully, looking at the letter as if it would somehow proclaim Cupressus’s bad intentions through the ink.

“Well, he wouldn’t, would he?” Harry shook his head and made an attempt to calm himself. It was hardly Hermione’s fault that Cupressus had been the first to respond, though it was a disappointment. “But, trust me, Hermione, this is just a ploy. The day he’s sincere about freeing his house elves is the day he takes the curse off Ignifer, and I don’t think that will ever happen.”

Hermione’s eyes and face were chill. “So he said he would take the curse off if she—“

“Came back to him and Declared for Light again.” Harry swept a hand over his face. “After Declaring for Dark because the wild Dark saved her life when she called. She’s only keeping her word of honor. But, of course, that word of honor is null and void when it comes to the Dark.”

“So what should I do?” Hermione looked doubtfully at the letter. “This was folded up inside a letter for me that said my project sounded interesting to him and he wanted more information. I thought he was sincere then. He spoke of the Light and free will and how much he wanted to obey the ideals of the Light.”

“Oh, he does,” said Harry, his mind lingering on the unpleasant man he’d met almost a year ago now, at the spring equinox alliance meeting. Cupressus was another Augustus Starrise, another Lucius Malfoy, dedicated to the Light but far more dedicated to having things all his own way. “Just his interpretation of them.”

Hermione nodded. “And you think that would include treating Muggleborns like house elves?”

Harry blinked. “I don’t know all the specifics of that,” he said. “But I think it might.”

Hermione nodded again. “And Merlin knows, I could never live with anyone who did that,” she said.

Zacharias flinched. Harry shook his head, and turned back to his book as Hermione left the library. “I’ll write an answer to Cupressus thanking him but refusing his offer,” he called after her—quietly, so as not to rouse the wrath of Madam Pince. “What you choose to do is up to you.”

“Isn’t it always?” Hermione said, and then snapped out of the library and was gone. Harry went back to concentrating furiously on what the book had to say about willing sacrifices. So far, it merely consisted of repeating what Acies had told them, but in more boring terms and with less clear and succinct language.

There is a way. Somewhere, there must be a way.

“Hermione?”

She halted in walking down the hall and turned to face him, her hands on her hips and the letter from Apollonis crumpled against her robe. “What is it, Zach?”

She knows I hate to be called that. But it wasn’t something Zacharias could complain about—not now, not when so much else lay between them. He took a deep breath and tried for a winning smile that didn’t come out that winning when Hermione faced him with her glare. “Can we talk?”

“Will it end better than our last conversation?” There was a slice of pain in her eyes, buried deep. Zacharias was almost glad to see it. At least it made her more human, without the constant bustle and determination that had lifted her, for a while, into the realm of someone not all that human, like Harry.

“That was your fault—“ Zacharias began.

Hermione took a step towards him. “Zacharias, you implied that not only were house elves beneath your consideration as a serious topic of conversation, but so were the rights of Muggleborns. I’ve *found* means of discrimination in the laws. Only Muggleborn children are monitored for the use of magic at home. That’s what all that elaborate Ministry language meant.” She took a deep breath that had pain dragged on the end of it. “Now, I can think of some reasonable arguments you could present to that, though I wouldn’t accept them. That there are no magic-using adults in Muggle homes, for example, and so Muggleborn children need to be forbidden from using their wands during the holidays in case of accidents. Even though it *does* mean that they come back to school with less practice doing certain kinds of spells, which I’m *sure* is a coincidence,” she added in a mutter. “But you said that only a fool would think that was an interesting thing to talk about.”

“I—“ Zacharias swallowed what he had meant to say, which was a defense of the pureblood point-of-view, and looked at her, hard. Hermione was tired, and her eyes avoided his for a moment, as though she wanted to brace herself for the coming argument. But, for the first time, those signs didn’t comfort him with thoughts of an imminent victory just ahead. They made him feel—wrong. It was wrong that Hermione should look that way, but especially wrong that she should look that way when speaking with him.

He held out his arm. “Can we walk?”

The stunned glance that she lifted to him hurt; he could admit it. But he kept holding out his arm, and didn’t specify a position for her to grip it in with his own hand. He left it up to her whether she would walk with him as a pureblood witch or an ordinary woman.

Hermione blinked for a moment, then shifted the letter from Apollonis to her left hand and draped her fingers over his arm. Zacharias noticed, and told himself not to rejoice in, the fact that she’d taken up the position of an older witch being escorted by a younger wizard.

They paced down the hall together, and headed out the doors, by common agreement. Zacharias cast a warming charm; the February air bit more than he would have expected, and Hogwarts's grounds were deep in snow. Hermione cast a complicated spell, one of her variants, that warmed both her hands and her robes. Zacharias felt as if he were walking next to a roaring fire.

Would you be stupid enough to reject a new spell just because someone who wasn't pureblood invented it?

Of course, from what Zacharias knew of history, his ancestors hadn't done that, and nor had other pureblood wizards. They had simply adopted the spell into their own repertoires and detached it from its owner as soon as possible, so that no one would know someone with dirty blood had been its source. It was of a piece, or so said Hermione, with denying they had any Muggle ancestry, or saying that every Lord-level wizard had been pureblood. It was a commonly accepted truism, but that did not make it the truth. Half of pureblood history was woven of lies, of stories that made good *stories* but poor truth.

Zacharias did not think it was half. A tenth, at most. But he was in love with a woman who believed otherwise, and he would have to either compromise with her or lose her.

He blinked at the wall of the courtyard, which was covered with traceries of frost. Discovering that he was *willing* to compromise should happen in a calm setting with sweet wine and a chance to think, he thought. Not outside in a cold so keen he was beginning to shiver once more.

Before, he hadn't seriously thought of listening to what Hermione said. She would get over it, and they would live together the way they had planned, putting one over on smug pureblood society by pretending to be part of it in public and laughing about it in private.

Only, the months had passed, and Hermione had not changed her stance, nor grown less interested in the Grand Unified Theory and the concept of rights for Muggleborns that would make them equal to pureblood wizards. And now she was interested in house elf rights, and Zacharias knew there was no way she could pretend to be pureblood again. Too many people would know her name now as the person who made up lists of reasons to stop using house elves and sent them in the post.

Zacharias had held back. He had tried to argue her around, and he had tried to use cold silence to make her come running back, and he had tried to reason with himself that this was the only thing he could do. His mother had taught him the importance of family and heritage—and heritage was what this was really about, not blood. Hermione would have to see that, too, or else she just wasn't a good wife for him.

But maybe I wasn't a good husband for her, either, the way I was acting.

"Hermione?" he asked at last.

"Hmmm?" She tilted back her head to look at him. She had a snowflake caught in her eyelashes. Last year, Zacharias would have taken the chance for a kiss, but they were too far apart to risk it right now.

Still, though. He had made sacrifices of his own. The badger scar on his cheek, left over from his summoning of Helga Hufflepuff when he had learned that Hermione was dying of a Severing Curse, twinged. He had done what was only supposed to be done for blood or love, and he was going to let her go?

He stepped away from her and lifted her hand to his lips. "Can we begin again?" he asked, breath warm against her skin.

Hermione did not melt as he would have liked her to; she considered him carefully instead, lights rippling and gleaming in her brown eyes. "And you'll consider what I have to say seriously?"

"Yes."

"And you won't assume I have any desire to conform to what purebloods want, that there's some inherent rightness in those rituals that I have to sense just because I'm Muggleborn?" Defiant words, bravely spoken, but Zacharias could hear the yearning underneath her tone. He was not the only one who had missed someone.

"I won't assume that," he said, and moved closer, and clasped her hands in his own, looking earnestly down at her. "The one unforgivable crime, my mother taught me once, is lying to yourself. And I've been doing it for months now. I've pretended that rituals matter more to me than you." He shrugged. "And that's not true."

Hermione's mouth fell slightly open, and then she caught herself and shut it again. "I can think of other unforgivable crimes," she

muttered.

Zacharias held her eyes, and waited. He had made the first moves. She would have to make the next set. He had made mistakes. So had she. If she was unable to compromise, then they would have to separate.

Until the next time you realize how much you miss her, the taunting voice in the back of his head whispered.

Zacharias ignored it, and waited.

Hermione sighed, and stepped forward, and kissed him, delicately, on the lips. It wasn't all that proper; the partner of purer blood was supposed to guide the kiss, in most dances. But Zacharias let it pass, this once.

"I'll let you have a chance," Hermione whispered. "One more."

The words did not frighten him. Where there was one more chance, there was the ability to win a second. Or a third, or a fourth.

The courtyard of Hogwarts was as strange a place to come back together again as it was to discover he was in love, Zacharias thought. But he would take it.

"I don't think it's a good idea."

"I can't pass it up." Ignifer paced back and forth in the center of the room, not looking at Honoria. "You know what he has. Harry didn't say anything about that in his letter, so I'm sure Father hasn't mentioned it to him. He has information, Honoria. Information about Lucius dealing with the Unspeakables, but also information about one other person." She spun, letting her robes flare behind her. It was easier to watch their swirl than to look into her lover's eyes. "We need that information. Who knows who the other person is? I've tried to think, but the clues he gives are too vague."

Honoria stepped in front of her, grasping Ignifer's chin and forcing her to look at her. "You know what price he's going to demand."

Ignifer took a deep breath and met Honoria's eyes. They were full of love and compassion, but also fear.

She really thinks that I'll walk into my old house and give away my freedom.

Ignifer reached out, gripping Honoria's wrist and holding it tighter and tighter until the smaller woman let her go with a wince. "I have to do this," she whispered. "I want to do this. It's possible that he'll ask some smaller price from me than the surrender of my free will and the Declaration back to the Light, and Harry *needs* that information. He's given me so much, Honoria: a place to belong and be myself again. I want to give something back to him."

"You've sworn the oaths of the Alliance," said Honoria, anger bleeding into her voice. She moved her head in a single sharp jerk that reminded Ignifer of a gull pecking at something that annoyed it. "You've saved his life. You've fought for him. What more does he have a right to ask of you?"

"It's not what he has a right to ask of me," Ignifer said softly, turning away. "It's what I want to offer."

"You know that your father would make you give me up," Honoria told her back. "He would say that you couldn't have a female lover if he accepted you back into the family. He would want you to marry someone and bear him a magical heir. For all that the Light families don't care about magical heirs, Ignifer, your father was certainly pleased that you were his, wasn't he?"

"He was," said Ignifer distantly. She remembered the days she had spent with Cupressus, asking questions no one else would be allowed to ask, touching objects in his study that would have involved curses if her younger siblings had touched them, and learning old secrets of Ireland that not even the other Light pureblood families knew. Once, she had known her world and her life and her place. She had given up more than mere comfort, more than a home, when she chose the Dark. And now it was her choice to go back and face what she had left behind.

Honoria did not understand. She was not going to embrace principles she had abandoned. She was going to embrace freedom.

But sharing the idea would diminish the prospect, somehow, Ignifer felt. She wanted to hold and entertain this idea alone.

And, if nothing else, it made a good test of how much Honoria and Harry really trusted her, what they thought she would do in pursuit of freedom.

She turned and cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames. Her mother's head appeared almost at once; Ignifer so rarely firecalled first that she thought the house elves had standing orders to fetch one of her parents when she did.

She met Artemis's eyes and spoke in Latin, the language of her childhood, her first language, the kind of peace offering her mother would mistake for more than it was. "Tell Father that I'm coming home, and that I will accompany Harry when he does so, to talk about house elves."

"*Vates*. A pleasure." Cupressus Apollonis performed a flowing bow. He straightened up and kept his eyes on Harry, not Ignifer, though she stood right behind him. From reading those books on the Light pureblood rituals, Harry knew this was how it was supposed to go, each guest welcomed individually. "I greet you with no blade, with no shut door, with no wand raised, but with an open door and in the hopes that you will consider this house your own."

A pretty blessing. Harry extended his magical senses as he inclined his head, a bit, and returned the proper words. He wanted to sniff out any compulsion spells Cupressus might be using before they found him. There must be a reason that Ignifer had persuaded him to come to her father's house and talk about freeing the house elves, and there must be a reason that she had chosen to accompany him, but Harry did not know what it was. Cupressus compelling her would make a good explanation. "And I step through the open door onto a path that I can hope will be walked in the light of sun and moon and stars and fire, themselves each a source of light."

Cupressus sighed softly. "Ah. I do not often hear the old words any more. Such a pleasure to have them vibrate in my ear." He turned to Ignifer then, and held out his hands, in a simple mark of appreciation that Harry could not have made—but would when he had his left hand back, Harry reminded himself, to silence his momentary envy. "And daughter. Welcome home."

Harry started, then caught himself and averted his eyes. The blessing was the one a parent would actually use to welcome a straying child, even though he knew that Cupressus could be doing no such thing, given how Ignifer would have to abase herself before her father would welcome her back.

He wouldn't, would he?

Harry had to admit, grudgingly, that he had less idea of what Cupressus Apollonis would and would not do than he had thought. He understood Lucius well through long exposure, and the key to Augustus had been his obsession with his dead sister, but this man was more of a mystery.

"Father," said Ignifer, and took one of his hands, and kissed both his cheeks.

Harry had to drop his eyes to the carpet so he wouldn't stare this time. He shook his head slightly and stepped forward, looking around the house so that he wouldn't try to speculate on the mechanics of a dance he didn't understand between parent and child. He had never been very good at that, anyway, given how little experience he had of true parenting.

The Apollonis home was large, with light flooding everywhere. Rather than walls, Harry saw, most of the house was all window, enormous planes of glass stretching from floor to ceiling, reinforced with spells so wind couldn't shatter them. Other spells, subtle enough that he had to work to notice them, collected the sunlight from outside and channeled it into beams that flashed and twinkled on the golden wood of the walls. The sun was not bright outside today—ordinary, pale winter light, barely encouraged by its gleam off the snow—but inside the Apollonis house, they seemed to be standing in the full flood of summer.

"Please, come further," said Cupressus, and gestured them forward, to where three chairs sat in front of the fire. One stood at a distance from the others, and he took that one. Harry had to suppress an exclamation as he sank into his own. It was wonderfully warm and comfortable, an adaptation of cushioning charms he had not known existed. When he looked up, Cupressus was lounging back, and his cheeks and mouth smiled, if not his eyes.

"The Light studies how we may make and better things," he said softly, "not how we may destroy them."

Harry held his tongue back from saying that his mother, Light-devoted, had done what she could to destroy him, and watched Ignifer to take his cue. She sat down in the chair next to him and showed no surprise. Of course, that could be because her eyes never moved from her father's face, and she did not want to demonstrate weakness in front of him.

A cup of wine appeared next to Harry—carved of wood, not glass. Harry looked from the liquid in it to Cupressus's face, and did not move.

"In deference to your sensibilities," said Cupressus, picking up his own cup and sipping, "I Summoned the wine, rather than having house elves serve us. And I assure you that this wine was prepared years ago, by the hands of Squib servants we had at the time, not house elves." He closed his eyes and sighed.

Harry, reluctantly, picked up his cup and drank. Openly doubting what Cupressus had said to him, implying that his host was deceiving him, was a serious breach of hospitality. The wine was warm, and sweet, with a sharp tang at the back of it that almost made him think lemons were involved in it somewhere.

"Now, we may adapt to the true business you have come about, I hope." Cupressus's eyes flared open, and Harry was reminded of a lazy cat lying in front of a mousehole. "You know one dimension of my offer, *vates*. I am interested in your arguments, and I do wish to free my house elves. There is another dimension that my daughter may not have told you of."

Harry glanced at Ignifer in surprise. Ignifer didn't move. "He has information, Harry," she said, voice like a cold blade in the midst of all this perfumed warmth. "Information about wizards dealing with the Unspeakables. One wizard is Dark and one is Light, I think. And both could hurt your cause."

I should have suspected the Unspeakables would begin to stir again. Of course, that led to the thought that Harry would like to know how Cupressus had got hold of this information. He turned back to the man. "You offer much," he said. "And I have heard no hint of a price thus far."

Cupressus smiled, a brilliant smile, well at home in this room of golden wood and off-golden sunlight. "The price is simple," he said. "And one that is in accord with history. When a Lord or Lady was challenged to a duel, for example, a sworn companion could stand in for him or her, and fight the duel instead. Or a sworn companion could give up a treasured heirloom, or a small part of his or her magic, in repayment for all that the Lord or Lady had done."

"Ignifer is not my sworn companion," Harry said.

"But she considers herself as such," said Cupressus, and turned his head to look at Ignifer. "Do you not, my lady? I raised my daughter to think of honor as the supreme good in the world. And you fulfilled that, swearing to the Dark rather than the Light, because you believed it the honorable thing to do." His eyes shone with what Harry could swear was pride. "It was hard for you; it was harder than hard, it was exile. And yet you resisted daily importuning from your mother and the urgings of your own conscience to return, because you had done what you thought was right. The long road can end, daughter. You can lay your burden down. You can come home. The only thing you must do is choose to embrace this simple trade, your old allegiance and your old obedience to me in return for the freedom of the Apollonis house elves and the information that I have to give."

"She would be less honorable if she chose to betray the Dark now," Harry said. He did not say the words above a hiss. He was too angry. He felt the drape of a scaled body around his shoulders, and the room around them deepened with the spread of jewel-like colors, blue and green and red.

Cupressus only raised an eyebrow. "Your magic is impressive, *vates*," he said. "And it is what makes the difference in this situation. Ask my daughter."

Harry turned helplessly to Ignifer, hoping for an explanation. She had put down the wooden cup of wine that had appeared for her, and sat with her elbows on the arms of her chair and her arms folded across her stomach.

"What he says is true, Harry," she said, never taking her eyes from her father. "In most contexts, it would be utterly dishonorable for me to betray my oath to the Dark—though there would be some who would say that I should never have abandoned my allegiance to the Light in the first place."

"True," Cupressus murmured. Harry didn't think he could help himself.

"But in this context?" Ignifer shook her head, her red-gold curls rustling around her head. Her yellow eyes, sign of a Light pureblood family, were as calm as a hawk's. "No. I do consider myself a sworn companion, though I have never given you a scar on my arm, and that is all that matters to honor—the will of the individual. I could yield myself to fulfill the bargain. Other sworn companions have done as much and more in the past, and ended more tragically, on the end of a wand or a rope. An enemy of the Lord has been satisfied with killing them and so given up the notion of killing the Lord himself. Some of those enemies have even become allies afterwards, in admiration of the sworn companion's sacrifice." For a moment, a smile ghosted across her mouth. "I recall the tale of a man who executed a Lady's lieutenant, and then went on to become the Lady's sworn companion, and died

defending her from a Killing Curse. That man was an Apollonis, Father, wasn't he?"

"He was indeed." Cupressus raised his cup in tribute to his daughter.

Harry wanted to snarl. It was *wrong* to talk so calmly and rationally about something so strange and against all common sense.

Then again, was it really any stranger than Lucius being proud, in their second year at Hogwarts, when Draco had outdanced him, and agreeing to do what he could to see that Harry was not expelled for Petrifying other students? Pureblood dances sometimes made people do very strange things in accord with honor.

"I am not a Light Lord," he tried.

"That does not matter." Cupressus's eyes, locked on Ignifer's, never moved. "Ignifer acts in relation to you as she would her Lord, Light or Dark. She is your sworn companion, and you are her leader, the one who gave her a home after she had none for fifteen years. This is her choice and her sacrifice to make." Now he did flick a glance in Harry's direction. "Unless you would stand in her way, my Lord of Free Will?"

Harry's hand tightened into a fist. Cupressus had baited the trap perfectly. Ignifer could have everything back that she wanted without feeling she was betraying what she had chosen. And Harry could no more interfere than he had interfered with Loki's sacrifice, or with Pansy's.

He leaned back, taut as a bowstring, and waited.

Did Ignifer know he would do this? She must have. Why else agree to come? She meant to trade her freedom for the freedom of house elves and whatever information Cupressus has to give me.

"Just think," Cupressus said, his voice only a breath. "I am the leader of most of the Light pureblood families in Ireland, Harry. Once they see me giving up my house elves, they will begin to reconsider house elves' value as a status symbol. If I can endure this with no loss of power, then they will begin to think that they can. You begin a revolution that will ripple across Ireland from here, *vates*. And such a small price. Delivered so willingly."

Harry heard a ripple of cloth. He looked sideways to see Ignifer sliding to one knee, her robes puddling around her.

Harry wanted to look away, but his eyes felt frozen. For long moments, he held still, and Ignifer held still, and the world around them swayed like a bauble at the end of a chain.

In the silence, Ignifer's words were soft, but very clear.

"I renounce my last name. I am no longer an Apollonis. I have no allegiance to that family, and—" Her voice soared like a sunburst, dazzling, outraged, on fire. "*Your curse has no power over a woman who is not your daughter!*"

Harry felt magic *snap* through the room. This renunciation was simpler and more basic than the ritual he had used to give up his own last name, but also more primal, and in some ways more powerful. He felt the moment Ignifer and Cupressus's last connection was stripped away, a shimmer of a bond that sparked into being between them and fell into ruin at the same moment. The world shifted. They were strangers now. Blood from one could not save the other, should one of them lie bleeding on the ground.

And the infertility curse on Ignifer was gone.

Ignifer was laughing, when Harry came out of his daze. She had stood, and her hair blazed around her, and her magic coiled up and down her arms as leaping flames, and her robes lifted in the streaming hot wind she had called. Cupressus was on his feet, his wand out, and firing curses that burned up when they neared Ignifer.

Harry stumbled to her side, and stared into her face. Ignifer looked down at him and sniffed. "Did you *really* think that I'd yield to the old bastard?" she asked. "I came to make one final test, to show myself how much I missed what I once had, to make myself see it and ask if this was what I wanted. And it isn't. Not at all." She shot a triumphant glance at Cupressus. "And now he has no reason to firecall me and taunt me with his power over my womb, and my mother has no reason to badger me daily. It's *done*. I'm free."

Harry could think of no words to say. He had never been more glad to see a sacrifice avoided. His hand closed on her arm and squeezed, hard.

“You know that no house elves in Ireland will be released now,” said Cupressus. Already, when Harry looked at him, he had recovered and put his wand away. He might have looked cool and composed, were it not for his shaking hands. “I will campaign against it. I will advise my allies to hold on to their house elves no matter what happens.”

“It was not worth the price that you asked,” said Harry. “I will not end slavery with slavery.”

“And the information I have?” Cupressus eyed him. “The time is rushing close when you will *need* it, Harry *vates*. You have no idea who stands against you, dim in the shadows, once a scion of Light.”

“What price—“

“You know the price.” Cupressus stared at Ignifer, who magnificently ignored him.

“Fuck you,” said Harry pleasantly, and turned away. “I am, as you reminded me today, a Lord-level wizard, Mr. Apollonis. I have no need to crawl.”

He accompanied Ignifer outside the house, feeling as if he were escorting a victor off the field of battle. Ignifer let her flames die when they stood on the steps, and tossed her head back, to breathe in a deep gulp of air.

“It tastes so much sweeter now that I’m not smelling it through an Apollonis nose,” she explained to Harry, when she caught him watching her.

Harry shook his head. He couldn’t stop smiling. “And you *planned* to do that?”

“It was a test, as I said.” Ignifer’s face was calm, and shone. “I had to tempt myself, to see what I could endure. As it turns out, I love freedom more than I thought. And Honoria.” Her hand found his and pressed it. “And you.”

Harry kissed the back of her hand. As they began to walk from the house towards the Apparition point, he asked, “Do you know what last name you’ll take?”

Ignifer’s smile flashed out, more mischievous than Harry had ever seen it. “I thought Pemberley might be nice,” she said. “Honorias mother *did* so wish that someone else would have the same last name as she did. I know she was thinking of grandchildren, but a wife might be a nice substitute.”

Harry laughed, and felt thoughts of difficulty, including what problems Cupressus could cause over house elves in the future, flame and die. For the moment, they stood in the light of a far different fire.

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Chapter Sixty-Four: What He Meant

“Are you sure?”

Harry wanted to shout that, no, he wasn’t sure, but he had made his decision. And he had put this off long enough, saying he wanted it, saying he didn’t want it, claiming one thing and feeling another. He locked his eyes on Snape’s and nodded.

Snape fastened the hand into place on the end of his left wrist, fingers moving with the same delicate slowness he used in brewing a volatile potion. Harry shuddered a bit as his arm sagged with the weight, and felt Draco, standing behind him, grip his shoulders in reassurance. Harry breathed in and licked his lips. *If this goes well, I might be able to do that to Draco soon.*

Snape’s wand skimmed over the edge of the silver where it joined Harry’s wrist, and he murmured the beginning incantations that would bond the hand to Harry’s arm and start the long, long process of Transfiguring the metal into flesh and filling it with bones and knuckles, nails and blood. Harry felt Draco’s own hands tighten again. He had wanted to do this for Harry, but his magic wasn’t strong enough. It had to be a powerful wizard whom Harry trusted completely.

And then it was done, and Harry could feel the subtle, questing trails of magic traveling up his arm from his wrist, now and then sniffing as they took in the scent of his skin or blended with his own power. At one point, he thought he felt them colonize a vein, and start busily learning his blood. He shuddered slightly.

“You remember what Manus said,” Snape murmured, drawing Harry’s attention back to him. “You have to use the hand as much

as possible. Slip the fingers around those things you want to grip. Visualize making it bend and move even before it can. Position it on the handle of your broom alongside your right. And do welcome it, Harry.” His hand pressed on Harry’s arm for a moment, hard enough to leave fingerprints. “If you don’t, the magic will sense that and withdraw.”

“I know,” Harry whispered. Those were all reminders that Rosalind Manus had given him, over and over, when Harry had finally chosen her shop and owled his order in, explaining what he wanted. Perhaps it was because they communicated solely by owl, and had never met in person, but she was refreshingly brisk about it, without peppering her post with exclamation marks and questions on the nature of her patron. She had asked innumerable questions about facts that Harry himself didn’t know but had labored to find out, including the length of his fingers on his right hand and in what position the sun had been standing when Bellatrix had cut his original hand off. Harry understood that she needed to know that in order to create a model that would bond to him instead of having to be Transfigured by force—a process that usually resulted in an unholy mess—and so he’d done his best to answer.

He had balked, a bit, at the price; Draco and Snape had insisted that he choose without looking at the Galleons it would cost him, and Harry had, unwittingly, chosen the most expensive hand he possibly could. Regulus had firecalled him the same day and had a long, stern talk with him about blood pride and what the heir of the Black family could and could not do with his vault. Harry had argued until Regulus resorted to guilting him; Harry had spent Black money for other causes, after all, so why not this one? And it would help ease Regulus’s own guilt, at not being in Harry’s head when he lost his hand, and being gone for eight months and not there to help him when he needed it.

Harry had given in. Now, he wondered if he shouldn’t have.

“Stop worrying at it, Harry,” Draco said into his ear. “If you do worry at it, then it’s just going to detach, and you’ll have spent the money for nothing.”

That made Harry try to relax and think welcoming thoughts. The trails of magic winding through his arm, which had slowed for a moment, brightened to red and gold under his skin, and wended faster.

“That’s it,” Draco whispered into his ear, and Harry let himself think only of that, the whisper on his earlobe and the soothing rub in his shoulder, and watched as the lines shrank and glowed and thrummed.

“You will be whole again,” Snape said a few minutes later, into the silence.

Harry looked up in surprise at his guardian’s tone. Snape leaned on the wall, his face as close to relaxed as it ever came, his eyes fastened on the silver gleam of Harry’s new hand. It was news to Harry that Snape had been hurt, in his own way, by the loss of his hand, but it was another reason to strive for and keep it.

And you can want it, he told himself sternly. Just like anyone else would. Normal person, remember?

“Thank you, Severus,” he told Snape, and then turned and nodded to Draco. “Let’s go practice. I don’t want everyone in the Great Hall gawking when I nearly tip over my pumpkin juice.”

“They’re going to gawk anyway.” Draco rubbed his chin along the side of Harry’s neck, eyes almost closed, an expression of sleepy contentment on his face. “But at least it should be for the right reasons.”

Harry smiled, a bit, and imagined he could feel the fingers flex in return.

Draco approved highly of Harry’s new hand. For one thing, he had chosen well; the hand was beautiful as gleaming silver, and would adapt to Harry’s arm much more smoothly than most of the other models, eventually making a hand as lovely as the rest of his body was.

For another, his lover would have two hands for the first time. Draco *did* look forward to seeing what would happen in bed, then.

“Pay attention, Draco.”

Peter did tend to notice when one of them slipped out of contemplating the Animagus transformation. Draco bit his lip and closed his eyes, sending his mind back to what it should be doing: fixing on his Animagus form.

He knew he was something small, lithe, four-legged. But he could still see only the silhouette. It frustrated him, this endless

process of seeing what was *really* there, what he *really* was, instead of what he wished for. He had wasted a week with wings because he had hoped his form would be able to fly. Peter had questioned him sternly, informed Draco that a four-legged form was still marvelous, and returned him to the simple drills of visualization until he could promise meekly that he would try not to let his desires interfere again.

Draco was beginning to see why so few wizards became Animagi. One might be stuck as an animal one didn't want, and it took so long even with an expert teacher, and it required such bloody *patience*.

He focused on his form again, scowling at it. He could see the shadow of a turned neck, a graceful, lifted head. The animal he would become stood at an odd position in his mind. Peter had had him look through books—not for images, but reading them, trying to recognize the name of the creature he naturally thought of as standing in such a position. Nothing worked. Draco was beginning to despair of seeing his form at all, or at least seeing it before Potter saw his.

His thoughts wandered again, but this time, he kept his eyes closed and his breathing deep and even, just this side of drifting off to sleep, and he didn't think Peter would be able to tell. He was thinking of his father's latest letter, the one in which Lucius had all but sworn to take back the disownment—if only Draco would admit he had been wrong. Since that would take away the force of his decision, Draco had refused, in lines he still thought of as clever and scathing.

Clever, he congratulated himself. *I am that. And cunning. That befits a proper Slytherin, but not all of them are as clever as I am.*

He started as the silhouette in his mind moved, turning fully towards him, but clung to his current train of thought. Peter had told them that sometimes this would happen; if they thought of something that coincided with their animal form, it might reveal itself to them.

Clever. Cunning. What is small and lithe and clever and cunning, able to adapt and survive the way I can, capable of great effort when necessary but preferring to take smaller prey? He knew from the shadow of teeth that his form was a predator. And though it stung to adopt Harry's description of him as lazy and only doing well when he needed to, it made his form spring forward, shadows peeling back from it, showing him the gleaming edge of a jaw, sharp teeth, bright amber eyes, a coat as pale as moonlight, a body adapted to slipping into holes and along the banks of streams to fool the hounds—

Draco opened his eyes with a shout. Peter glared at him, and so did Potter, jolted out of his trance. Harry looked at him expectantly, with a smile that widened as he stood and came over, putting his arms around Draco. A moment later, two hands pressed against Draco's spine, holding him.

"You found your form," he said.

Draco nodded, his heart singing with triumph, especially since he could look over Harry's shoulder and see Peter's and Potter's expressions turn to ones of interest and envy, respectively.

"What is it?" Harry whispered in his ear.

"A fox," said Draco. He knew his voice was smug. He did not care. "A white fox. I should have guessed. Foxes are the epitome of cunning. They're supposed to have magical powers, and dance to lure their prey close to them. And they're clever. They'll run through streams and ride on the backs of sheep to escape the hounds."

"They live in dark holes, too," Potter muttered. "How appropriate."

Peter laid a hand on Potter's shoulder and gave him a stern look. Then he nodded at Draco. "Very good, Draco," he said. "Now that you know your form, and exactly what it looks like, you can begin the exercises that will blend your human body with your—vulpine one." He had hesitated a moment, to remember the correct adjective. Now he smiled. "More weeks of work ahead of you."

Harry sighed into his ear. "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing," he murmured into Draco's ear. "Oh, Draco, be careful. Remember the many things that will *save your life*, and don't forget the one big thing that might doom you."

"You're telling me to see the forest for the trees, Harry?" Draco had not experienced pure joy in a few days, at least. It was pleasant to see it again. "I promise I'll look. And you can be my eyes in the dark, since you're the lynx."

Harry drew back, grinning, and pushed his shoulder. "That's not certain yet."

Draco pinched him back. Harry hissed. “Oh, yes, it is,” he said, and ruffled Harry’s hair. “My little kitten.”

Harry hissed at him again, sternly enough this time that the Many snake on his throat uncoiled. Peter shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Children,” he said. “Settle down to visualizing again.” He paused. “Well, Harry, at least. Draco, come with me. I need to show you which books you’ll be using now.”

Draco followed him, smug both in the knowledge that he knew what his form was now, and that he’d got there before Potter.

“Thank you for coming to meet me, sir.”

Adalrico chuckled in spite of himself and held out his hand to Harry. “Still so formal, when we have been allies for more than three years, *vates*,” he said. “Please, call me Adalrico, as you call Mrs. Parkinson Hawthorn.”

Harry relaxed a bit, and his smile warmed his face. Adalrico glanced over his shoulder, taking in their surroundings and making sure no one was nearby to threaten Harry. Granted, they were meeting in front of the Ministry, in the same alley where Harry had ridden the dragon, but one could not be too careful of enemies. Adalrico and Elfrida still warded their home tightly when one of them left, and they had only placed Marian in the care of a trusted friend one or two times. Life in the wizarding world had been difficult, once, and when it turned difficult again, those who were prepared for it would survive the best.

Adalrico almost wished the difficulty would hurry up and arrive. Then he could go to war again. Peace was telling on him. He woke from dreams of the First War now, and they were not always nightmares.

“I appreciate you coming,” Harry reiterated, and walked towards the phone box they would take into the Atrium, perforce drawing Adalrico with him. “Merlin knows this will be a thankless task otherwise.”

Adalrico nodded to him. “And you want me to testify that your magic does not do harm to Marian?”

“If you would.” Harry punched the number to let them into the Ministry and told the witch’s voice their names and business, then turned around, leaning on the phone box while he waited for it to spit their badges out. Adalrico tried not to stare at the new silver hand cradling Harry’s right elbow, and thought he succeeded. “The monitoring board has a new idea about how to thwart me, now that they can’t bicker about who I bring to the meetings or how often we meet.” He rolled his eyes. “The latest idea, which Marvin Gildgrace gave the *Prophet* an interview about, is that my magic could harm young children, either in the womb or younger than two years old. If you could testify that Marian received no ill effects even though I was with her when she was born, I’ll be grateful.”

Adalrico frowned. He had seen that interview, but it had seemed so ridiculous, just another wrinkle in the striving over the Grand Unified Theory, that he’d skimmed right past it. He thought now that he should have searched it for a mention of Harry’s name. “Why would he think that?”

“Supposedly he has *research*—“ Harry’s tone made it plain what he thought of that research “—that wizard children have adapted to the presence of Lord-level wizards in the world, but not one as young as I am. Because I’m closer to a child in age myself, my magic can have an adverse effect on them. Or something.” He waved his silver hand in the air. Watching closely, Adalrico thought he could see one of the fingers bend, but that might have been wishful thinking. “I must admit, I didn’t try to follow the convulsions of his argument once I realized he was targeting me, and why.” His mouth tightened in exasperation. “These Light wizards don’t give up.”

“Why bear with the monitoring board?” Adalrico asked, a question that had been bothering him. “You could dismiss them. You have the legal right to do so.”

Harry gave him a sharp glance. “I see that someone’s been talking behind my back,” he said, his eyelids dropping a bit. “I’ll have to talk, too.”

Adalrico let a faint, chill smile wreath his mouth. “Actually, Harry, no. I grew interested in the ways that the Ministry has dealt with unexpected Lords in the past myself, so I did my own research. And though none of them have been *quite* as unexpected as you were, they still should have treated you better. The threat of Voldemort, the fact that you went against Dumbledore, and your age frighten them, and make them think they can control you.”

Harry flushed. “My apologies, si—“

Adalrico raised his eyebrows.

Harry sighed and held out his flesh hand to catch the badges that dropped into them, handing Adalrico's over. "Adalrico. I'm sorry. I should have realized that other people can do their own research, of course. But I had thought I'd demonstrated my resistance to control quite well already."

"Light wizards never understand that until you embroider it on a flag and wave it in their faces," Adalrico said scornfully. "They'll try to drag you down, Harry, like hounds on a stag. Even the lesson of the dragon didn't linger with them long. It has to be your own magic." He felt his skin prickle and his hair lift as Harry's magic rose a little, heightened by Harry's outrage, and he sighed. The wild scent of a thunderstorm was all around him, and he appreciated it as he never had. Of course, there were so few Lord-level wizards in the world to smell. He let his voice become a coaxing whisper. "Think of what you could do with it."

The smell dropped abruptly, and Harry gave him a faint, wry smile. "I have thought of it," he said. "And there are some uses I prefer not to put it to." He clipped his badge to his robe. "I don't think the Light wizards are the only ones manipulating me. Sir."

That was deliberate, not a slip of the tongue, and Adalrico accepted the message it gave gracefully. "At least I am honest about it," he said.

"Yes. I've never forgotten your honesty."

One look into Harry's eyes made it obvious he was remembering the night when Adalrico had told him about torturing Alba Starrise. Adalrico nearly swallowed his tongue, but forced himself into a gracious nod. "I'm known for that," he said.

Harry gave him a dangerous smile and paced past him into the phone box lift. Adalrico hastened to join him, and told himself he'd deserved that slap. *Never forget what he is, and never stop watching. He changes so fast, and he's recently changed so much, that you'll need that simply to keep up with him.*

They stepped out into the Atrium, and Harry nodded to a door at the far end. "That's where the monitoring board meets, that small room."

Adalrico concealed his disgust. Harry should have demanded—could have demanded, rather—both a larger room and one more convenient to his own schooling at Hogwarts. But he had got this far being humble, and it did seem that he had little use for trappings of rank, though Merlin knew why. He merely nodded and took a step forward.

It was swift. Adalrico saw the shadows stirring from the corner of his eye, and just managed to turn before something silver skimmed at him, curved and silent as one of the legendary death-blades. It caught him around the neck and seared his skin with a cold burn as it closed. *A collar*, Adalrico thought, and he felt his magic try to leap out through his body and his wand, and slam against unseen barriers.

Then someone seized his arm, and the tug of a Portkey took him away, and down, down, down.

Harry didn't hesitate; he released his magic directly at the Unspeakables in the shadows, a hail of deadly knives that he thought up even as they flew. The Unspeakables melted and dipped like bird's down in front of the blades, two of them vanishing altogether. A third took Adalrico's arm, and turned his hooded head towards Harry with a smile he could *feel*, if not see, and they Portkeyed out together. Harry cursed and raised his magic into a shimmering aura, then directed it outward with a sweep of his hands. He realized only a moment later that he had used the silver one as well as the flesh one, and wondered if that would weaken his command.

It seemed to have made it stronger, instead. The air around the Unspeakables froze, and they were trapped in glittering blocks of blue ice. But the ice melted a moment later, and they also vanished, soft as ripples in water.

Harry clenched his flesh hand and tried automatically to close the silver one into a fist, and cursed again. He was shaking.

They have Adalrico. They took him into the Department of Mysteries. Harry tried to swallow, and felt as if something had stuck in his throat. *The Stone isn't playing fair anymore.*

He turned sharply as wards rang and Aurors came barreling through the gates of the Atrium. Too late, of course, Harry thought. Far too late. And the door at the far end of the Atrium was opening, too, and Snape and Draco were coming out. They'd gone ahead to wait for him, given that Adalrico was Apparating in less than a minute after they descended and Harry wanted to impress

the monitoring board with how much he trusted Mr. Bulstrode by having them come in together. Harry could see the looks on their faces, and grimaced. *It'll be a long time before I hear the end of this one.*

And then the thought fell away, and turned into sheer fury, because *they had Adalrico*, and how could he worry about his own safety in the midst of that?

“What happened?” It was the Auror called Hope who spoke, her eyes wide, her fingers turning her wand in a nervous gesture.

Harry drew breath to explain, and someone laughed.

Harry turned, his silver hand rising in a flurry and flash of sparks. A man walked away from one of the fireplaces at the other end of the Atrium. He was putting something in his pocket—an Unspeakable artifact, Harry thought, what looked like a key made of diamond. That was the reason they hadn't seen him before.

He immediately had six Auror wands trained at him, but he didn't seem to notice, or care. His eyes were fixed on Harry's face, and his smile was horrible, and he seemed to be waiting for something.

Recognition. And Harry knew him by his slightly dreamy, slightly mad eyes and his pale hair—knew him by the reflection of another man through him, a man who had looked like that. “Pharos Starrise,” he said, and had to close his eyes to keep from screaming. Was there no end to the foul, ash-starred ripples that could spread out from a single act of vengeance? Did no one but him ever get tired of claiming and shedding blood?

The thought of Cupressus Apollonis blazed in his mind like the edge of the sun in a solar eclipse. *The scion of Light sinking into shadows. Pharos is whom he meant. A Light heir, a setting star. Damn it! I should have known.*

“Yes,” said Pharos, his voice full of the sated sound that usually came to someone else when they had a good meal, or a good round of sex. “And he is gone, vates. He is gone where you will not find him.” He paused, and when Harry opened his eyes, Pharos's gaze was fixed, glittering, on his left arm. “Or gone where you must follow,” Pharos whispered. “You swore a family alliance with the Bulstrodes, didn't you? The scars will break open and bleed you to death if you do not fulfill it. Oh, dear. Venturing into the Department of Mysteries, the heart of the Unspeakables' trap, in order to rescue a single ally. Of course that is something Harry *vates* would do.”

And he smiled.

Draco had reached Harry's side by now, but Harry didn't look at him. Draco offered calm, and what he wanted was rage.

He let his magic travel through his eyes. With nothing more than his gaze, he froze Pharos into an awkward position, his neck twisted to the side, his chest ceasing to move, his triumphant smile becoming a rictus. Harry could feel trapped air brewing in Pharos's lungs, searching for a way out. One of the Aurors cleared his throat, and he knew the monitoring board would be watching him in silent horror, but he didn't care, he couldn't care.

“You are going to tell me everything you know about this, you fool,” he told Pharos softly. “Or you'll cease to breathe.”

Hope *did* step forward then. Harry turned a remote gaze on her, and she stopped, but stood her ground. “You can't treat a prisoner like that,” she told Harry. “We have to question him. We have to put him in a cell and protect him from—those who might try to harm him.” She hesitated for a long moment. “And that includes you, *vates*.”

The air in Pharos's chest kicked and struggled like a trapped baby. Harry could feel the urge to keep on holding Pharos tight, to kill him like this, or to turn and rape his mind with Legilimency, get the information he was hiding.

And the small, nervous Auror, standing up for what she believed in, was the one to defeat him.

Harry twisted his silver hand, and Pharos collapsed to the floor, able to breathe again, his face almost blue. Hope hurried forward and bent over his shoulder, spelling his hands together behind him.

“You'll come and present evidence to the Minister, of course,” she told Harry. She hesitated again, then said, “What is this about?”

“Pharos's uncle had a twin sister,” Harry said distantly. He watched Pharos rub his throat and his neck, and tried to feel remorse at how close he had come to killing him. He could not. What he could feel was the screaming necessity to go after Adalrico, panting like the breath of a Grim in his ear, and Draco standing behind him, running one hand over his neck. “Pharos's mother.

She committed suicide after being rescued from Death Eaters. Augustus Starrise, the uncle, raised her sons, and searched obsessively for her killers. He found out last year that Mr. Bulstrode directed the torture. He challenged him to a duel, and they fought, and Augustus died. That should have been the end of it. It wasn't." He jerked his head at Pharos. "He has something to do with the Unspeakables, and their taking Mr. Bulstrode."

"I do." Pharos could talk again already. He was smiling at Harry. "I gave them information they need to trap you. In return, they promised it would be Bulstrode they took." He laughed quietly. "And they've shared a few immunities with me, too. You won't get what you want by questioning me with Veritaserum, or magic. I'm immune to them both."

"Torture would do it," Draco whispered into Harry's ear.

Temptation—Harry crushed the temptation. He leaned back into Snape's comforting presence, and rubbed his left arm, which was beginning to itch, and nodded to Hope. "I'll want to speak with the Minister, of course."

"Of course," she murmured, and waved the other Aurors forward to help her take Pharos to the lifts.

Harry, staring blindly about, caught a glimpse of the monitoring board, and Aurora's pale face, and smiled a smile that made a few of them flinch backwards. "The meting of the monitoring board is canceled for today, sirs, madams," he said. "I hope you understand." He made sure his tone said that he didn't give a damn if they didn't understand, and then followed the Aurors.

Anger and horror howled in his ears, combining with the itch on his left arm to urge him to rush ahead. *He's your ally. He was endangered because he was with you, and for no other reason. The Unspeakables only wanted him to have you. How can you stand here? How can you not go and save him at once?*

Necessity answered. *Because my life is important to other people, too. And Pharos might know something about the traps the Unspeakables have set. It would be stupid to rush ahead when he could warn us.*

Necessity, Harry decided, would have to shut up in a short while, if what he suspected was true and the Unspeakables had really made Pharos immune to questioning.

Rufus watched Harry as he shut the door quietly behind him. Percy had preceded him into his office, and Rufus had let him go first to make the young man feel better, even though he hardly thought Harry would kill him over this news. Now Percy's nostrils were flared, and he scratched like mad along his shoulders, where Harry's magic would be making him itch.

It was strange, Rufus thought as he limped across the room, the focus of five pairs of eyes—Harry, Draco, and Snape had entered the office, and Mr. Bulstrode's wife and elder daughter had been summoned—how Harry could do nothing but sit casually in a chair in his office, and still be murderously angry. His magic went back and forth across the room like a stampede of scorpions, lashing the other way whenever it encountered a wall. It remained invisible so far, but Rufus thought that wouldn't last much longer when Harry learned what he had to say.

He sat down, and leaned forward, and gave them the news.

"Starrise is right. We can't make him talk, not without bringing out knives and other—methods we prefer not to use."

"Then bring them out," said Bulstrode's daughter. Millicent, that was her name. She leaned forward, her elbows gouging into the arms of her chair. Big girl, Rufus thought. Strong girl. Strong enough to make Percy reach nervously for his wand, at least. Rufus caught his eye and shook his head. "I want my father back. I'll use whatever I have to."

Rufus had not feared being killed. He had feared this, clash of Light principles against Dark. He said steadily, "That won't be possible, Miss Bulstrode. We don't torture our prisoners."

"Except when you accidentally let someone slip through the net," said Millicent, with an unpleasant twist of her lips. "Usually a Dark wizard suffering vengeance at the hands of the Light one, or a werewolf 'tripping' on the way into Tullianum. So 'accidentally' let someone through now."

"No," said Rufus. "I will not be a party to deliberate violation of another wizard's rights."

Millicent drew breath to speak, but it was Harry who answered, voice only mildly inquisitive. "So you couldn't get any information about the Department of Mysteries from him?" Around him, the scorpions marched. To be in the same room was

becoming actively painful, but Rufus had endured worse. He replied.

“No. He hinted and taunted about ‘chains,’ and that was all he would say.” He paused, studying Harry. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

“So am I, Minister.” Harry nodded. “Especially since I am going to have to invade the Department of Mysteries to get Adalrico back.”

“No—“ said Snape.

Harry flipped his left sleeve back. A fat drop of blood was just welling from a scar along his arm which Rufus thought was normally faint and pale, but had now turned pink as if newly inflicted. “I have no choice,” he said, every word as heavy as a falling boulder. “The family alliance oath will name me traitor if I don’t. And it would be right.” He put the sleeve back. “That doesn’t mean I’ll go alone. I’ll take anyone who’s willing to go with me, and that includes whichever of your Aurors you can spare, Minister.”

“You’ll have them,” Rufus promised, feeling a brief, dizzy spin of irony around him for a moment. He had never thought he would be lending some of his Aurors to rescue a former Death Eater he knew had escaped Azkaban on only the flimsiest of pretexts. If asked sixteen years ago, he would have preferred to let Adalrico Bulstrode rot where he was.

But that was before he knew what the Unspeakables did, before they rebelled against the Ministry, before he became Minister, before he decided that holding onto his principles was worth it even in the midst of crises. He would not let Pharos Starrise be tortured, and he would not let it happen to Adalrico Bulstrode, either.

Snape was talking quietly with Harry, Rufus saw when he looked up. The words grew more violent, and finally exploded into loudness when Harry pulled away from him and stood up, eyes polished green stone. The scorpions were visible now as great snakes, looped around Harry’s body, their hisses nearly drowning his words.

“I *know* they want me. I *know* this is a trap for me, more than Adalrico. I don’t care. I’m going. I have to. Adalrico is my friend and my ally, and I swore an oath.” He flicked a glance at Elfrida Bulstrode, who had sat pale and silent since she’d come into the office, and whose face was almost milky now. His voice gentled. “I’m sorry this happened to you, Mrs. Bulstrode. You can call whoever else you think might like to go with us, but it can’t take too long.”

“I know,” said Elfrida, and seemed to recover, bending over her wrist.

Rufus went to fetch his Aurors, and tighten the guard around Pharos. He had questioned the man himself, hoping the words of another Light wizard might get through to him. Nothing had helped. Pharos had only laughed at them, and remarked now and then that his vengeance was complete.

Perhaps he could not stop the Unspeakables from appearing in the middle of the room and spiriting him away, but Rufus was certainly going to try.

And he would be grateful for the chance to act on the, low cold anger rising in him now. The Stone had sworn an oath, and had broken it, probably due to some technicality in the laws of magic. The Unspeakables were rebelling against the Ministry’s ideals of law, and against his direct control.

He would be more than happy to help defeat them.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Five: An Island In the Seas of Time

It was pain.

Adalrico had thought he would be able to explain pain if someone asked him to. It was the curve of the blade, the touch of the poison, the cool-eyed gaze that evaluated when the acid had done enough. But now he knew he had only truly known pain through one end. His had been the hand that inflicted.

Now it was the hand that felt.

They had his hand in something that was eating his fingers away. The liquid swirled only a small amount as his hand flopped like a fish, but the metal band around his wrist held it there so it could not get away, and the liquid ate steadily, cleaning flesh from

bone, tearing it open with tiny hooked teeth.

And beneath the skin and the meat and the bone, which it cracked and swallowed the marrow from, it fed on his magic.

Adalrico knew he would come forth from this time weakened. There was no way that he could not. But he wanted to know if he would come forth from it at all, if he would see his wife and his daughters again. The steady burn of the scar on his left arm, which the Unspeakables had set blazing like a beacon, said that Harry would come for him, and that, yes, he would walk in the sunlight again.

But the rational part of him, which still existed somewhere beyond all the screaming and all the pain, whispered that the Unspeakables *wanted* Harry to come. Adalrico was a prize; they could study his Dark Mark, and take his magic to guide their experiments. But Harry was a greater source of power still, and strange in ways that Adalrico only barely understood when Thomas tried to explain them, marked by the scar on his forehead. They would want him, could use him, more.

And Adalrico's capture was drawing him ahead, down and down into the darkness and the madness.

That was what he thought before the pain became all his world.

Harry halted and lifted his head. They were in the corridor that led to the Department of Mysteries. They had come down from the lifts, and entered a hallway made of stone that looked like any other stone in the Ministry. But the soft, subtle vibrations of magic around them told Harry the truth.

He felt a sting of admiration through his fury. *No wonder the Stone escaped for so long. This part of the Ministry isn't in the same world as the rest.*

He could feel it, the shifting sideways that occurred between one step and the next, the short passage that the Stone had constructed—or caused to be constructed, since Harry was not sure it could grow hands—and used to join the Ministry and another, very similar place across the boundary. Harry saw the rest of them start as they felt it. Hawthorn and Snape, Draco and Narcissa, Elfrida and Millicent, Moody and Tonks, and the ten Aurors Rufus had been able to give him on such short notice, all knew the moment they stepped *between*, but they did not know what it meant.

“Be careful,” Harry said quietly to them. “Magic may not act here as we're used to.”

Moody snorted at him, and his magical eye rolled around his head. Harry wondered if it was his imagination that it went further and rolled faster than normal. “And you think we needed a warning from *you* to figure that out, boy?”

Harry smiled a bit, reassured. Then the reassurance dropped away, and his rage flooded back. He saw Snape lean away from him with a slight flinch, pressing one hand to his forehead, and Draco lean nearer, sniffing rapturously. The others expressed various signs of discomfort.

“The Stone does expect us,” he said quietly. “Stay as close to me as you can. If I have to shield you, I won't have time to spread it out.”

Not that they could help but stay close to him in the narrow corridor, Harry thought, as they made their way towards the black door at the far end. But beyond this hall, he knew they would find any number of odd rooms, and some of them would be large enough for the Stone to hit them from several directions at once.

He was alert. That was the only reason he heard them.

Insects streamed up the corridor, glinting silver as spiderweb in the dim light. Harry threw up his hands, and his first shield rose. But he was looking for signs of the curses Moody had taught him as they came, and saw the telltale red tinge in the same moment that Moody roared his warning.

“They'll make the shield explode, boy! *Down!*”

Harry dropped his shield and fell to one knee, using the rest of his magic to press his allies flat and to reach out and slap the insects away with an invisible hand of pure force. Some of them careened away, spinning into the walls with a series of angry clicks and buzzes. Most of them, though, kept coming as though the invisible hand didn't exist, their legs spreading and their jaws opening.

Harry had no idea what they would do if they touched his allies, and he had no intention of finding out, either. Someone whom he loved was already dying for him, hurting for him. He imagined the insects stinging Draco and Snape, or biting them, and a slow, burning power heaved itself up his throat.

It was familiar, but last time it had risen so quickly that Harry had had no time to study it. Now he did, as it cracked red wings from the shelter of his back and spread out through his eyes and ears and nose.

Go, he willed, thinking the word so loudly he would not be surprised if that gave Snape a headache, too. *Do not be.*

And they were not, the insects winking out of existence the way that Harry had made Greyback wink out of existence when he tried to attack Draco. Harry rose to his feet in the ensuing silence and nodded back to Moody, the only one with an eye in position to see him.

“We can proceed,” he said. “They’re gone.”

“They’ll have others,” Moody predicted, but he stood, with a long, slow glance that Harry didn’t have time for. If the old Auror wanted to be afraid of him, then he could. Harry was going to rescue Adalrico. He strode forward, and Draco and Snape and Millicent, pressing at his shoulder, were anxious to follow.

Nothing else attacked them in the corridor. Harry touched the black door, and felt the throbbing magic beyond. He had his doubts, suddenly, about how accurate the maps of the Department of Mysteries Scrimgeour had given them would prove.

He took a deep breath, gave a grim smile as he remembered the Minister’s joke of “holding down the line”—in reality, preparing the rest of the Ministry for the moment when the worst might happen and Harry lost to the Stone—and then pushed the door open.

As it happened, the maps were accurate. In front of them was a room with a polished blue floor, so deep that Harry very nearly did think he was stepping into a pool. Candles flickered and sparked on the walls, blue as the ocean. Black doors lined the circular walls, and Harry thought that if he counted, there would probably be twelve of them.

“Behind me,” he said, the only warning he would give. His magical senses were extended around him like a lynx’s whiskers, but he could feel nothing lying in wait. Of course, that only made him warier, and certain there were traps somewhere beyond his reach. He paced forward, and heard the others clinging close to his shoulders and heels. Millicent was the only one who might have passed him, and Harry put out his hand to hold her back. She took one look into his face and understood.

When the last of them was through, the black door shut. Harry held his breath, wondering if it would work as Scrimgeour had told him—

Yes. The room began to turn, faster and then faster, until Harry had the urge to close his eyes so he wouldn’t vomit. He held still, though, and watched as the doors danced. What they were doing to Adalrico would be far worse. If his ally could bear that, then Harry could bear this.

The revolutions slowed and stopped at last. Harry strode towards the door directly in front of him and reached out with his magic, pushing at it. One push, one pull, and the door swayed gently open. Harry shoved it back against the wall of the blue room with his magic, still not wanting to touch the wood. The door thumped loosely, not the kind of thing it would do if there were anyone hiding behind it. Beyond, in that room, Harry could see nothing but darkness.

Well. He could also hear something—whispers. And an invisible rope came coiling out of the room, grabbed him around the waist, and would have tugged him in if Harry hadn’t braced his own strength and fought back. The magic retreated with a hiss. Harry let out his own breath and glanced over his shoulder.

“Do you know what this place is, Moody?” he whispered.

“That’ll be the Death Room.” Moody’s magical eye was spinning like a top. “Nothing much in it but a veil, boy.”

“A veil?” Harry turned and listened to the whispers again. Though it was hard to make them out, he was almost sure one of them was Sirius’s voice, and another sounded like Sylarana’s hiss, and he heard Fawkes’s warble. He shuddered.

“A veil that leads to—some other place.” Moody shook his head. “Nothing like the Stone in there, that I ever saw, and it’s only a room for the dead.” He watched Harry a moment, keenly, then spoke so sharply that Harry jumped. “Shut the door, boy!”

Harry realized he'd had one foot over the threshold. He tugged it back, took a deep breath, and pushed with his magic. It was hard. Something in him fought against the closing, lunging forward, thinking of the veil as a tattered curtain he could pass, to find peace and old friendship among the dead.

But it's the living who need you now. With an effort, and a loud click, he shut the door. He expected the room to begin revolving again, but it didn't, and Harry half-closed his eyes and touched the scar on his left arm.

It blazed, and now that he thought about it, Harry could feel a distinct pull coming from one of the doors on his right. He turned in that direction, and the others moved with him, obedient to his warning about the shields. Harry turned and gave them a quick smile.

"Whatever we find on the other side of that door, you have my gratitude for coming with me," he said.

Then he faced the wood, and felt Millicent's magic surge on one side of him, the mirror image of her father's, dark and heavy and strong as stone, and Draco's magic on his left, quick and lithe as a fox's.

His scar forced a drop of blood up through the skin.

Harry opened the door.

The room around him swooned. Harry tipped forward, and felt the others follow him, scrambling. Beneath them, green and silver blazed, and Harry's first, mad thought was that they were falling into the greatest Slytherin bedcover ever woven.

But no, he could make out cloudy shapes like trees, and thin threads of silver like streams, and then he realized that they stood on the edge of a great gray cliff, and then he felt the mind that heaved beneath him, and then he realized that the door had opened directly on top of the Stone.

And then the Stone seized him and wrenched him out of the world, out of his body, into the paths that lay on the other side of magic.

Draco shouted as Harry vanished, but he had to face the enemies bearing down on them, dark birds with glittering metallic bodies and jeweled beaks. They hurtled out of the green-and-silver sky, and up from the gray cliff, coming from every direction and none; Draco's vision wouldn't stop spinning, as though his head had continued to fall, separate from the rest of his body.

He cast a curse, but heard a human scream of pain. Then talons made of diamond grazed his arm, and he flung himself in the direction of what he thought was the ground, clinging to the Stone. He felt it shift beneath him, and was reminded that he couldn't even trust what they stood on.

He closed his eyes and reached for the one gift that would avail him here, at least if the birds had minds. He leaped.

And he was within a cool, shallow puddle of thoughts, borne on heavy clanging bronze wings, aiming along a straight line between crooked, twisting mirrors, his beak open to rake across his mother's face.

He gained control and then crashed into another of the birds, bearing it away from Narcissa. He could see straight in this form, and he knew which direction was up and which was down, and he reoriented himself and spun away from the Stone, flapping his wings and crying. He could guide the others, if they only *looked*, but none of them could trust their eyes, and none of them could turn away from the battle; more birds were coming.

Draco dived through the bird's mind, looking for an answer. He refused to think there was a solution that his possession gift might not be able to discover. Yes, there *was*, and he would *find* it.

And there it was, as if his desire to find it had pulled it into being. In front of him, the puddle of the bird's mind boiled away, but connections led away from it, thin and strong as spiderweb, to the others' minds. The Stone could control one of them, and in so doing, control the flock, its awareness leaping between them all, like the Many hive. There was no central mind. It moved and changed as the Stone needed to change it.

Draco had never jumped so many minds so fast before.

Staring down the connections, an instant before he flung himself through them, he had the feeling that he had better learn.

Harry landed in a twisted, oddly beautiful landscape. He crouched at an angle, holding his head up and setting his magic blazing furiously around him, to cleanse the air and steady the fluid in his ears so that he had at least a small sense of balance.

He stood in the middle of a black gravel path, the stones shifting softly under his feet as he moved them. They were cool to the touch of his flesh hand, burning coals to the touch of his silver one. Above him ran the gleaming underside of a silvery road, and around him on either side twisted gold and purple and more black and deep gray and palest white. He was in the middle of a mass of crazy catwalks, and the magic around him breathed deep tales of slumber, of Light power strong as that gathered at Midsummer and Dark magic strong as that gathered at Walpurgis.

“I am here.”

Harry turned sharply. A blocky gray shape drifted in front of him, an illusion or representation of the Stone.

Harry didn’t lash out with his *absorbere* gift, though he longed to do so. He knew the Stone was immune to it, to all magic. But it was becoming apparent that it also manipulated magic with consummate skill.

“I want Adalrico back,” he said levelly. “Give him to me, and give him back intact, and *maybe* I won’t destroy you.”

“You’re angry, aren’t you?” The Stone sounded interested, as if he were a scientific curiosity to be studied. The illusion angled and drifted up, passing through Harry’s head. He flinched, but felt nothing from it, no touch of cold or sharpness. It was simply there, and for the moment, it happened to be in the same place that his head was occupying.

“Of course I’m angry,” said Harry, and pulled his magic tight as chains around him, ready to lash out the moment they found a target. “You knew that about me. You took one of my allies so that I would come here. *Give him back.*”

His voice rattled several of the paths. The Stone responded in a tone of quiet amusement. “I knew that you would be furious, but not to this level.” For a moment, it was silent, and Harry turned his head to watch the illusion. He half-wanted to ask where they were, but he knew, if he thought about it. They were in the paths he had briefly glimpsed last Midwinter, flying with the wild Dark, opening a gateway for the Light’s gryphon through his body. These were the secrets so many Lords and Ladies had risked their lives to discover, the unconquered country into which they blended when their tasks were done or they couldn’t withstand the call of Dark or Light any longer.

Even Harry could feel that call, nagging at the edge of his awareness, urging him to drop his barriers and embrace the magic that flowed around him. What could be better than being part of magic itself? He would have everything pleasant that he did now, and none of the trouble and vexations. He could stop making sacrifices. That was what he wanted, wasn’t it? That was what he deserved, wasn’t it?

Harry laughed to himself. *Lily was a harder taskmaster than you are, and she taught me to deny pleasure*, he told the paths, and they danced back from him like hurt deer.

“Yes,” said the Stone suddenly. “You are caught outside of time now. And that means that I can finally find out where you stand in relation to time. I will discover all your secrets eventually, but this is the one I am most curious about.” And it reached out and *ripped* him.

Harry screamed in pain, his arms rising to cover his head, his magic leaping out and falling back, defeated, from the Stone’s absolute and utter protection against it.

But something *else* roared like an unleashed dragon, and this time the Stone was the one who screamed.

Snape had closed his eyes immediately when he found his vision would not stop spinning. He had trained to blind-fighting in the Dark Lord’s service, and at least the sounds the birds were making were fairly constant. He aimed his wand, and cast the Severing Curse, and heard wings and body separating and tumbling through the air, to land with an echoing crash. He did not dare open his eyes and gloat. He knelt down, to protect the person who lay nearest him—Millicent, he thought.

He did not dare think of Harry, either. He had to trust that Harry knew what he was doing, and would fight the Stone on the level, in the way, that none of them could. If he did not think that, then he might as well snap his wand and cast himself off the Stone’s

dizzying cliffs right then and there.

With his eyes shut and the confusion of sight cut off, though, he began to hear something else. It sounded like the throbbing engine of a Muggle car. It was in the rock beneath their feet—that was always beneath their feet, no matter what it looked like—and rising steadily to meet them.

Snape opened his Occlumency pools, shielding and shading and splitting his thoughts. He called up the rage that was brought only by the thought of Harry in danger, but he forced himself to think of something other than rescuing Harry while he did it. He spread his wandless magic out around them, winged and fanged and vicious, ready to act as a net and intercept what was rising from the Stone. He was the strongest of them but for Harry. It was his duty to protect the others.

He heard the birds' cries change suddenly, and nearly opened his eyes. Instead, though, he concentrated on the throbbing.

Near.

Nearer.

Nearer still.

And then the Stone tore open and tipped them down a chasm, and Snape spread his magic out like wings, unfurled and unleashed it, and commanded it: *Hold*.

Harry did not understand what was happening. All around him was dazzling, white, shadowless brilliance, brighter than the brightest lightning, and it pierced his eyelids and showed him the changing and unchanging outline of the fingers he'd pressed over them. And the Stone screamed, and the dragon roared, and something caught him under the ankles and tipped him up to float in space.

The lightning died. Harry waited another few moments to open his eyes, though, certain he would be burned if he did.

When he saw again, he could only stare.

He floated in a new kind of dazzle, one that he thought had not banished but occluded the paths of Dark and Light. This was a white, scissor-shaped radiance, cradling him on one blade and the floating illusion of the Stone on the other. And spread out around him were coils.

Harry stared. One unfolded like honey rope from his forehead, and stretched behind him in a wide tunnel. When Harry turned his head, he could see the shape of a bird, frozen forever within it. Or were there many birds, hurrying back and forth between him and a distant point? Whichever one was true—and perhaps both were true at once—he needed no Thomas to tell him this was the representation of the link between him and Voldemort that the attack at Godric's Hollow had forged.

It was odd. He had imaged the tunnel as straight. Instead, it was angled, bent like an elbow. Almost Harry thought it missed something, some other angle that would have completed it and made it make sense, but he did not know what his own thoughts meant, and in any case other things soon snared his attention.

Under his feet drifted another honey rope, coiled in on itself. When Harry peered closely, he could see that running dogs marked it, and small, gray, shadowy figures that reminded him of Dementors.

The second prophecy that Trelawney made. It concerned Sirius's death, and my freeing of the Dementors.

Harry swallowed. He glanced back once more at the rope attached to his forehead—the first prophecy, the one that proclaimed the savior who would defeat the Dark Lord—and then turned to look for another. There should be one more, Trelawney's third riddling, the one Harry thought meant he would have to defeat two more Dark Lords.

And there it was, stretched all around him, lapping him about, draping the white scissor-blade, and joined and tangled with the first prophecy until Harry could see the bird's wings beating in it, too. He took a deep breath and shook his head, now having a good idea of the force that had roared and risen to defend him.

It had been Time itself. Harry was part of three prophecies at various points in his life, and prophecies were living creatures, capable of shifting, and two of them were still trying to happen. They would not have been pleased if the Stone had peeled back

Time from around him. Harry was already caught in a maze of what had been and what would be. There was no place for an interfering Stone.

He started to chuckle, looking towards the illusion of the gray block again, which ached in bruise-colored ripples, and then his breath caught in his throat.

Beyond the Stone floated another rope, this one not honey-colored but dark green, shot through with glints of gold. On the coils, her eyes fixed on him, sat Death's black, slim hound shape.

A fourth prophecy was coming for him. And judging from the color, it was dark and Dark. Harry swallowed, and hoped fervently that it was the last one he would have to live through. He didn't fancy being the subject of three prophecies at once.

The last one I will have to live through. Is it so? Does that glimpse of Death mean my own death? And is it about the Horcruxes?

There was no way to tell from this distance, and no way to be certain of the prophecy until it arrived. Harry did not think that would be long. He wondered if he should be relieved—especially that the war with Voldemort would apparently not last long—or worried.

He glanced down at his own body as light from it caught his attention, and blinked. He had marks in this view of time, other than the scar on his forehead. The imprint of a phoenix glinted on him, the beak starting at his throat and the body continuing down his chest, and a golden-white trail whorled all over him. By glimpsing its endless bends, Harry thought he knew what it was. He had traveled the Maze, and the Maze was outside time in its own way, from another world even as the Stone was. It had branded him, and so had Fawkes's gift.

"You are *interesting*."

Harry looked swiftly back towards the Stone again. There was still pain in its voice, but even more awe.

"You are marked and scarred and tattered by time, wound in the future and traced with an immortal sacrifice, and through you Tom Riddle is marked and scarred and tattered by time," the Stone said. "And the third. Where is he? There is a place left in your aura, as if for a guest, and yet he is not with you."

"I don't know who you're talking about," said Harry, and started, quietly, to gather and to swing his magic.

"It does not matter," the Stone whispered. "I could spend centuries studying this, trying to grasp the odd coincidences that let this come about. *Such* a child of Time. And Time does not like me interfering with you. Well. I will not, not now. I will deliver you up to it, and study your life instead. Backward and forward, there is much material here, and you will teach me more if I let you go than if I bid you stay."

"Give me Adalrico," said Harry. The wonder had dulled his rage, but not restrained it, and now it orbited him as on a chain, ready to strike at where the Stone was vulnerable.

"I cannot," said the Stone. "He is being used. His magic is fueling our experiments. I will agree to a peace between us, and take no more of your allies, but it would be only a corpse that I gave back to you."

"Wrong answer," said Harry softly, and then he reached out, crashing his magic through the dream-world of Dark and Light, leaping and wrenching through the paths, striking straight for the Unspeakables and bidding them die.

He had done this before. Then, it had been beside a lake, and it had been a web he could not undo, and he had shouted the words in silence while tears streaked his face. Now he shouted them aloud, and behind the tide of his magic that struck the Unspeakables, his enemies, dead, he sent the *absorbere* gift.

"Adulto cordis! Adulto cordis! Adulto cordis!"

They died of heart attacks, and their magic, which would ordinarily have gone back into experiments of the Stone's in death, sank down his gullet. Harry tugged on the magic, bearing it to him, letting the *absorbere* gift slam shut when it could hold no more and begin to digest. For the first time, he welcomed the magic to make himself stronger. If the Stone did not listen to him, if it chose to fight him rather than save those still dear to it, then he would need that power to survive the coming battle.

The Stone wailed, a pitiable noise. Harry doubted it truly cared for the Unspeakables, but they had belonged to it, and at least it sounded like a child mourning for lost toys.

He waited in silence, while his power expanded around him like a rippling pool, and he began to gather and swing it again, that crashing chain that was also a paired spear of destruction and magic-swallowing snake. He was stronger than he had been. It didn't make as much of a difference as he had expected. Swallowing magic, and saving it for himself instead of using it at once to benefit others, did not instantly corrupt him and turn him into a monster. He wondered a little, now, that he could have thought it would.

He did not feel that bad about the Unspeakables' deaths, either. They had been the Stone's servants, sworn to it, bound to it, unutterably loyal. He could feel the dying echoes of their bonds inside him, and it made the slavery Voldemort enacted with the Dark Mark look like cords of twine. They would not have yielded to save their own lives, and they would not have given up Adalrico, and only their loss *might* convince the Stone to give his ally back.

They had been human. And he had killed them. Harry took a few deep breaths, watching the Stone more with the edges of his pool of magic than with his eyes. He would have to talk to Joseph when this was done and make sure he had not torn another wound in his soul. But this was battle, this was war, and if he could not handle it—either the killing of people who would never be anything but enemies, or the consideration of their humanity that would follow after it—then he should never have joined it.

"You may have him," the Stone whispered.

Harry did not sag with relief, because that would weaken the impression of uncaring strength he presented. "Intact in magic and in body," he insisted.

"Intact in magic and in body." The Stone tilted a corner towards him that Harry thought was the equivalent of a meek head-bow.

"And you will not interfere in my life again, or take any of my other allies."

"I already said I would not." The Stone sounded faintly surprised. "You are too fascinating."

"And you will leave the Ministry and the wizarding world alone."

The Stone took its time about answering, and Harry reached out to an Unspeakable and began to drain her without saying a word.

"I will leave the Ministry and the wizarding world alone," said the Stone quickly.

Harry let the Unspeakable go. He hoped he had not already reduced her to a Squib, but he kept himself from checking. He had Adalrico to think about. "Then bring me back from the dream-world to the real one," he said.

A long moment passed, and then the Stone said, sounding more surprised than it had so far, "Someone seems to be preventing me from doing that."

Draco jumped from bird-mind to bird-mind, barely touching down in one pond before he leaped on. In every mind, he planted the same direction, trying to make it seem as if they were the creatures' thoughts, and not his own. He cracked and split apart the water there, and placed the series of ripples *he* wanted, so that the command would both reinforce itself and travel through the connections into the minds of the rest of the flock.

Save them.

The flock swirled and descended before Draco could finish circling them. He cursed in words that had no breath behind them, hoping that they hadn't done so because the Stone sensed and decided to stop him, and turned to look out one through one pair of topaz eyes.

He saw the best sight he could have hoped for. The cliff his mother and Professor Snape and the others were fighting on had cracked clean through, and they dangled above the chasm in a net of light and pure magic no thicker than algae. Professor Snape's pale face said where the net had come from.

The birds were grabbing their former prey with gentle talons, though, and flying with them to another part of the cliff. Draco waited only long enough to see his mother borne to safety, and to see the birds carting along his own motionless body, and then leaped one more time, and went home.

He sighed as he opened his eyes, then grunted in annoyance as one pair of talons sank deeper than it should have and the clamor of steel wings nearly deafened him. He sat up as the birds put him down, and found himself wrapped in his mother's embrace. The birds wheeled around them once, then divided; half the flock flew away across the dizzying land of mirrors, which was growing steadily less dizzying, while half hovered, guarding them. Draco hoped the first half had gone to fetch food and drink, which would be a good use of the "save them" command, and let his head sag back on his mother's neck.

"You saved us again," she whispered into his ear.

"I think Professor Snape helped," said Draco, and blinked, turning his head. "Has there been a sign of Harry?"

Narcissa shook her head tightly.

All of them, from Draco to the weakest Auror, felt the enormous flare of magic a moment later.

Harry gasped as something slammed into him, unseen. The dimension of Time flickered and faded, and Harry tumbled, no longer supported on the scissor-shaped blade, no longer able to see the phoenix imprint or the Maze's brand or the prophecies that coiled about him. He lifted his head, and saw himself on the black path once more, while above him the other roads raced in different directions. The illusion of the Stone had vanished with Time.

Who—

And then a shape dived at him, a glittering wave of power running at its back, and Harry knew which enemy of his was at home in this country of strange and secret paths, this country between the Dark and the Light. He began to swing his magic as a chain, ready to meet Falco again.

~*~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Six: Defiance

Falco had a vision in his mind. The vision had settled there the moment he felt Harry wrenched from the wizarding world and deposited between the paths, the place where Falco himself had retreated to consider his options and learn the magic of the Dark in more detail. The problem might, after all, be solved without countless battles. If he could force an attack on Harry's greatest vulnerability, he might yet win.

He had flown among the paths while Harry talked with the Stone and wrapped himself in prophecy, gathering up the magic he would need to cloak his endeavor. The cloak was more important and harder to weave than the spell that would attack Harry's vulnerable chinks. Harry had to be convinced that Falco was really coming down on him with this gray wave of power.

And then he had it ready. Foam crested his shoulders, reaching around his wings, half a sea eagle's and half a thestral's; communing with the Dark had taught him the perils and the wonders of other kinds of shapeshifting.

He turned and came down on Harry with the wave behind him, sliding across the door between the worlds that the Stone was trying to open to send Harry home. The Stone could cut through the barriers by being what it was, immune to magic unless it accepted the touch of it. But Falco was stronger here still, given his courting of the greater powers, and he easily healed every small slit that the Stone opened.

Harry tumbled back into the world of the paths, and the prophecies retreated, and Time loosened its clutch on him.

And Falco swooped, with the wave hiding the weapon that hovered at his back like a knife concealed in a palm.

Draco bit his lip, riding out the explosion, or collision, that had torn through him. His ears were ringing, and the blood dripping from the small gash on his arm had started to flow faster. He pulled away from Narcissa as soon as it was safe and climbed to his feet, looking around.

He should be able to sense the direction Harry was in. At least, he felt as if he should be able to, given their connection through the joining ritual and the Portkey-bracelet. He laid his hand on the bracelet now and asked silently what Harry's condition was. Harry had enchanted the bracelet to let Draco know that, and also to bring him to his side if there weren't strong wards in the way.

In shock and pain, the bracelet's silent, inflectionless voice told Draco.

Draco shook his head, biting his lip again, and realized that most of the people gathered around him were watching him closely. The sole exception was Snape, who had pulled his magic back into his body and looked to be fighting between collapsing where he was and searching for Harry.

"Do you know where he is, Mr. Malfoy?" Hawthorn Parkinson's voice was terribly polite.

Millicent was less so. "Where's my father?"

"That, I don't know," said Draco absently. He twisted the bracelet on his wrist, and wondered if he should go to Harry. He *wanted* to, damn it, but there would almost certainly be wards in the way, both the Unspeakables' and the Stone's. He gave the rock beneath his foot a vicious kick, to which it responded not at all. "But I know that Harry is still alive, if in shock." He held up his wrist to show the gleam of gold when mouths opened to ask how he knew that. "I don't know if we can get to him, though." And he wasn't madly in love with the idea of leaping to Harry's side without knowing if he could help him. The last time he had done something like this, going into the Ministry when Dumbledore had captured Harry and subjected him to the *Capto Horrifer* spell, he had had the Black coin to insure he was prepared when he landed.

His mother seemed to sense the flow of his thoughts, and she gave a slight shake of her head to indicate that she thought Draco's pause a good one. "We must plan," she said. She took one more look around the landscape. It had settled, Draco noted. Now they stood on a gray cliff, which might have been made of granite, above a land of cloudy green trees and silver streams. The bronze and steel birds swept around them, vigilantly watching for threats. There was no sign of gray-clad Unspeakables. "If there is a way that we can reach Harry, then we should take it. Otherwise, we should keep in mind that we do not know the laws of magic here, and Harry himself said that normal spells probably would not work."

"I might have an idea," said Draco slowly, and closed his eyes, slumping against Narcissa's ready arm as he leaped up into the minds of the hovering flock once more.

They welcomed him eagerly this time, their shallow pools of thoughts adapted to his touch, and Draco planted the idea of bearing the strange humans they needed to keep safe towards the explosion of magic they had sensed earlier. The birds did seem confused, for a moment, about where the explosion had come from—not surprising if they were in another world, Draco thought, or if Harry was. But Draco modified the idea of "towards" to be "as close as they could," and the birds turned and descended again, clasping shoulders and arms with gentle talons.

Elfrida Bulstrode spoke as they rose into the air. Draco heard her, dizzily, through both metallic ears and human ones for a moment before he thought to retreat into his own head. "What are we going to do, Malfoy?"

"Come as close as we can to the source of Harry's pain," said Draco. "The wards or the prison or the world where he's being held. That's where I've told the birds to bear us." He held up his hand, and the ring that Mrs. Parkinson had given him for his confirmation ritual as magical heir flashed and glimmered. She had sacrificed a part of her magic, making herself permanently weaker, for the sake of giving Draco an important and shining gift. That magic still crouched on the ring in the form of a small blue stone. "And I'll use what power I need to so that I can burst through the wards or the walls, and rescue Harry."

Harry could feel the magic swelling around him, rising, moving oddly, shifting like the wave he saw at Falco's back. He had more power here than he had ever had, if he wished to use it. He had swallowed the magic from the Unspeakables, and the Dark and the Light were here—or, at least, curving through here—in all their might and could offer him gifts, and he did not have Voldemort pulling on his magic just now and drawing it towards him.

But Harry was determined to remember what the price of gifts from the Dark and the Light might be, and just because Voldemort was not yet a part of this battle did not mean he would stay out of it.

He moved backwards, and took a defensive stance, a shield of blades that appeared in front of him. He built the blades themselves of light, narrowed to such a thin edge that it would cut an eye out, and curled night about the ends of them in hilts of black wood. Blades were a poor defense against water, but Falco's magic was not truly water, and the blades were not truly blades. All were only imagined representatives of what could be, here, and Harry had finally, finally stepped into a place in his own mind where he had cleverness and more to spare.

The wave fell on the blades, Falco sweeping past just under it and adding another hammer blow of strength to follow behind.

The blades quivered, and cracked, and quaked. And Harry dropped the center out of them and imagined them unfolding, rising, as a spiderweb, the edges of light become tearing spokes or spider legs, snaring Falco's magic and dragging it towards him and his gullet.

Falco let out a cry Harry told himself was surprise, or fear. It was better than thinking it was mere shock and irritation that would fade in a moment.

Harry didn't want to try swallowing Falco's magic, not yet, when the *absorbere* gift had not quite finished digesting the last meal he'd given it. He swung the captured power around instead, casting his net away into the maze of Dark and Light paths, giving Falco's magic to whatever wanted to eat it. He heard a howl somewhere far away, and something nameless in both the realms most mortal wizards understood scurried to retrieve the prize.

Falco rose a second time, the glittering form of a spread-winged sea eagle in the midst of light. Harry juggled balls of power behind him, letting them rest in his silver hand for moments at a time, and thought of Quidditch.

He studied Falco in the meanwhile. This was the first chance he'd had to evaluate the nature of his enemy's magic. He knew Voldemort's power, vicious and fanged and bladed. He knew Snape's magic, like a tamer version of Voldemort's, and without as much of the swallowed poison. He knew Draco's, quick and adaptable and flexible, and Lucius's dusty marble tomb, and Millicent's, a stone that might dance in an earthquake at any moment.

Falco's was different. Chilly as the light he mantled himself in, deep as deep water, it revealed barely any of its owner's personality. Harry blinked. Given his lessons with Jing-Xi, he hadn't believed this possible. Even a small manifestation of his magic would show him to those who knew him, and Jing-Xi had explained that a Lord or Lady with a longer life was likely to develop a ferocious soul that imprinted itself on the smallest signs of his or her power.

He studied Falco a bit more, and then he understood. This *was* Falco's personality. Chilly, deep, high, brooding. He saw himself as above humanity. He understood very little of what they did. His long sleeps and retreats into the paths that surrounded them now were part of that, but more came from a refusal to understand that things had changed. Six hundred years ago, when he had been born, this kind of height above the world might have been the ideal for Lords and Ladies, and they would have interfered with mortals only to adjust the "balance" among competing forms of magic.

But even wizards changed. Even Lords and Ladies died. And Falco had locked himself into a mode that, if it did not permit dying, also did not permit living. He tricked the Dark and the Light, and in so doing, he had forgotten a good deal about tricking—and living with—others.

Harry comprehended a great deal then that he hadn't understood before.

He was ready when that chill light poured at him, trying to push him onto a golden path, trying to open his mouth and force a Declaration to the Light past his lips. He cast the balls like balls in Quidditch, the Snitch darting away from his right hand and towards Falco, a bright and fast thing all feathers and chirrups and hurrying summer morning. From his silver hand came the Quaffle, a vision of mild gentleness, of compassion, of spring.

Behind them, moving almost too fast to be seen, were the Bludgers, and they *slammed* into Falco, one and then another, cracking his light, letting him know how stupid he had been, causing his world to shatter into ringing shards around him.

Falco faltered and fell. Harry let the cold light wash over him, and met it with the naked strength of his will. He would not Declare. He found it wrong. And he had performed too much Dark magic to be considered Light. Would the Light really want a tainted prize like him?

Falco's attack, calculated on a misjudgment of Harry's character, trembled and fell after its master. Harry faced him triumphantly.

And Falco cast the spell he'd been hiding.

He lifted his head, did Lord Voldemort, when he felt the clash of them far away, the Dark Lord that was to be and the young one, his heir, the child of his hatred, who would feel the bite of his hatred as the bite of an ice scorpion very, very soon.

He listened to them, and chuckled.

“My lord?”

That was his Indigena, the one who had cleaved to his side, the one who came when called, the one he felt almost tender towards. He stroked her hair with long fingers, and watched through the snake’s eyes as it slithered quickly across the grass above the burrow, seeking for some signs of the new Dark Lord’s magic in the air. That new Dark Lord had prepared a refuge for them. Why he should wish to do so was not yet clear, and while he almost thought he could take his word for it, did Lord Voldemort, he would be foolish to walk into a trap the enemy was preparing.

“Lord Falco and Lord Harry are fighting,” he said. “And it is clear which one shall win.” He cocked his head as a spell leaped to him across the distance, a spell not many people knew any more, a working of weaving and silver chain that he, swift and great, had only learned for himself in Egypt, in a city scorned by most European wizards as haunted. “Though the contest may yet be interesting,” he added.

He knew his Indigena would have a baffled expression on her face. He did not mind. He liked confusing her. He petted her hair again, and sniffed the smell of roses.

Falco lay in place, as if weak and wounded, and watched his spell do its work, wrapping around Harry’s mind in a dazzle of chain. Harry bowed his head, rubbing his brow with his silver hand, seeming to know that something was wrong and yet not realizing what it was. He should not have known. Falco had been careful of that. And now he was casting his second spell, as opposed to his second weaving of pure power, during the encounter, reaching out and drawing one of them closer, the nameless creatures who lurked between Dark and Light and had never received any distinguishing notice from wizards because they merited none. They could not affect the balance, normally. They were scavengers who ran the paths and ate what scraps of nourishment fell their way.

One was about to play a part in determining the fate of the British wizarding world. Falco wondered if it knew, then dismissed the thought. Nameless, these creatures were also mindless.

The thing wandered nearer, sniffing forlornly after the scraps of magic. It looked like a hyena, but without the head, leaving only the hunched shoulders to bend down and press a flat, blunt hole like a nose against the paths. The paws sparkled with diamond claws, and the wire sticking up from its back flagged like a tail. It was a living thing, a magical creature, and that was the only requirement it needed to serve the part it must play.

Harry saw it. The spell moved deep in his eyes, changing him. He lifted his silver hand. Falco hid his annoyance. It would have been more symbolic had Harry used his wand, but he had forgotten that nearly all of Harry’s magic was wandless now, that he had adapted that well to this level of power. Falco debated building in an urge to use his wand when he rewound the control this would give him over Harry, and then dismissed the notion. Best not to press too far. Restoring the balance would be quite enough for him. He had no reason to attend to all the minor performances that might accompany the grand gestures.

The nameless thing squared its shoulders and turned to face Harry. Falco wondered if it knew it was about to suffer. It might. He had read, somewhere, that they did. He shook his head. One could read and forget many books in six hundred years.

The end of the silver chain sparked in his hand, winding through Harry’s mind, giving him access Harry did not realize he had. Like a certain class of perception-changing spell Albus had used against Harry, it could conceal its own presence from the minds of those it affected, and erase any notion of itself that popped up.

In a moment, the spell would force Harry to use compulsion against the nameless thing.

Using compulsion, he would cease to be *vates*.

And then he would have no reason not to Declare, and because he knew what horrors Dark Lords were, he would choose Light. Falco would Declare Dark, and fight him, and most likely die, given the prophecy that bound Harry and Tom. And then Harry would go on to fight Tom, and probably kill both of them in the bargain. And Britain would be without any Lords again, which was probably the best condition for her.

Falco was not afraid to die. He *was* afraid of accidents.

But this spell, Harry could do nothing against, because he did not know about it.

Age and cunning will defeat youth and stupidity every time, he congratulated himself.

Draco had not known if he would be able to sense the best place to break through the barriers when they came to it. As it was, he didn't have to worry about that. Every sense in him stood up and screamed. It took him a long moment to realize that he was, in fact, feeling what the flock felt; they knew the moment they had fulfilled their task and taken him to the point where he was parallel to that collision of magic.

Draco did take a moment to wonder, as he studied the scene in front of him, how his possession gift had changed. He had never done that much research into its origins, not really. He suspected that it came from the mingling of his Malfoy empathy with the Black compulsion gift, but if that was so, it should not have changed further; it had no reason to do so, nothing else in him to blend with. He would have to read up on it—

Assuming that both he and Harry survived the encounter in the Department of Mysteries today.

He shook his head, and thought more about the immediate problem and what he would have to do to solve it. The flock had carried them to a place in midair, which looked like a huge, polished mirror. Draco could see more green trees and silver streams and boundless gray sky on the other side of it, and the distant reflection of the Stone. The problem was, this place in the Department of Mysteries being what it was, he couldn't say that this was a mirror. It might actually be that this room continued, only in perfect reversal this time, even down to the presence of a second Stone. Perhaps this was only as close as the birds could bear them, a midpoint and not a gate or a wall.

But he would not rescue Harry if he were fretting himself about philosophical questions.

He held up his ring and began to call on the magic that resided in it. In a way, he hated to use Hawthorn's gift for this; the practical Malfoy part of him whispered to husband the magic, to keep it for a point where he could really get a use out of it instead of using it because there was no better weapon available.

But the Black part of him asked what the magic *should* be for, if not for rescuing the man he loved? And the Malfoy part of him—or, at least, the child of a father who had once valued his wife and son beyond price—had no answer for that.

Draco smiled grimly. There were times he could feel the two sides of himself, Malfoy and Black, Lucius and Narcissa, fighting out the balance of his soul, but he intended to be more than two battling sides. He was in the midst of chaos now, weaving what he could, making the best decisions he knew how while still in ignorance of the outcome, and that was a talent all his own.

“Draco, wait.”

His mother's hand clamped on his wrist from across the air between them. Draco concealed the impulse to snap at her, and turned a gaze that he hoped was coldly courteous on her instead. Narcissa gazed back, more than a match for him, and he lowered his eyes and nodded, indicating his willingness to listen to what she had to say.

“Could you command the birds to break through the barrier?” Narcissa gestured at the steel vulture that held her, and flapped large wings stronger and sturdier, Draco had to concede, than the glass the mirror was made of. “They may have carried us this far only because you told them to, but they would, perhaps, break open the barrier if you told them to, in turn.” She gave the polished air a mistrustful glance.

“I don't know if I could,” Draco retorted. “They guarded us and carried us so far because of one command that I gave them: to keep us safe. If I changed that, and told them to break through the mirror now, they could drop us, or smash us into shards as they went through wards that would not harm them.” He gestured in a wide circle with his left hand. “And I don't see any ground where we could count on safely landing if they released us. And Professor Snape is exhausted and could not catch us in time.”

“If I wove a net for us?”

Draco lifted an eyebrow. “Try.”

Narcissa waved her wand. A spell that Draco recognized as a net which had wrapped around most of Malfoy Manor the summer he had thought he was a dragon in a human body and tried to fly off the roof spread out around them. It was glittering silver, thick and strong and more easily able to bear weight than the desperate construction of Professor Snape's magic.

It had nothing to attach to, however, and the moment it formed it began to fall. Draco watched it drift downward in silence, and then turned an eloquent look on his mother. Narcissa only inclined her head.

“Do what you must,” she said. “There was a time I would not have hesitated, were Lucius on the other side of wards like that.”

Draco nodded, and turned his attention back to his ring, ignoring the muttering of some of the rest of them. Millicent was worried about her father, and Professor Snape was worried about Harry, and Moody was worried about Draco’s ability to lead a rescue like this. None of that signified. He laid his will like an extra hand across the small blue stone, and tapped into the freely given magic. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. He wanted to break through the mirror, step through it or smash it or rend it apart like cloth—whatever must be done to stop it from separating him and Harry—and then reach Harry’s side.

He visualized the desire very clearly in his mind, and started to reach for his wand to help the effect along with an incantation.

Then the world broke.

Harry felt his lip curl as he gazed at the headless creature nudging at the foot of the path. It was quite the ugliest thing he had ever seen, hairless and without a purpose except to ramble about in magic and salvage what it could. Peter’s rats were beautiful and purposeful, the Many shone like the sun, even the skeletal thestrals had an odd beauty, but he could not see what this was for.

His silver hand rose without his conscious volition. The trails of magic that bound it to his flesh were warm and glowing, more pink than red now, more yellow than gold. It would be good to use it to get rid of the headless creature, wouldn’t it? That way, he would show that he welcomed the hand, considered it part of his body, and bond it more firmly to his arm.

He might destroy the creature, blasting it away a hurricane of fire. He might wash it away in a sudden flash flood. He could do that. He was powerful, and around him beat the heart of all magic, available and ready for him to use.

Or he could compel it to go away. It was the easiest method, barely the flick of a thought, and then he could turn back to his battle with Falco, who was, he should not allow himself to forget, his real enemy.

Yes, perhaps compulsion would be easy—

And then the flood of rejection and defiance came forth from the depths of his mind.

For thoughts like this, the mere shadow of an idea of compelling Connor, he had feared he was becoming like Dumbledore and forced himself through a breaking and rebuilding in the Room of Requirement. He had taught himself he could hate his parents and it was well, that he could reject his last name and still retain the connection to his brother, that he could forgive his parents and yet not want them around for the rest of his life. There was no better way to make him forget about everything else and concentrate on throwing off chains and delving into himself. *Why* had he had these thoughts? How in the world could he have them?

Why in the world would a *vates* use compulsion?

He screamed, and dived into his mind, redirecting his magic, telling it to lay open his thoughts and show him *everything* he was thinking.

His vision spun dizzily, as Legilimency and more ordinary power, including the swallowed magic of the Unspeakables, sprang to do as he wished. Harry had a brief, burning moment to wonder why more Lords and Ladies didn’t do this to themselves.

He stood above a map of blue and green and red, and swept his gaze through guilt and memories and the remnants of sated physical needs, and his gaze fixed on the alien silvery chain twining through his thoughts, and he reached in and yanked it out.

Pain leaped through him, but it was nothing compared to what he would have felt had he compelled the headless creature to go away. He flung off the silver chain, and tattered it, and shook his head impatiently.

Then he turned on Falco.

The Quaffle, Snitch, and Bludgers he had constructed were shades of an idea. If Falco was cold and saw himself as above humanity, then Harry could best battle him by introducing warmth and the idea of what it meant to be human. He could bring him back from his cold distance and force him to flee if he saw, face-to-face, what he was not.

That had been what Harry wanted to do when he had both some compassion for Falco and an idea of finesse left, however.

Fuck finesse.

He called forth his magic, winding it up into a massive wave of his own, bound to his hands, flesh and silver, and then flung it forward, hitting Falco with a flood of pure, raw wildness and strength.

You don't want to be human? You don't have a choice.

He plunged Falco into his own memories, his own emotions: the intense drama of the trial, the memories of a child cutting himself with curses and only slowly training himself out of pain, the graveyard and the wheeling, screaming moment when he lost his hand, the dizzy joy of speeding along on a broom, what it was like to have magic that manifested itself as creativity and hot jungle life. He showed him what it was like to be Harry Potter, Harry *vates*, and how he had already lived more in sixteen and a half short years of life—ten of those spent under a bondage he had not realized was bondage—than Falco had in six centuries. He showed him again, and again, and again, and again.

Falco fled.

Harry had not expected that. He suddenly had no target to pour his magic against. He tugged it back. It came reluctantly, shaking its head like a wild horse, and Harry caught sight of Falco crouched at a distance among the paths, his wings almost scraping a golden one, watching him with intense fear.

Harry started to snap his magic forward again, but he paused. Something hovered behind Falco, reaching out to trail its claws teasingly down his back. Harry thought it one of the nameless creatures that lived between the paths at first, but in that case, Falco would have been aware of it, and he didn't seem to be. Harry stared, trying to understand, and Falco stared back, obviously not knowing the cause of his reprieve but intent on absorbing as much information as he could about Harry while it lasted.

The thing trailed its claws, and looked at Harry, and smiled. And then, just for a moment, it changed from a vague dragon into a shape like a chimera, like the one that had come at Midwinter—or so Draco had told him, later—for his Declaration.

This is the Dark.

And it hovered over Falco, and it spread its wings, and it cradled him as if he were one of its children, but Harry did not sense the kinship from it that he felt towards himself, or the wilder, more vicious, more predatory communion it had with Voldemort. It seemed to treasure his ignorance instead, to treat him as a victim. If Falco was going to be the next Dark Lord, he did not know his new allegiance well at all.

Harry's eyes widened.

And what if that is it? What if the power the Dark Lord knows not, in this case, is the Dark? Falco is entirely ignorant of its nature. He's never Declared for it before, never fought for it, and it hides itself from him and laughs at him.

Harry felt his heart beating harder and harder. He reminded himself that the wild Dark was unpredictable, and it might change its mind and decide to welcome Falco between now and the time when he Declared.

But if he could creature a situation where the wild Dark might destroy Falco—

And if Falco Declared on Walpurgis, or fought Harry on Walpurgis, the time of the next great rising of the Dark, and Harry could not see him waiting until Midwinter with the way he had attacked now—

Then Harry might be able to consciously fulfill the prophecy for the first time.

He laughed aloud, and Falco's eyes narrowed. Harry leaped forward, his magic running around him like a whole herd of wild horses, shaking their heads and tossing their manes and tails. He rushed at Falco. He thought he knew how to destroy him, but if he could do it here and now, then he wouldn't complain, and he didn't intend to wait.

He raised his magic, and the foundations of the Ministry shook, and one path shredded like light and showed Draco hovering on the other side of it, in the talons of a metallic bird, staring at him.

Harry winked at him. His anger turned to joy, and he sent another flood of life after Falco.

Falco vanished.

Apparated, or bent time the way that Scrimgeour had told Harry he could—Harry did not know, was not sure, did not care. Hope had joined him, and it sang and sang and sang until he could barely hear the voice of the Stone underneath it.

“I will keep my promises,” the gray illusion said, as it appeared hovering beside Harry. “You are the most fascinating creature I have yet met with. Studying your relationship to prophecy alone could keep me happy for half a year.” Harry saw one corner tilt in that gesture like a meek head-bow again. “Step through the slit. Your ally awaits you, intact as you requested him to be.”

Harry inclined his head back to the Stone. He was no less angry with it, not really, and he did not entirely expect it to keep its promises not to hurt him or his allies, or the Ministry and the wizarding world. But if it broke them, then he could rise against it and hurt it very badly through taking its Unspeakables and its experiments away.

He had the magic, the power, to do that, and while there were some things he would need to be wary of doing with that power and always would—killing others and draining their magic, for example—he could use it.

There are, he thought, thinking of the monitoring board, *going to be some changes*.

And then he turned and stepped through the slit in the paths into what was no longer empty air but a solid, sturdy corridor that led towards a black door opening on the circular blue room, and the birds were gone, and his allies stood about him alive and unharmed, and Adalrico lay senseless at his feet, and Draco was in his arms, breathing against him, heart beating.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Seven: Minds, Scarred and Unscarred

Draco closed his eyes, and held Harry, and said nothing. He could feel cloth sliding under his hands, and cold silver along his spine—cold enough to feel even through the robe, as though Harry had placed his hand in the dark spaces between the stars before he returned. He felt a beating heart.

And, because of who he was, he felt the pressure and the presence of the stone in the ring on his finger, still a bit of solidified magic he had not *quite* managed to use before Harry broke open the barriers between the dream-world and the room in the Department of Mysteries.

He might love Harry as much for sparing him from using that magic as he might for the power he’d just exuded, he thought.

Harry finally stepped away from Draco with a small shake of his head. “Later?” he murmured.

He—ah. Draco had to hide his chuckle as he caught sight of a flush that wasn’t embarrassment or dying worry or exultation on Harry’s cheeks. He nodded and let his fingers rest against the side of Harry’s neck before he moved to greet Snape. Snape did not touch him. That did not matter. Draco could see the air around him humming with his relief, his respect, his gratitude.

And Draco could add his own to it, as he leaned back and folded his arms and watched Harry move from person to person, soothing with words, sometimes the touch of a hand, and occasionally a flicker of magic, if it seemed that the wizard or witch in question needed to feel that. He also darted quick glances from the corner of his eye at Mr. Bulstrode, so that by the time Adalrico stirred and Harry dropped into a fluid kneel beside him, Draco had the feeling that Harry knew quite as much about his physical condition as if he had checked him over all the time.

“Mr. Bulstrode,” Harry said, and then corrected himself, with a faint smile on his lips, at one of those jokes Draco hated because he hadn’t shared. “Adalrico. What hurts the most?”

“My hand.” Adalrico rolled on one side and held it out. Harry grasped and studied it. Draco, who had come up behind him—when had he done that?—scanned it narrowly. He could see dark, blue, fleshy bruises along the fingers, but he wasn’t sure what might have happened.

Harry’s free hand trembled, though, as he reached out and rested it on Adalrico’s forehead. “Transfigured flesh,” he said quietly. “You’ll have the best care in the wizarding world, Adalrico. I mean it.”

The man nodded and closed his eyes. Millicent was kneeling down beside him, and her hand clasped his arm as if it wouldn’t move any time soon. Draco couldn’t blame her. He knew how he would have felt if it were Narcissa in the clutch of the Unspeakables.

Harry stood, moving aside like a dancer when Elfrida came to watch her husband, and considered him for a moment more. Then he nodded, and turned, and seemed surprised to find himself chest-to-chest with Draco.

He smiled, though, instead of retreating as he would have once, and leaned in to whisper, “Still not quite private enough yet for what I want to do.”

Draco raised his eyebrows, stifled his own flush, and nodded. He could wait. There was no reason to hurry.

Harry’s heart was beating.

Millicent cast the spell lurking in her wand—at least, it felt as if it were lurking there and not on her lips, and had been since the moment she heard of her father’s capture. The magic spread over Adalrico’s body in a soft, sparking net, popping gold and red before it vanished into his joints and elbows. Millicent stroked his forearm above the Dark Mark and watched.

Wisps of blue rose to the surface of his fingers and chest and hair a moment later, like steam off food. Millicent studied them, while her parents had a quiet reunion in the middle of the floor.

Pain, the blue wisps spoke of, and by the depth of their color, she could guess how severe the pain had been.

This was the color of the bruises on Adalrico’s fingers. It spoke of suffering that was never going to heal.

Millicent’s hand spasmed open, but she tucked it beneath his shoulder, so that no one else could see, and heaved, to get him to his feet. Adalrico cocked his head to look at her, and curved one heavy brow in amusement.

“Everyone else is leaving,” Millicent pointed out. Harry and Draco had moved over to another black wood door in the walls, guided by an arrow of Harry’s magic that would—Millicent hoped—lead them to the correct portal. “Unless you really want to stay here and spend some more time with the Unspeakables, then I suggest—“

Her voice clipped itself off at the look on her father’s face.

“Millicent,” said Adalrico softly. “Do not joke about this. Promise me that you will never joke.”

Millicent strove to swallow several times before she could. Then she whispered, “I promise it.”

Adalrico inclined his head in a fragile nod, then stood. He leaned on Elfrida as she led him towards the door, and that was the first time Millicent had ever seen *that* happen. The Stone and the Unspeakables might have given Adalrico back with the damage undone, but that was not the same as healing it, and Merlin knew what he had seen and felt along with suffered.

And he had come through alive, and without a resentful glance towards Harry.

Could I have done as much?

Millicent did not know. She hadn’t had time to feel resentment towards Harry. She had followed Harry’s summons to the Ministry through the phoenix song communication spell when her father was taken, and then she had wanted him back, and then she had prepared to fight Unspeakables, and then she had fought birds instead, and then she had knelt beside her father. Emotions other than sheer determination had existed on the far side of *when I have him back*.

But now she had her father back, and he did not seem to blame Harry. He seemed to feel it was a reasonable price to pay for the alliance, and that because Harry had come and rescued him, that obliterated any blame that might arise from the fact that the Unspeakables had only taken him in the first place because he was Harry’s ally.

Could I have done as much?

And the thought repeated in her head, and repeated, like the roar of surf, because someday her father would be dead, and she needed to stand at Harry’s side, and she did not know whether she could maintain that kind of blameless trust in a powerful wizard—that kind of trust in the mechanics of power, for that matter, which accepted the risks of becoming strong enough to attract attention.

But she had the feeling that she would need to learn to do so, because neither the commitment nor the danger was going away.

Millicent slid the wand back into the holster on the side of her belt and followed her parents.

Rufus was waiting for them.

He hadn't gone with them, of course. What might happen in the Department of Mysteries was too strange to fathom, and on the off chance that it killed Harry, Rufus had needed to remain above in the Ministry and prepare for the worst. If he had gone down and been killed—

Rufus shook his head. He did not know who would have been Minister. Amelia Bones's run of power was done. Some members of the Wizengamot might jostle each other for the Minister's office, but Rufus personally thought Elder Juniper was the most likely to win. And given the delicate state of affairs between the Ministry and the werewolves, and Juniper's dislike of them, that might have been disastrous.

It was not the first time he had had to stay behind and think of life and the future while people he valued went to face death in the present. But perhaps he had never been so glad as he was now to see those people come back into the light, not unharmed, not safe, but alive.

He held out his hand on instinct when Harry stepped out of the lift into the Atrium. Harry gave him a quick glad glance, and clasped it back. Rufus narrowed his eyes at the thrum of power through his palm.

He has grown stronger again.

It would mean many dangerous things for the Ministry, but not as many dangerous things as an Unspeakable victory would have meant, or an illusion of the Stone advancing with slow majesty up the corridors. Rufus would have accepted the growth of Harry's magic for that reason alone.

And he could accept it for another reason, he thought, as he turned to welcome his Aurors back into the Ministry and congratulate them on their courage—disgruntled though some of them looked. The part of him that wanted to follow Harry was howling like a hound on the scent of blood. Harry had defied those who insisted that a powerful sixteen-year-old would destroy the wizarding world. He had done things that Rufus was not sure Albus Dumbledore in the height of his power could have done.

Rufus had felt the blast of magic that soared up through the Ministry. It could have meant so many things, including that Harry had simply grown tired of the way the wizarding world worked and decided to claim it.

And yet, he had not only not done so, he looked more interested in chivvying his allies out of the lifts than demanding a parade and concessions from Rufus.

Just as he thought that, Harry glanced over his shoulder and locked eyes with him. "I do trust that Pharos Starrise will be arrested and tried before the Wizengamot?" he asked, in the tone of a gentle suggestion.

"He freely admitted conspiracy with the Unspeakables," Rufus told him. "At the least there will be a trial."

Harry nodded, and turned away. Adalrico Bulstrode himself was coming out of the lift now, leaning on the arms of his wife and daughter. He stumbled. For a moment, Rufus caught a glimpse of the Dark Mark under his sleeve.

We have all changed.

Some of us more than others.

He sent the returned Aurors, quietly, to Pharos's cell, to inform him that he was under arrest. He paused, then also told them to tell him his victim had come back alive. The Auror he told that to, Emily Frogswallow, widened her eyes in delight that was almost unholy.

"And that doesn't fall under the definition of torture, sir?" she asked, as if hoping that it would, but also aware that Rufus wouldn't allow her to say anything if it did qualify.

"It falls under the definition of getting what he deserves," said Rufus.

Frogswallow practically curtsied and danced away up the hall, arguing with her partner about who would get to tell Starrise the truth.

Rufus smiled tightly, and faced Harry. “I need to speak with you about the political situation with the Stone and the Unspeakables,” he murmured.

“Of course, sir.” Harry took a few more moments to talk with Adalrico, evidently determining whether there was anything he needed, and then joined Rufus. They made the journey to his office in silence.

Harry smiled a bit and settled back in the chair Scrimgeour had given him. He was not sure which felt better: the push of the cloth against his shoulders, or the fact that Snape and Draco were back beside him, where they belonged. He had missed them more than he realized in the dream-world of Dark and Light and the paths. “Ah, but, sir, you don’t quite understand. This isn’t entirely a political situation. It’s also a magical one. The Stone is fascinated with me. It saw the prophecies that surround me, and the way I contended with Falco. It wants to watch me.”

Scrimgeour tapped his fingers on the desk. “Like a hybrid in a glass cage.”

“Well, rather, sir.” Harry shrugged and shifted position. He’d taken a hard knock on one shoulder from a falling piece of magic, or perhaps simply from the strain of channeling so much power through his body. Draco’s hand descended and massaged it. Harry allowed himself to think for one longing moment about what he would like to have Draco do once they were back in bed, then hastily reminded himself that he was in front of the Minister, and certain reactions were inappropriate. “But for that very reason, I think it’s actually more likely to keep its promises than a human in the same situation. It’s a—a version of a research wizard who doesn’t have a family or eating or sleeping or political enemies to distract him from his goals. It will watch me and be tempted to do almost nothing else, I think. It was enthralled with me. I wasn’t just the passing entertainment of a moment. And as long as it maintains its interest, then I won’t be in danger from it, nor my allies, nor the Ministry—and hopefully not the rest of the wizarding world.”

“Must you be a sacrifice, again?”

Harry blinked for a long moment before he realized what the Minister was talking about. “I don’t consider interesting the Stone in me a sacrifice, sir,” he said, with a small smile. “It’s passive, after all. And I did what I had to do in the Department of Mysteries. Anyone else in my place and with my power and with my mindset would have done as much.”

Scrimgeour opened his mouth as if to ask a question, then shook his head and let the words die unborn. “And what will happen if the Unspeakables and the Stone do slip out of control again?”

“Summon me.” Harry shrugged. “There are other things about me the Stone never mentioned knowing. I think I can raise a mystery that will make it interested again, and that makes it abandon its games for the game of watching.”

Scrimgeour sighed. “So nothing is settled.”

“Nothing directly, sir. It may still break its promises. But it may also be more faithful than any human. And even humans can break oaths, or act against common sense,” Harry added, thinking of Lucius, thinking of Pharos. “We will have to wait and see what it does.”

Scrimgeour nodded, as if he didn’t like it but couldn’t think of anything better. “You realize that some Light wizards may take the opportunity to act against you?” he asked, eyeing Harry. “For poisoning the mind of the scion of a noble and ancient family, or whatever other grievance they can dream up? Not because they believe it, but because they believe their political power may be lessened by this?”

Harry laughed. “I should be used to people creating accusations out of thin air about me, sir. This time, though, I mean to give the accusations weight. I will tell whoever asks that Pharos Starrise’s means of taking vengeance were foul and ridiculous. The ritual his uncle used should have settled the debt between the two families, as it was meant to. At the least, Pharos could have challenged Adalrico to a formal duel, instead of giving him into the custody of men and women who are enemies of all sane in the wizarding world. The Light’s honor has broken. They won’t get far by pressing against me.” He sat up a little straighter. “And I mean to break the monitoring board.”

“Do you.” Scrimgeour’s voice was neutral.

Harry gave him a direct look. “Yes. They’ve given me what they can. I haven’t turned on them and snapped at them. Anyone who wants to listen knows that our few meetings have been riven by factionalism on both sides, not my refusing to listen to their reasonable recommendations and running off on my own, like the child they pretend I am. And I don’t really think the Wizengamot would end Gloriana Griffinsnest’s trial now, would they?”

Scrimgeour slowly shook his head. “No. We’ve questioned her, and she’s admitted to a few unsolved murders of werewolves as well as to Claudia’s. So she must be tried, if not convicted.”

“Good.” Harry stretched his arms above his head and gave a little shake. “I’m going to do what I should have done in the first place: talk to my Light allies about making Light wizards trust me and giving them a voice in Dark-dominated politics. Not the monitoring board. Not anymore.”

“You do realize—“ And Scrimgeour flushed, and stopped.

“Sir?”

Scrimgeour appeared to hold a private argument with himself. Harry leaned forward, attentive.

“I wish,” said Scrimgeour at last, his tone striving for dignified and not making it, “to be there when you talk to Aurora Whitestag and tell her about the dissolution of the monitoring board.”

Grinning, Harry stood and extended his hand. He noticed only a moment later that it was his silver one, but he didn’t take it back. He would make the cold metal flesh in the end. “Come with me then, sir. We don’t have far to walk.”

Scrimgeour’s hand touched his. Harry knew that only by sight, since he couldn’t feel anything through the silver yet. But that would change. He would make sure that would change.

And, really, seeing the expression on Aurora’s face ought to be enough to make up for a disappointment in the matter of his metallic hand. If some things were not yet right in the world, a good many other things were.

Aurora had felt the shifting of magic, as though one foundation stone had just replaced another at the root of the world. She was wary, and she did not scurry home as the others had. Still she sat in the small room just inside the Atrium, hands clasped in her lap, and waited. Griselda Marchbanks sat with her.

She half-started when the door opened and Harry stepped inside. He had a windblown look about his features, as if he had run across the tops of a cliff and let the desert touch him. The look he turned on her was cool and remote. As Snape and young Malfoy and even the Minister crowded inside, Aurora couldn’t take her eyes away, couldn’t see who else he had brought to witness her humiliation. She knew the words he would speak before he spoke them.

“The monitoring board is dissolved,” he said.

And she had to pull herself together, and fling into the teeth of that uncaring coolness: “Why?”

“I need it no longer,” said Harry, with a slight shrug. “And it did me more harm than good, and next to nothing to secure political power for Light wizards.” He paused, and, for some reason, stared over his shoulder at his Malfoy before he turned back to her. “And, technically, it was illegal in the first place. The Ministry doesn’t deal that way with Lord-level wizards.”

“Laws can be changed.” Aurora did not look away, did not weep. “And you were the one who offered the compromise, Harry.”

“Didn’t know the laws then.” He looked utterly unapologetic, despite the self-condemnation in his tone. “Should have. And since then, people who have always cared for me and protected me looked them up, and told me this was illegal. So. There’s no reason to maintain it any more.”

“You are still very young,” Aurora said softly.

“And I’ve always survived with help from friends,” said Harry. He leaned back against Draco Malfoy, a blatant gesture of disrespect, considering that Draco was so much younger than Aurora, and had no political standing of his own. His smirk widened when the Malfoy boy stroked his shoulder, as if he didn’t know or could not see the implications of the gesture marking him as a pet. “I don’t think I need an entire monitoring board half-composed of enemies helping me. It’s a waste of your very valuable

time and attention that could be better turned elsewhere.”

Aurora lowered her eyes, and gave a slow nod. She had felt that burst of magic. She knew, from the exultation on Madam Marchbanks’s face, that the rest of the wizarding world already on Harry’s side was apt to think of this as part of his vates duties, and that others would swing towards him. Harry did command Light families who could stir the loyalties of others. Opalline might be despised for not participating in wars, but they could summon allies and pull strings that no one else could. Gloryflower had soared back into prominence with Laura Gloryflower’s intention of protecting her werewolf niece. Marchbanks followed him now. There would be others who would be glad to take Aurora’s place even if the monitoring board continued to exist, and Harry would welcome them as his friends.

That they would be his friends, and therefore less likely to criticize him and teach him that there were limitations even to magic, would seem irrelevant to both Harry and those who might replace her.

Aurora raised her eyes to Harry’s face as slowly as she had lowered them. She had never found out what had changed his soul, but she knew now it had been the death knell for her ambitions. She could never hope to gain the advantage over him that she had wanted, never hope to put the leash around his neck that she had been convinced had to go there, for the good of the world. And that would remain true even if they patched up their differences and he accepted her as a friend someday. He was not in the mood to listen to advisers now. He would meet them, at best, on an equal footing.

And he was not interested in the words of a woman who had had two of her children destroyed by him. That much was plain. Aurora wondered if he remembered Heloise and Abelard’s names.

She would retreat. She could not win, and so she would not destroy herself trying. She would retire gracefully from the field. She would help the Light achieve what prominence it could in Britain, because the Dark was either mad or intent on following a sixteen-year-old. She would dance as much as she could in the unoccupied areas, not engaging with Harry.

And if what she feared happened and all the great dream came tumbling down, she would attempt to fight and preserve what she could, instead of dooming it all to die with Harry because she had trusted him too much with its protection.

“Thank you for explaining, *vates*,” she said. “I will leave now. You know my name, if you should decide that you wish to ask for my help.”

She saw the Minister’s face freeze from the corner of his eye. Aurora laughed, but only inside, and it was a tired and bitter laugh. Had he expected her to crumple? She saw no reason to do so. If her grief had been overwhelming, she would have, but she was tired of such a long and pointless struggle that would only end up raising another Lord. Britain had chosen to follow magical power instead of wisdom. Let them deal with it. It might even work out well for them.

She saw Draco Malfoy’s eyes narrow as if studying her, and Severus Snape lean forward like a hound on the scent. Aurora avoided his gaze. She had begun studying Occlumency since that first disastrous meeting, but she did not think her barriers could stand up to his probing, yet.

Instead, she looked at Harry, interested, even now, to see how he took this.

She found his eyes peering back at her with bright, piercing confidence, the confidence of a hawk who would not believe he could not strike the target. Aurora concealed her pity behind a nod and a smile, and walked past him.

Lucius leaned back and closed his eyes.

Narcissa had written him a letter describing the events in the Ministry. It was a short letter, and listed only points of action, without telling what she felt about them, or what Draco felt. She probably assumed he could imagine what they thought.

There was one exception to that: the last sentence.

Do you not wish, now, that you had kept your loyalty to a man who would rescue you if the Unspeakables ever captured you?

“Ah, Narcissa,” Lucius whispered to the fire, and stood. “If you understood that I have more to fear from Harry capturing me.”

He accepted the truth, now. He was alone. He had hoped to work his way back into Harry’s good graces by careful handling. He had hoped that with enough time and enough obedient behavior—and a commitment to that obedient behavior—Harry might

want him as an ally again. And he had believed that such a thing might work. Slowly, slowly, the new path dropped into place exceeding fine.

His last hope had always been that, if Harry did discover what he had done, he might pause, hesitate, forgive—for Draco's sake if not Lucius's.

But now that hope had flashed into flames, too. The Harry who had come forth from the Department of Mysteries, who had killed without flinching, might, possibly, forgive, but Lucius would not trust his life to chance.

It was time to consider plans of self-preservation, plans of making sure that he could survive Harry's wrath when it appeared, not plans that were geared towards keeping him from ever discovering Lucius's secrets. Lucius was a master at these. They had served him well when the Dark Lord fell. Those like Bellatrix, who had believed he would never fall, had been caught alive in the trap of their own assumptions. Lucius did not intend to be.

It was time for plans of escape.

Hawthorn scattered some more dust into the potion, then, with a curse, cast a stabilizing spell on the cauldron and stepped away with a deep half-cry. She could not concentrate on even a possible cure for lycanthropy right now, when so many thoughts were brewing around in her head.

She stalked to the window from which she could see her garden. The memorial of pansies, hawthorn, and dragonsbane usually calmed her.

Today, it only made her think of how Indigena Yaxley had come to her garden, summoned Connor Potter there—Hawthorn believed it was ultimately her summoning, and not Rosier's—and taunted her with her life. And she had not taunted Hawthorn with memories of Pansy's death, either. She barely seemed to remember what they were to each other. She had gone on living her life when Pansy died, in spite of the curses that had almost killed her.

And now there seemed to be next to no way of killing her, if all of Hawthorn's curses had bounced off.

She reached out and murmured a spell that grew her fingernails into spikes, sufficiently sharp and thin to be different from werewolf claws. She drew them down the glass of the window, carving long, parallel patterns that shrieked the air apart.

Hawthorn could not allow Pansy's killer to live. At the same time, she knew Harry would not take vengeance on her, and that seemed to be the one sure method of making her die. And an execution held no appeal for her. She wanted Indigena to die from vengeance, not justice.

Most of the time, she could give up vengeance. She had done so for Claudia, though that wound still pulled at her like the loss of a limb, sometimes. She had done so for Fergus Opalline, dead in battle. She had done so for Dragonsbane; he went to his death willingly, and she had known.

But for Pansy...

Let me have this. Let me have this one scarlet, blood-soaked, screaming thing.

And she would not rely on curses in battle again. Harry had accepted that because she had done it in hot blood. But that was no way of insuring Indigena Yaxley's death. Hawthorn had to do it slowly, in cold blood, had to stand over her enemy's body and make sure it no longer breathed or spoke or grew.

She wanted that.

And she was unsure if she could achieve that.

She stood there, silent now, save for the noise as she drew frost-patterns on the glass, over and over again.

There was an old ritual that should have answered.

Adalrico thought of the ritual as he sat in front of the fire, his hand stretched out towards the heat. He was not trying to grip anything with it yet. Millicent and Elfrida had cast healing spells on it until he told them to stop. Marian was currently curled in his lap, asleep, the only company he could tolerate because she did not know or comprehend what had happened to her father.

There was an old ritual that would have been inflicted on anyone who tried to take vengeance when a feud was settled. It would have let Adalrico summon Augustus's ghost and confront him with Pharos's actions. He would have been horrified, and he would have turned his back on his nephew, condemning them to meet no more. Adalrico knew it. Starrise had been a stubborn old bastard, but he had been, every inch, a child of the Light pureblood rituals. Invoking revenge when it should have been done with was a violation of those rituals, and turning to help outside the family made it doubly vile.

He lifted his hand and flexed the fingers. As Harry had said, it was Transfigured flesh. He could use the hand again, someday, perhaps as soon as a month from now. He could do a great many things, actually. But he would still have the memory of the acid wringing the muscle and the magic from the bone.

There was an old ritual he should have been able to use on Pharos Starrise, instead of turning him over to the Ministry's justice.

Adalrico Bulstrode sat before the fire, and the desire for vengeance stirred in him with a bright and high and deadly song.

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Intermission: Among the Nightshade and Belladonna

"And does he yet suspect you?"

Snape could not help a smile. He kept his face lowered, so that the other Death Eaters would not see it, but his Lord would know it was there. And he would forgive Snape for it, when he heard what Snape had to say.

"No, my lord," he murmured. "I managed to convince him that I disappeared on the night of your return to save the Potter brat, and arrived only a moment too late. He did not take that well, but I gave him no hook to hang his suspicions on. His Legilimency is not as great as your own." He was offering flattery, but only if Voldemort truly wanted to look for flattery. He *was* better at Legilimency than Dumbledore had ever been. Part of what it required was a will dedicated to dominating other minds, to finding out their secrets. And Dumbledore, fool that he was when he could have been great, still held himself back from that desire. It had grown worse since Harry died on the altar-stone in the graveyard, and Remus Lupin had followed him. It was as if he believed that no evil would happen in the wizarding world if he did no evil.

Snape entertained the vision of Dumbledore stepping aside when the Dark Lord walked into the school, because he could think of nothing else to do. That was easily enough to put him on the verge of chuckling.

"And your other absences, my dear Severus?" One cold white hand came down and cupped his cheek, and Voldemort's power sang around him, treading the ground with a heavy step that made the Death Eaters standing on their feet sway. Snape did not pretend to understand all the complexities of that magic any more than he pretended to understand the whole of the Dark Arts, but from what he knew, some of the Potter brat's power had been wound with his Lord's own. Not until Harry had died had that magic returned home to his Lord.

"He believes I am still spying for him and the Order of the Phoenix, my lord," he murmured.

Voldemort laughed, and most of the other Death Eaters in the room laughed with him. Snape did not. For one thing, it was not a joke they understood, nor had any right to, and he did not share his amusements with lesser mortals.

He listened carefully to the peals of laughter, though, picking among them. Bellatrix was only laughing because it was her Lord, and she did what he did. Lucius was laughing because he had judged the moment was opportune to do so. Like Snape, he had broken and returned to the fold after all, now that he knew Harry was dead and there was no one to protect him against his Lord's rage. After maiming him permanently and claiming one night with Narcissa, Voldemort had decided his debt was paid sufficiently to let him back into the Death Eaters, but Lucius was always at the forefront of attacks now, and had to do what he could to curry favor with the others.

Walden Macnair's laugh was not as assured. Snape kept his face blank as he knelt there, and never glanced in Macnair's direction.

The man was the most likely to betray them of any of Voldemort's servants, he thought. He was a coward, of late, as if his joy at killing dangerous magical beasts for thirteen years had somehow translated itself into a reluctance to kill humans. And he

sometimes listened with a slightly open mouth to Snape's descriptions of the Order of the Phoenix, and with wide and shining eyes.

I will be watching him.

"Describe Connor Potter," said Voldemort suddenly, stopping his laugh and leaving the other Death Eaters floundering. "What have they done with him, now that his brother is dead?"

"Put him into training, my lord, behind privacy wards that only his parents have the keys to," Snape murmured. "They believe that he must meet you and fight you soon, and that he is unprepared."

"Of course he is," said the Dark Lord. "I killed his brother, the true Boy-Who-Lived." He paused. "Do not think I have forgotten what you did for me, Severus, or the last bit of true pleasure I received from the boy's death."

Snape smiled. For a moment, as he had stooped over Harry, he had pretended this had all been a ploy, Lupin a necessary sacrifice, and he had been going to rescue Harry and take him home. He had waited to see the hope shine, and then he had withered it when he took the disemboweling knife from his Lord's hand.

"I wish you to discover the secret of these wards, Severus, and bring the Potter boy to me," said the Dark Lord.

Snape had known that would be his mission. He could have protested, said that Dumbledore would never trust him, but he knew that made no difference. He must *make* Dumbledore trust him again, and get around the fool's desires to see Snape as somehow responsible for Harry's death.

He was, of course. He sat in the same room with the parents of the boy he had helped kill and they stared at him with resentment, but not the hatred they would have to express if they knew. It amused him enormously. Snape was enjoying this form of revenge on James Potter more than he had ever thought he would.

"Of course, my Lord," he murmured, and made to stand.

"A moment, Severus."

Snape knelt back down at once, and stayed there in silence as the Dark Lord sent all the other Death Eaters away. They were in the Riddle house, a rather obvious meeting place. But Snape had convinced Dumbledore that the Dark Lord hated his Muggle ancestors so much he would never use their home for either a meeting or a hiding place, and subtle Dark magic helped to reinforce that impression the one time the Order of the Phoenix came to search it. Lily Potter had walked right through a room where Nagini lay curled on a pillow watching her. Laughter roared in Snape's throat at the thought.

"I have an unusual request for you," Voldemort continued when they were alone.

"My lord?"

For a moment, that pale hand came out and caressed his face again. Then it caught his chin, and tilted it up. Snape went obediently with it. The Dark Lord spread out his Legilimency, and Snape opened his barriers wide before it. He had no secrets from this man he had served so faithfully for nearly twenty years.

The Dark Lord moved through his mind like a mist with fangs, then nodded and stepped out of it. "You still think of yourself by your last name," he said. "I would like you to begin to think of yourself by your first."

Snape nodded. Of course he would do so, and not ask why, if his Lord did not want him to ask why—

"You wish to know why, Severus." He was amused. Of course he was. Snape could feel his Lord's magic breathing over his skin like the cool wind from the lungs of some ice dragon.

"I do, my lord."

"And I do not yet wish to tell you." The gentle, caressing hand on his throat turned sharp as barbs. When he wished, the Dark Lord could use wandless magic to grow claws that rivaled any werewolf's. "You will know when I deem you ready to know, Severus."

"Of course, my Lord." And then he rose to his feet and Apparated, because he could feel the push in his mind for him to do so.

Voldemort's eyes were on his back the whole time, like burning coals, like watching werewolves.

“Severus! Come in, my boy.”

Snape had no sneer on his lips when he came into the office of Albus Dumbledore, because he never did. He bowed and took his place across the desk from him, holding a shadow of sympathy in his face. He was thinking how different it was when Albus called him by his first name than when the Dark Lord did so. Voldemort, of course, knew his life, as he knew the lives of all his Death Eaters, and knew why he didn't like the name. To Albus Dumbledore, the informality it allowed him mattered far more than what Snape wanted to be called.

“What did you learn?” The man had offered him nothing to either eat or drink before he began, showing just how anxious he was.

Snape began his entirely contrived report, which attributed motives to Death Eaters they did not have and prompted the Order of the Phoenix to watch for attacks that would never happen, his eyes not moving from Albus Dumbledore's face in the meanwhile. The man was pathetic. The news of Harry's death, and thus the breaking of the prophecy, had broken him. Now they were searching frantically for someone to be the “elder” to Connor Potter. So far, Snape knew, they had found no one. Two good candidates had mysteriously died in their sleep.

Albus nodded at every third word he said, his eyes filled with old shadows. Snape felt bile like acid creep up his throat.

Merlin, how he hated this man.

He had wanted to use him to steer a path through the darkness, to show Snape his own soul. Instead, Albus had assumed that he had simply “won” Snape back from the darkness, and paraded him as a prize before the other members of the Order of the Phoenix. And, of course, he had briefly allowed Snape to go to Azkaban, simply so that he could reward his “true” allegiance later when he testified that Snape had been their loyal spy all along.

A month with Dementors, because Albus Dumbledore wanted to make himself seem more heroic.

And, on top of that, he would not use his power. At one point, he could have prevented Tom Riddle's rise. At one point, he could have made Harry Potter into the weapon that would have stopped the Dark Lord's second rise. And he had refused, and hesitated, and hid behind prophecies, and refused.

It was no wonder that Snape preferred to serve another master. It was no wonder that he wanted revenge on Albus Dumbledore—revenge hot as a knife, cold as the hand of an Inferius, sweet as clustered honey on the tongue.

Snape slowly opened his eyes. Another dream, and it tattered and flew across his mind like clouds across the moon. He thought he had been dreaming about Albus, but that was not unusual. The man still appeared in his thoughts, both past and present.

Nothing hurt this time; he had finally learned to sleep with his arms neatly folded on his chest again, instead of tangling himself in the blankets as he thrashed from a memory he had no wish to relive. He stood, and paced across the room to check on his purple poison. He had mostly made it as deadly as he could, and now amused himself with seeing how painful he might make it.

In the end, he thought it would be very painful, and would kill just quickly enough to give the person who ingested it hope that she could be saved.

Snape sighed as he cast yet another stabilizing spell on the cauldron. There were times he dearly wished Remus Lupin were here.

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Interlude: The Liberator's Seventh Letter

February 17th, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Please forgive me for not writing in so long. It took me a long time to understand what had happened to me, and even longer to realize to what use it can be put. So. I will commit these words to parchment now, while my family is looking for political

opportunities for the Light and not paying as much attention to me.

I began having strange dreams about Falco not long after I wrote my last letter to you. I put it down to nightmares at first, then to anxiety and worries. But soon I was dreaming of things I had never seen, and will never see, as I am a witch of only moderate power. He walked the paths of Dark and Light, and learned the disciplines of necromancy in a way that made me uneasy. He did not intend to commit to being a necromancer, but he is learning of death. And he is studying what Lord Voldemort did in his first rise, and his abbreviated second.

I fear that he is trying to become a Dark Lord. Why he should have changed his allegiance so spectacularly is still open to speculation. He speaks in the dreams, and I hear him, but I cannot read his mind.

I was at a loss, at first, how I came by this information. Then I realized that I had a scar on my hand that I did not remember having. I had paid no attention to it at first, since I often wake with scars that I do not remember having when I went to sleep, but this one throbbed when I dreamed of Falco.

I confronted my mother. She looked away from me, but at last she admitted that I had the scar from grasping at a mirror.

A mirror! The time I spent with the glass in which my parents could see Falco has affected me, I think. Why, who can say? My parents and my siblings are all more powerful than I am. Perhaps the glass connected with me as the weakest of the family. Perhaps it sensed my intense interest in Falco and grafted on to that. Perhaps it reacted to the less-than-perfect devotion to the Light I can sometimes feel in myself.

Whatever its reason, I have a connection to Falco through the dreams.

From these dreams, I can tell you that:

He is studying Lord Voldemort's tactics so closely that he may imitate them. I beg you, Minister, listen closely for reports of new Death Eaters, even if the reports seem false and self-contradictory at first.

He no longer appears as interested in the magic of time as he once was. He is now more fascinated with the magic of death. He has wrested secrets that only trained necromancers usually know, including the knowledge of raising spirits and sending them to possess the minds of the living.

He visits the coasts and other waterways in Britain often.

He does not understand the wild Dark. He often communes with it as if it were a pet, or a deeply stupid child. I am not sure if this can be used against him, since he seems intent on Declaring to the Dark anyway, but it may help.

I will pass on more information as it becomes certain, Minister. May the shadows shelter you.

Yours,
The Liberator.

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Chapter Sixty-Eight: The Advantages of Research

"I did think of one, Harry."

Harry jumped and glanced up from writing the letter to Tony Flotsam, a Muggleborn wizard who'd asked for more information on house elves. By an effort of will, he didn't scatter ink across the parchment, but it was only by an effort of will. "Peter? You thought of another time when my parents defied Dumbledore?" He put the ink and parchment carefully on the table, and glanced towards the front of the library. Madam Pince was scolding two third-year Hufflepuffs for throwing books at each other, luckily, and couldn't overhear them, but Harry cast a privacy ward around the table anyway. "Did it have to do with the ethics of sacrifice?"

Peter took a chair and nodded. "It did."

Harry studied him in concern. His voice drooped, and so did his face, pasty white and with nasty dark circles standing out from beneath his eyes. "Peter, are you all right? Have you been sleeping well?"

A moment passed during which Peter seemed to be trying to decide what he wanted to say. In the end, he gave Harry no more than another nod. “Yes.” He sat up. “The memory came back to me when I was trying to remember Defense Against the Dark Arts spells we’d studied in *our* sixth year that might be appropriate for my class. James had a certain—power in the Dark Arts, you know. They fascinated him. I think that was why he broke when he realized that he’d used an Unforgivable on someone else for ten minutes and enjoyed it.”

Peter’s voice was full of shards of memories, and Harry didn’t particularly want to linger on James’s torture of the Lestranges. He nodded, to encourage him along.

“He didn’t have as much of a problem with the Dark Arts in school as he did later, when he’d seen them used in the war,” Peter continued, musing. “He found a spell that would target purebloods.”

Harry frowned. “How?” Thomas’s research had shown that even pureblood families often produced wizards and witches of considerably lesser power than they ought to have done, if purity of blood guaranteed that magic was more likely to choose them—which it wasn’t, but which was what most of the European families had believed for years.

“It worked on belief,” said Peter. “It would attack someone who wasn’t a pureblood by birth but *believed* he was. Or someone who knew the pureblood customs and worked to make himself fit in, like you.”

I suppose some spells could work like that. Harry had rarely studied them. Magics of the minds, and visions, and actual spells that would work on the bodies of enemies, had been more of interest to him. “And did he use it?”

Peter shook his head. “He was more fascinated with the theory behind it than what it did. All it would have done was give someone stinging boils. So he read more in the book where he’d discovered it, and then more books. And he brought the books to Lily and showed them to her. She was tempted. She had infused so many of Dumbledore’s beliefs by that point that she was ready to fight in the First War. But she hadn’t yet come to think, the way she did later, that she had to use only Light spells or she was damned. So she was willing to wield Dark Arts against her enemies.”

Harry nodded. He could see how such a willingness would have been a violation of both the ethics Dumbledore taught his mother and the kind Falco believed in. One didn’t have to Declare Light, since the Light needed enemies to struggle against, but one couldn’t hang in between and use both kinds of magic. Harry sometimes thought that was what irritated Falco most about him, other than his sheer ability to change the wizarding world. “And did they use them?”

“On a few birds we captured.” Peter grimaced. “Curses that would have got them expelled if any of us betrayed them. None of us did, of course. We were all fascinated—all but Remus, but I think you know that. And Sirius showed us some of what his compulsive power could do. He took control of James’s body and marched him around like a puppet. It exhausted him, but he was competing with James, wanting to show that he could do everything James could.

“*That* panicked James. He burned the books and, I think, paid the library for them. And he declared that he wasn’t going to use Dark magic ever again. Lily followed him; I think he convinced her that time, or she thought about it and decided that a Light witch had no need for those kinds of spells.” A shadow passed over Peter’s face. “Of course, she would use spells that violated the ancient definitions of Light, like free will, if the spell was *technically* Light.”

“The phoenix web,” murmured Harry, thinking how much easier his life would have been if his mother *were* a bit more technical and exacting in her definitions.

Peter nodded.

Harry sighed the temptation to wallow in self-pity away. He had dealt with his past as well as he was ever going to deal with it. Its major value now was how it could help him in the war, and learning that his parents had defied Dumbledore, and Falco through him, at least two times moved them closer to being the first two Dark Lords in the prophecy. “Thank you, Peter. Please let me know if you remember any other major defiances.”

Peter nodded and stood, yawning.

“And get some sleep!” Harry called as he walked towards the door of the library. He turned back to his letter to Flotsam, concealing a yawn of his own. He should probably feel like a hypocrite, he knew, dispensing advice to Peter he wasn’t disposed to take himself. In this case, though, he’d been up late turning the advice Joseph had given him about the Unspeakables over in his mind. Harry had gone to him almost the moment he’d come back from the Department of Mysteries, wanting to know if Joseph thought what he had done, killing people and draining their magic in order to break the Stone, was right.

Joseph's gentle questions, as usual, had led him down the right path.

If you had the situation to face over again, would you do it, Harry?

Harry had hesitated, but nodded. "I'd like to find some second road, but I don't think there's a second road to take. The Stone values its servants. It doesn't value much of anything else except what I'm unwilling to give up, like my magic, and werewolves to perform its experiments on, and my allies to drain for their magical power."

What would you want done, if you were in the position of having a family member drained and killed by an enemy?

"I'd want to know why it happened. What motive he had for doing it. If his reasons were good ones." Harry stared at his clasped hands. The silver one felt too cool against his flesh one, even now, but small sparkling trails of warmth moved up it.

Perhaps you should talk to Dionysus Hornblower, then. He may know how much contact Unspeakables still have with their families. Perhaps the Stone forbids them to meet a sibling or parent again when they swear to it, but perhaps not. In fact, learning more about these enemies in general would serve you well.

Harry knew Joseph had been speaking of what might happen should the Stone decide to interfere in the war again. He, though, had considered it a valuable reminder of what the human cost of war might be.

He rubbed at his eyes and picked up the quill. He'd finish the letter, work on his Defense Against the Dark Arts homework for an hour, and then spend an hour on Horcruxes. And then he could go back to their bedroom, and Draco. The thought of that made him smile.

I'm living, I think. At least, I'm trying.

"Zacharias. You wanted to speak with me?"

Had it not been unwise to do so, Zacharias would have smiled. His mother's voice sounded so much like Hermione's. But he knew neither woman would appreciate the comparison, so he would not give offense.

Even though you are about to give offense in another way, far more deeply.

He shook those thoughts aside and sat up. "Yes, Mother." Miriam Smith's face floated in the green flames of the fireplace in the Hufflepuff common room. As Zacharias was of age by his family's standards, he'd been allowed to use a privacy spell so that others could see him but not hear what he was saying. He felt some curious glances on the back of his neck now, especially from Susan Bones, who appeared more interested in the politics of the wizarding world than Zacharias had ever seen her.

He let out a slow breath. He didn't need to be thinking of Susan right now. He needed to be thinking of his mother, and Hermione.

"What about?" Miriam asked a moment later. Zacharias concealed his start well, he hoped. It had been his intention to wait and draw his mother out, but he hadn't done it consciously, not this time. He'd simply let his thoughts distract him to the point where he hadn't paid attention to the workings of her face.

It could be fatal, he thought, eyes locked on the impatient lines around his mother's mouth, *to do that again.*

"Something political," he responded. "Something important. Unless you're doing something more important still, Mother, and then I am sorry to have disturbed you and shall wait respectfully until you contact me to speak to you again."

Miriam studied him in silence. Zacharias could feel the balance weighing and tipping in her mind. She was currently engaged in trying to make sure that those Light purebloods who opposed the Grand Unified Theory still had a voice in the Ministry. She would not want to be taken away from it, and she would doubt whether her son's preoccupations concerned anything more important than that.

But, on the other hand, Zacharias was not in the habit of contacting her on a whim.

She nodded, and Zacharias could almost hear her deciding that she would grant him a few minutes of speech. "What is it?"

All his graceful words deserted him. He had planned a few metaphors, vague mountain passes by which he might approach the

subject, and now it was upon him, and he could do nothing but gesture towards it.

Unless he walked the direct path.

The direct path would not have annoyed Hermione. She would have thanked him, probably, for saying what was on his mind without prevarication. But his mother and Hermione were two very different people on the surface, however deep the similarities might run.

“Zacharias?”

And he was taken off guard again. That was a grave enough sin for him to *deserve* whatever punishment his mother might think appropriate for a direct statement. So Zacharias spoke, without trying to clothe it in a sapphire-colored cloak.

“I believe the Grand Unified Theory is right, Mother.”

Miriam did not explode. That had never been her way, of course. Bursts of temper were like stars going supernova: all they did was produce a great deal of heat and light and die quickly. More was gained by waiting, by thinking, and by obeying standards of honor and coolness that the Light held dear.

Zacharias thought for a moment that the Dark held them dear, too, and then pushed the thought away. He was not to blame for what his ancestors had valued. The only thing he could affect, ultimately, was his own actions. He knew what would happen when he was announced as a believer in the Grand Unified Theory. Some Light purebloods would shun him, and his influence would lessen.

He had thought, and thought hard, in the last few weeks if announcing his beliefs was worth that. In the end, he could only conclude that it was. The last straw had been reading the words of Muggleborns on the subject, and the words of purebloods, and realizing that the Dark and Light wizards of old families sounded more like each other than the Light ones sounded like the Muggleborns who had come seeking sanctuary in their world.

Zacharias was Light. He was that before he was pureblood, or Hufflepuff, or a descendant of Helga Hufflepuff, or the heir of the Smith family. If he could only have kept those distinctions by doing something Dark, he would not have. And it disgusted him to think he might have more in common with Lucius Malfoy than Hermione.

“You must have received some convincing evidence,” his mother said at last. She had no emotion in her voice at all. That was a very bad sign. Still, Zacharias did not close his eyes.

“I did, Mother,” he said. Quiet, respectful, rolling with the blows, baring his belly and his throat to her if she wanted to tear them out. In the end, he was beyond her reach, just like Hermione was. The mistake of the Light purebloods lay in thinking this might go away if they clamored enough. And if it had been only a refutation of the old pureblood ways and rituals, then it might have. But this was proof positive, a statement of existence and not refusal of existence. Zacharias did not think anything was going to make it go away. Murder the wizards who believed in it and burn their books, and still someone would do the research. It would rise again. The facts existed whether anyone cared to believe in them.

“Of what kind?”

“I read the books.”

“And what did they show you?”

Zacharias spread his hands. “That our most basic and most primal attitudes are right, had we listened to their wording,” he said calmly. “That it is *magic* that matters, not blood and not birth and not wealth. Once, we used that to justify poor pureblood families climbing to the ranks of the great, as long as a sufficiently powerful head guided them. And it was used to excuse the actions of the son or daughter of a poor parent.” Miriam’s eyes narrowed. Zacharias wondered what tones and inflections she had heard in those particular words. He hoped they were the ones he had meant to put there. “They had their magic, and their magic should shine unclouded, not dimmed by the stupid or thoughtless decision of a weaker mother. Or father.”

“And, Zacharias?”

“Hermione is very strong,” said Zacharias thoughtfully. “So is Hannah Abbott, a Muggleborn student in my House. And some others, like Justin, whom you’ve met, aren’t that strong, but they can recognize power, and follow it because they know that magic so pure has a claim on them that no other allegiance can. They fought for Harry in the Midsummer battle, Mother, just as

we did. The difference lies in that they didn't need rituals to convince them, or alliances. They have native honor, native recognition of magic. They have to, since magic is the only bond that brings many of them into the wizarding world at all; otherwise, they would live out their lives in ignorance of its existence. I have to admire their courage, Mother, riding a ship into uncharted waters. I don't know that I could do it, be taken from everything I've known and loved at the age of eleven and shown that I have one thing—just one thing—in common with many other people, but that a good portion of those other people would despise me for something else I had no control over, my birth.”

“There are many other things that matter in our world now,” said his mother. “You know this, Zacharias. Or we would simply have followed Dumbledore mindlessly, and Harry as mindlessly now.”

“But that's not what we *say*,” Zacharias insisted mildly. “We *say* that we're not prejudiced against Muggleborns, and that they're welcome among us, and that we would even marry them if they're strong enough.” He took a deep breath. “But you don't want me to marry Hermione, Mother, even though she's strong enough.”

“That is a consequence of her political attitudes, Zacharias, and not only her blood.”

“But her blood is part of it.”

His mother was silent.

Zacharias shook his head. “I think I need a wife like that, Mother. I would be *bored* in five years if I didn't have one. I might get along better with someone like Susan Bones, who's been raised to the duties of a pureblood wife and knows the pace of our rituals, but my life would be little more than dancing, of one kind or another. I am smarter than most of the people in the school, you know that. I want a challenge.”

“And when your *challenge* deserts you to run off with another man, or wakes you in the middle of the night with her arguing?”

“I'll be sure to keep Hermione away from intelligent Muggleborn men who support house elf rights,” said Zacharias, dryly. “And I would rather wake because of arguing than because of my political enemies attacking my home. With Hermione at my side, I'll see my enemies coming before they get that close.”

His mother sighed. “Take a few days to think about this, Zacharias. I believe you will change your mind.” And the flames flickered and vanished as she ended the firecall.

Zacharias shook his head and stood. Yes, perhaps if he had been childishly infatuated with Hermione, he would change his mind. But he had other, more practical reasons to marry her. Keeping himself from boredom for the next hundred and thirty years was a large part of that.

And what could he say? She had been right. He would be stupid to ignore that, and he was not stupid.

Indigena Apparated into being near her house, and then paused. There were lights in Thornhall where there should be none. Only her house elves were in the house, awaiting her return, and they did not need light, their large eyes seeing more clearly at night than ever humans' did.

She sped her steps as she moved forward. The thorns on her back slid out of their sheaths and twined restlessly in the air, looking for someone to stab. Indigena rubbed their bark, letting the bumps beneath her fingers soothe her rage, and then reached out and opened the door.

A lamp burned in the hall. Indigena saw no house elf near it. She paused, looking around, listening, the thorny rose on her wrist whose poison would kill in two minutes lifting its head. Its petals rustled as it sniffed for danger. Indigena could smell nothing, though, save a faint, warm scent that was like her own, if she had visited sometime in the last few days and moved through several rooms.

That made her narrow down her suspicions as to whom it could be, at least. There were only a few people who both smelled like her and were sufficiently powerful to get through the wards. But Indigena could not imagine why they would want to. She had gone to Voldemort, had fulfilled the honor debt that Yaxley had owed him because her nephew Feldspar had refused to return and join him. How dare they blame her now, if they were here to blame her?

With stiff steps, she walked into her study and stood there, regarding the woman in front of the bookshelves silently. She did not

look up, but Indigena had no doubt she was aware of her presence. Indigena was not the only one in the family to have made sacrifices in return for gifts, nor even the only one whose sacrifices had made her less than human.

“Lazuli,” she said at last.

Her sister set the book she held carefully back down, then turned to face Indigena. She looked as lovely as always, pale, slender. The striped shadows on her face could have come from the lit lamps. Indigena eyed her hands, but Lazuli wore her trademark heavy robes. One would have to go up and feel her arms before one could find the damage done to them.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Lazuli nodded once, as if she had expected the question. Her eyes were as bright a blue as the gem she was named after, her dark hair heavy and long as the robes were. She and Indigena did not look like sisters at all, but that was only fair; they had had different fathers. “I came to see if you had abandoned the house,” she said, voice as soft and fine as drifting dust. “If you had, by rights, Thornhall belongs to me.”

Indigena shook her head once, in weariness. “Lazuli, you know where I am. You know what I am. None of that gives you a right to assume me dead, and none of that is sufficient excuse to be in a house where most of the plants would murder you on scent.” She moved a step forward. “You have been here for days. And you could always have owed me to ask such a simple question. I asked once before.” Her thorns began stirring on her back again. “*What are you doing here?*”

Lazuli studied her in thoughtful silence. Indigena had never been able to intimidate her when she was fully human, nor even after she began weaving plants beneath her skin, but she had hoped this more drastic change after Parkinson’s blood curses would help. It did not seem it did. Lazuli might have been regarding a cat puffed up and hissing at her for all the reaction she showed.

“You surely must know.” Her voice had at least a hint of surprise, when minutes had passed with Indigena refusing to answer this time. “Well. Not know. But you know what I did, what gift I chose. Does it surprise you to learn that I am interested to hear a *vates* is moving about in the world?”

And Indigena had to turn a corner and face something she had never suspected she would. Most of the Yaxley family, though they practiced Dark magic and were unafraid to walk the shadows, did not join in the wars of Light and Dark. Feldspar had been the single, stupid exception, and he was Peridot’s son, not Lazuli’s, so his stupidity was understandable. Indigena had been the answer to that forgetfulness. She had never thought she would have to face one of her family across a battlefield. Voldemort could offer them nothing, and nor could Harry.

“A *vates* has been moving in the world for the last year, Lazuli,” she said. “Why choose his side now?”

“Did I say I was choosing his side?” Still soft and fine voice, still no trace of a smile. That was what Indigena found hardest to comprehend about her sister, the lack of any human warmth, the refusal to turn a hair. Lucius Malfoy was more human, given that he gloated over his enemies. Indigena would have said she herself was more human, but with the shrubbery growing under her skin, she couldn’t claim that any more. “I am merely interested. And the reason I could feel him, Indigena, was that he stepped into the paths between Light and Dark. He may, someday, grow interested in what lurks there. He may, someday, wish to help Jacinth.”

Indigena snorted in spite of herself. “You chose what she was to be yourself, Lazuli.” It still stunned her, sometimes, what Lazuli had given up in pursuit of improvement not for herself, but for her child. A Seer had told her, accurately enough, that Lazuli would never bear the daughter she wanted by lying with any man; her fate was to have sons, or stay barren. So Lazuli had found and lain with something nonhuman, a nameless beast that skittered between Light and Dark. Jacinth was born half-human only, and Lazuli would be executed if she so much as mentioned the name of the father’s species to anyone else. They were—not native to the paths between Dark and Light, but something wizards had bound there, and feared, and forgotten long ago. But if they found that a witch had summoned one and given it partial access to the wizarding world, even if it was only through the gateway of her body and a child of impure blood, they could remember.

Indigena eyed Lazuli’s arms again. “What are you missing today?” she asked.

She blinked in shock when her sister answered the challenge by undoing the sleeves of her robes and pushing them up. Her arms were very slender, not much more than bone. Huge chunks of flesh were taken from them, bloodless, worried by invisible teeth. As Indigena watched, another vanished. They would regrow tomorrow, and be taken again, and again, and every day for the rest of Lazuli’s life. She had accepted that as the price for Jacinth’s fathering.

Indigena did not want to face her sister on the battlefield. More than that, though, she did not want Lazuli’s indomitable will

behind Harry.

“He wouldn’t be able to do anything for you,” she warned. “Not when the beasts out of the paths can’t survive except by devouring other things.”

“He freed the Dementors,” said Lazuli. “He freed the werewolves. He is freeing the house elves, whom many purebloods would claim we cannot survive without.” Her voice was water with the moon reflected in it. “I have already freed my elves.”

Indigena stared at her.

“They were frightening Jacinth.”

“Please, sister.” Indigena made some effort to swallow, to speak calmly. “You *know* that the Dark Lord will win. He is too clever, and Harry is too weak. My Lord knows magic he has not yet used on the battlefield. He is immortal.” She knew what the means of that immortality was, and she briefly wished she could tell Lazuli, so she would understand how hopeless Harry’s cause was, but her Lord had bound her by oath to say no word about it except to another Death Eater. “He has his methods of building up another cadre of faithful followers. You will doom yourself, and Jacinth, if you join Harry. He will lose, and the Dark Lord will destroy you and the daughter you love.”

Lazuli shook her head. Indigena wondered why, until she said, “He will face Jacinth’s father if he tries that. I have much to gain from the *vates*, Indigena, and nothing to lose. You are lost to Yaxley in any case. And if someday my daughter can walk in the sunlight, her heritage acknowledged by all, her father sometimes free to attend at her side—I would pay much.”

“We are going to defeat him,” said Indigena softly.

“You consider yourself a Death Eater, sister?”

“I am bound,” said Indigena, a little more sharply than she meant to. “I had no choice in that, just as you would have had none had the Dark Lord chosen you. And I’ve always known what my road cost. They call me Thorn Bitch. I *know* it. Even now I am doing things I would not do if I were free, spinning webs that will upend the world. But, still, sister. *Vita desinit, decus permanit*. I know the motto of our family as well as you do.”

Lazuli nodded. “And if I choose Harry’s side, I will hold by him as firmly as you hold by your Lord.”

Indigena felt a deep sorrow engulf her as she gazed at her sister. There was nothing she could do, no way that she could end this. She could not have forced Lazuli to do anything even if she were free. Of course, if she were free, Lazuli’s determination to join Harry would just be the amusing matter of a joke, not the difference between life and death, as it would be now.

She knew it was irrational, to fear her own sister this much. But ever since Lazuli had chosen as she had, to be devoured each day for as long as she lived and consider it small price for her snake-eyed daughter, Indigena did not think anything could truly oppose her. Let her join Harry, and the Dark Lord’s victory had just become that much less sure, Horcruxes and all.

And there were others—wizards and witches, Dark and Light alike, who had mated with creatures other than Veela, the only magical species widely recognized as having the legal right to cross with humans. There were children with glamours on their ears, on their eyes, on their hands to give them the right number of fingers or hide extra ones. If Harry could command Lazuli’s allegiance, he might be able to command theirs. It was a force Indigena had not even anticipated him calling on.

“If you were only concerned about honor,” Lazuli said, bringing her out of her daze, “you would not care, sister. You would fulfill your oath and leave me to fulfill mine. I do not think you are entirely his, even now.”

Indigena lifted her head. “Thornhall is still not yours,” she said. “The question you came to have answered is answered. Leave, Lazuli.”

Lazuli nodded and turned away, another chunk of meat vanishing from her right arm. Indigena watched her go, then turned feverishly to the shelves and drew forth the books she had come looking for, on the old, old forces of self-sacrifice, of love and hatred and how they could be to used to hold and hurt. Her Lord wished to know if love, after all, was the force that would oppose him, and for that Indigena needed more than *Odi et Amo*, useful as it had proved in other things.

At least one good thing had come of her sister’s implacable behavior, she consoled herself as she turned away. She now knew a threat that might help Harry and oppose her Lord, and could warn him about it before it manifested. Perhaps it might give him time to ensnare those who had mated with Dark creatures as allies. He had once won werewolves by offering them freedom. He

could do the same thing this time.

She had almost left the study before it occurred to her to go back and look at the book her sister had laid down when she came in. The title did not reassure her at all.

The Paths of the Lords. It had a section on the *vates*, and on what it meant to be *vates*. Knowing Lazuli, she had used the book to look for answers on whether Harry would be likely to help Jacinth, and found them there.

Indigena swallowed. She had to trust in her Lord, in her own honor, and the plans she had made. Harry was likely to fall before the calendar year was out, or perhaps the school year; her Lord had not been specific in his gloating. Then she might never need to face her sister, and Lazuli and Jacinth could remain in the shadows, letting them shelter them, instead of chancing exposure to a disgusted wizarding world and a harsh war.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Sixty-Nine: A Birthday Celebration

Harry cast his fifteenth charm on the letter. It glowed a little, and then the glow faded, utterly failing to show that it had been smeared with any venom that would transfer to his skin on contact.

“Someone could want to ally with you for your own sake, you know,” Draco muttered, edging away. Harry’s fourteenth charm had turned his pancakes green. “You don’t have to use every spell ever invented on that letter.”

“You would have snapped at me if I didn’t and then you saw the signature,” Harry pointed out. The letter had come with an unfamiliar owl, who still sat at the edge of the table, preening herself and waiting for a response. Harry had cast several spells before he unfolded the parchment. Then he’d caught sight of the signature, which ended in *Yaxley*, and decided that the letter could stand a few more.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

Harry shook his head—Draco would never acknowledge when he was being unfair—and finally opened the letter. Reading it left him no less mystified than before.

Harry vates:

My name is Lazuli Yaxley. I am the half-sister of Indigena, whom, as you know, fights with Voldemort. We had the same mother, but different fathers. My other sister is Peridot, the mother of Feldspar, whose stupidity in serving the Dark Lord during the First War condemned my sister to serve him in this one.

I have discovered recently that you may be amenable to helping me with a large problem of prejudice and disgust in the wizarding world. My daughter Jacinth, for various and sundry reasons, will never have a free life if some common attitudes do not alter. You are working to alter these attitudes in regards to werewolves and house elves. It occurs me that you could do the same for her. I would like you to meet her, and me, on neutral ground. I am not willing to come to Hogwarts, but the house of one of your allies would be welcome.

We have much to discuss. I can offer you much: intimate knowledge of Indigena, which will be important now that she is the Dark Lord’s most dangerous Death Eater; knowledge of the paths between Light and Dark without your having to venture into them; a possible source of allies in other parents who have children like mine; my wand and my will; the support of a small portion of the House of Yaxley, though in this we are individuals and it will not be a formal family alliance. In return, I ask much: for you to fight for Jacinth as you would for any of the other magical creatures under your protection; for you to support those Yaxleys who agree to support you should the Dark Lord fall on us; for you to not report me to the Ministry when you learn the extent of the laws I have broken; for a fair hearing when my sister has been a source of torment to you; for the meeting on neutral ground. My owl will await your reply.

Lazuli Yaxley.

Harry shook his head with a small, quick frown. In a way, he didn’t want to refuse. This was the kind of *vates* work he was supposed to do, wasn’t it? He didn’t know what connection Lazuli and Jacinth might have with magical creatures; if Jacinth were half-Veela, then they could have gone through the Veela Council to ally with him. And if Jacinth were not half-Veela...

That would explain the line about not reporting her to the Ministry.

“Interesting?” Draco asked, at his right shoulder.

Harry handed him the letter. He expected laughter, and a shake of his head, and a murmur that a Yaxley must be out of her mind to think that Harry would meet with her. Instead, Draco’s brow furrowed, and he chewed one corner of his mouth so much that Harry thought he’d forgotten and mistaken it for a pancake.

“Well?” Harry asked at last. “What do you think?”

“You could do worse than to meet with her.” Draco handed the letter back and leaned his head the other way, closing his eyes, still making his lip a ragged mess with constant bites. “I’m trying to remember everything my mother told me about the House of Yaxley,” he said. “Hush a moment.”

Harry raised an eyebrow. “Only a moment?”

“*Hush*, I said.”

Harry turned back to his orange juice. Argutus, who was draped around his shoulders, asked for an explanation of the letter, and Harry gave it to him as best he could. To his surprise, Argutus stretched his neck forward and flicked his tongue around the edge of the parchment, then retracted his head and scented around the edge of Harry’s flesh hand, too.

“*I thought so*,” he said, sounding satisfied.

“What did you think?”

“*There was the scent of a strange snake, and I could not see one.*” Argutus wound himself partially on to the table to steal a sausage from Millicent’s plate. She rolled her eyes, but permitted it. Most of the Slytherins seemed to think that if they weren’t swift enough to prevent Argutus from taking their food away, they didn’t deserve to keep it. “*But the scent is on the letter. At one point it was in a room with a snake.*”

Harry inclined his head, almost unwillingly. If Lazuli Yaxley kept a snake, that would make sense. It intrigued him, and he had almost nothing to fear on that quarter.

“Can you tell what kind?”

“*Unfamiliar. I look forward to meeting it. It smells like wind.*”

Harry looked thoughtfully at the letter again. He knew one place that might be a good candidate for his meeting with Lazuli; the difficulty was in getting his potential host to agree to it.

“Draco.”

Draco jolted and opened his eyes, glaring at him. “I told you to keep quiet and let me remember everything I’ve heard about the Yaxley family.”

“Oh, I know enough about that,” said Harry blandly, and delighted in the way that Draco’s glare grew sharper. *Really, he ought to think more carefully if he’s going to handle politics for me.* “Generally undeclared, but tending towards the Darker side of magic. And obsessed with honor. If Lazuli does consent to ally with me the way Indigena serves Voldemort, then perhaps I need not fear her.”

“My mother fears her, though,” Draco insisted. “Not anyone else in the family, not even Indigena or their sister Peridot, just her.”

Harry blinked. *That’s unexpected.* “And did she say why? Or is that bit of important information still hiding in the depths of your memory?”

Draco hit him, but his eyes were serious. “She said that Lazuli Yaxley has an implacable will. Once she decides she wants something, she won’t stop working until she gets it. And that could be dangerous, Harry, as you know. She might decide that she wants something other than your friendship. It would be better if you didn’t get involved with this at all.”

“But she’s reached out to me, and rejecting her now could be dangerous,” Harry reminded him. “I don’t know if she has any pride to insult, but if she does, then this would do it. I’m *vates*, Draco. I can’t refuse to help someone sight unseen, and just because I

might be afraid of her. It'll make me look weak."

"And that's what she's counting on," said Draco evenly. "Why do you think she appealed to you in the name of the good you do for magical creatures?"

"Because she wanted my help," said Harry, getting a bit exasperated now. Sometimes, Draco was both eager to remind him of the danger of politics and seemingly convinced that Harry had to abandon his standards in order to deal with that danger. "She knew this was a good means of securing it. I wouldn't have expected her to do anything else."

"And you're really going to meet with her, then?"

Harry looked at the letter, then at the owl sitting at the end of the table. "I'll suggest a meeting place. Then I have to suggest it to the person who owns the meeting place, and it's someone who might not agree, for all I know. And then I have to talk to Snape." Harry grimaced slightly. "Three guesses on who's going to be the hardest to convince."

Dear Adalrico:

I am writing to ask if I may visit your home as neutral ground to use in a meeting with Lazuli Yaxley. I trust to your wards and your care; Blackstone is defended enough that I would not feel uneasy meeting with Yaxley there as I would at Lux Aeterna. I doubt that Yaxley would agree to that, at any event, as it is my brother's ground, and not hers.

The reason I ask you in particular, sir, is that Yaxley wishes me to help her daughter in return for her alliance. I know that you value your children highly, and our bond was most truly forged through the birth of your younger daughter. I do not wish to come to your home at the end of February merely to meet with Yaxley, but to celebrate Marian's birthday, to renew my commitment to her and to other children who will, I hope, grow up in a different world.

If you would prefer that I not use your home, I will understand. You have suffered enough because of our alliance. But I thought I would ask, for the reasons I have given above.

Thank you for listening.

*Yours,
Harry.*

Dear Harry:

Meeting with a Yaxley? You have gone quite mad. A meeting with someone else of another Dark family I could understand or accept. I would even be willing to open my home to a Light wizard, if one ever agreed to step through Blackstone's doors. But this?

I had been wondering why you sent a letter to me rather than spoke with me by means of the phoenix song spell. Now I understand. You wish to appeal more formally than the spell allows. The answer to part of your request is no, Harry. My wife and I would both welcome a birthday celebration for Marian, and having you at it. We agree that she needs to live in a different world, and you have not spent as much time with her as we once envisioned you doing. But our home will not permit the foot of a Yaxley to cross its threshold when her sister fights with the man who once ruled my life, and nearly ruined it.

Adalrico Bulstrode.

Dear Mr. Bulstrode:

I understand your reluctance, and your reasons are well-expressed. As it happens, Lazuli Yaxley has agreed to an alternate location for the meeting, one I am surprised she accepted. I will come to Marian's birthday celebration, and not meet with Yaxley and her daughter until afterwards.

I hope you and your family are well.

Harry.

“Harry.”

Elfrida came to meet him, clad in her pale blonde hair as in dignity. Harry caught her hands and kissed them carefully, secretly delighting in the fact that he had a left hand now to match her left one, and that she neither flinched nor complained about it being too cold. She cupped his chin as soon as the formal greeting with done, and lifted his face so that she could look critically at him.

“You are tired,” she said.

“I shouldn’t have agreed to lead a political alliance if I wanted my beauty sleep,” Harry told her, with a slight grin, and stepped away from Blackstone’s fireplace so that Snape, Draco, Peter, and Regulus could follow him. Hawthorn was already standing in a corner of the room, he saw, talking quietly with Adalrico. He nodded to her. Neither Millicent nor Marian had appeared yet. A fireplace across the room brightened, and Narcissa stepped out, shaking her skirts to rid them of soot. Harry raised an eyebrow. It was one of the few times he had seen Draco’s mother without formal robes. These skirts swirled in deep shades of green that emphasized her pallor and the crown of equally pale hair around her head.

“No one else is expected,” said Elfrida, catching his eye.

Harry found himself relaxing. Sometimes, as much as he treasured his newer allies, he wanted to be with his oldest ones. Not even in front of Owen and Syrinx could he let down as many of his masks as he could here, though Owen and Syrinx would be accompanying him to his meeting with Lazuli Yaxley after Marian’s festival. He smiled and moved over to Adalrico.

“Where’s the birthday girl?” he asked.

“Still asleep, but Millicent is fetching her.” Adalrico held out his hand. Harry hesitated a moment, seeing it was the one wounded in the Department of Mysteries, but clasped it when Adalrico wriggled the fingers. The deep, fleshy bruises on them were gradually beginning to fade. “I am glad that you agreed to come, Harry,” he added, as they let each other’s hands go. “It will be good for my children to know a Lord-level wizard who does not want to conquer the wizarding world or control them. It is a chance I never had.”

Harry murmured something polite in return, while fixing his eyes on Adalrico’s face. He could see shadows burning there, but Adalrico’s eyes remained steady. It seemed he didn’t resent Harry for asking to use Blackstone as neutral ground. Perhaps it was for the best. Harry had been stunned when Lazuli agreed to meet him at Copley-by-the-Sea, but being surrounded by wards he was linked to, as Black heir, would give him a security even Blackstone could not have provided.

“It is no more than Lord-level wizards should have been doing all along,” said Harry, meaning it. The more he tried to learn about Dumbledore through questioning Snape and Peter on their school memories, the more intensely puzzled he became. *Why* would Dumbledore have wanted to control his students the way he had tried to control Lily through the ethic of sacrifice? Why would he want to have mindless followers fighting behind him, instead of freely chosen allies fighting beside him? It made no sense to Harry. Voldemort’s madness was actually easier to interpret; he had known nothing else, had probably been born that way. But Dumbledore had known, at one time in his life, justice and a powerful relationship to the rest of the world not based on exploitation. That anyone would choose to fall from that was—

Wasn’t comprehensible. And Harry was just going to have to get used to that, and accept that his training and his magic had led him in different directions, he supposed.

“Here she is!” Adalrico exclaimed, turning away from him.

Harry caught a glimpse of Hawthorn’s face as he followed suit. She was very still, but there was a wistful happiness in the backs of her hazel eyes. If she could not feel joy with her own daughter dead, at least she might feel its echo in the presence of other people’s children, Harry thought.

He reached out, making sure he used his right hand, and clasped her arm. Hawthorn gave him a strained smile.

Then Harry faced the door of the receiving room, where Millicent was walking beside Marian, murmuring advice to her much smaller sister that Harry doubted she was taking. Marian had a child’s garment on, a cross between a tiny robe and a long shirt, and her dark hair was done up in ribbons of green and white. Harry raised his eyebrows. *The Bulstrodes truly are fond of the old*

ways. In some of the most ancient rituals, those ribbons would have been used to signal that the child was now leaving the winter of infancy—the winter when they could easily have died, and when the family could have more easily given them up—and entering a spring in which her siblings and parents would surrender their hearts to her. Of course, it could also easily signify Marian’s birthday on the cusp of spring.

Marian’s head turned as she came into the room, and she scanned their faces carefully. Her eyes fixed on Harry, and stayed there. Harry held his breath. She could probably sense his magic as the strongest in the room. Her reaction would be telling, and might make all the difference as to whether Adalrico’s idea of rearing her around a friendly Lord-level wizard would actually work.

Marian broke into a smile. Then she pulled away from Millicent’s hand and wobbled unsteadily across the room to him. Harry knelt to receive her, putting himself as much on her level as possible.

There was a stain on Marian’s shirt, as if she’d been eating a purple berry. It didn’t seem to matter. “Harry,” she said, and then clasped his robe and tugged on it insistently. If she noticed the silver hand as different from the flesh hand, it obviously didn’t interest her. “More magic.”

Harry nodded slightly, hoped that Snape had his shields raised against a headache—he’d complained enough about this day, Merlin knew, and Harry didn’t really want to distress him further—and lowered his shields.

Warm dark blue spread out from his palms, as if he’d opened the gate to an ocean there. Harry smelled the scent of sun-warmed grass, and autumn wildflowers. Two purple hands unfolded from the light and began to paint a picture, which grew to resemble Marian’s face.

Marian laughed. The sound was free, uncontrolled, not afraid at all. She put out one hand of her own, and seemed utterly enchanted when Harry solidified one of the purple fingers enough so that she could touch it.

Harry felt his eyes sting with tears. He reached out and carefully picked Marian up. She didn’t kick, though Elfrida had warned him she might, but went on gazing into the heart of the light, utterly absorbed, poking a finger now and then and giggling when it poked her back.

Harry ducked his head and rubbed his face in silky, dark, warm hair. For a moment, notions of politics tumbled away from him, and so did notions of how wonderful it might be if every child could be unafraid of magic. There was only the fact that he knew he was acting *right* in response to the rest of the world.

Jing-Xi had told him about that, the responsibility that other Lords and Ladies—mostly of the Light—felt for their people, and how wonderful it was when they knew they had come down from lofty heights they placed themselves on and others cooperated in building, and actually *interacted* with others.

Harry hadn’t known if he would ever feel it, since he seemed mostly to piss other people off through things like insisting on house elf freedom. He hadn’t known if he would ever fulfill the promise of the words Narcissa had written as Starborn, encouraging him not to be a Lord, to defend and serve and protect instead of compel.

Now he knew he could, if only for a moment at a time.

Hawthorn glanced down at her hands. Tears were blinding her, and not because Harry holding Marian like that brought back memories of Pansy at a much younger age, yelling as she raced in circles through the house and made the elves squeal.

For a moment, the life she’d lived lately, the one in which vengeance against Indigena ached and pushed against her, opened up, and sunlight came through the crack in the clouds.

It was more beautiful and more piercing than the moment in which she’d given up bloody vengeance for Claudia. It said that perhaps life was more important than death, and the dead must give place to the living. It said that it was things like this which mattered, more than the time when a heart stopped beating.

I cannot think like this. I cannot. Hawthorn ran a hand over her face in anxiety. *Pansy was my daughter. I must take vengeance for her.*

She turned away from Harry and Marian, because they were only confusing her, and watched Draco Malfoy watching Harry instead. The expression on his face was easy enough to understand.

Draco felt as though he *understood*, then. He'd been going through Harry's memories in the Pensieve he gave him for Christmas. Some made him laugh. Some enraged him. Some broke his heart. None of them had ever let him understand Harry's lack of ambition, why he wouldn't use his magic to win just some small luxuries for himself, delights no one else would miss and which they'd be glad to give to someone of Lord-level power.

Now he knew. Harry didn't want them because he was more interested in the greater delights. His magic lapped the room like a purring serpent. He was happier in that moment than Draco had ever seen him outside of bed, his will and reality in accord, and it was his magic that had helped him bring it about. He didn't want people to face him with fear, but with wonder instead.

Draco put a hand on his chest, feeling as if he'd swallowed a chicken bone. Harry didn't like fear.

Oh. *Oh*.

And that would be the reason he'd included the desire to not cause fear in the oaths for the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, and why he didn't want to intimidate people, and why he didn't want to keep house elves as slaves or servants. Why should he? He could have *better* things.

Draco understood all about wanting better things. He had simply never imagined that respect and wonder could be two of those better things.

He wanted to move forward and put his hands on Harry's shoulders and kiss him breathless, but they were in public and Harry hadn't put Marian down yet. It would have to wait.

For once, Draco didn't mind waiting.

“*Vates*.”

Harry inclined his head slowly as he stepped around the door into the blank stone room of Copley-by-the-Sea where Lazuli Yaxley had agreed to meet him. “Madam Yaxley.” Snape followed close on his heels, Draco just behind, with Peter and Regulus peering over their shoulders. Owen and Syrinx stepped through the door and spread out to stand on either side of it, staring at Lazuli all the while.

Lazuli, who had been looking out the window, turned to face them. And Harry met her eyes and understood why Narcissa might fear her.

She was not the strongest wizard in the room; she was considerably weaker than Snape, and perhaps Regulus, and of course Harry himself. Her magic had a Dark edge, but Harry had met and felt more vicious ones. Her cold, polished manner was one common to many purebloods.

It was what the lack of expression on her face meant that could frighten someone else. She appeared to be totally uncaught, unlinked, unbound. No one else, said her face, had ever made such an impression on her that she would hold herself back and do what they said. She had never feared anyone.

Unconquered.

Harry subdued the flash of immediate approval that caused in his heart. He might like her as *vates*, but he was not here only as that. Lazuli also proposed to join his political alliance.

“Madam,” he repeated, when she said nothing, but continued to study him. “You agreed to bring your daughter. Is she here?”

“Jacinth,” Lazuli breathed, not taking her eyes off him. Harry had no idea what she felt, what she was thinking. It didn't show in any flicker of expression or any tiny gesture she made, both the places he was used to looking for them.

A small girl came around the side of the one piece of furniture in the room, a large chair that faced the window. Harry studied her. She looked about seven years old, and normal for a witch that age: dark-haired, pale, nervous. She ducked her head away from Harry's gaze before he could see the color of her eyes or make out much of her face. Of course, if what Harry suspected was true

and Jacinth was half-human and half violently otherwise, she was probably wearing a glamour in any case.

“This is my daughter Jacinth,” Lazuli said, and put one hand on the girl’s shoulder. “For her, I offer you alliance and loyalty, in all the terms discussed in the letter. For her, in return, you would be fighting. I wish you to change the world so that she does not have to hide in the shadows any more.”

Harry cleared his throat with an effort. “I would like to see her fully, first. Am I right in assuming that Jacinth’s father was not human, Madam Yaxley?”

“That is so,” said Lazuli. “*Finite Incantatem.*”

Jacinth’s outline rippled under her hands. She looked up again, half-cringing. Harry caught his breath, and strove to make sure that nothing showed on his face.

Jacinth’s eyes were huge, golden, and caught under eye-ridges that made them stand out from her head like a snake’s. Delicate, incongruous lashes fringed them, nevertheless, and Harry could see from her nervous blink that she did have eyelids. A forked tongue flickered past her lips.

Lazuli stepped back, and Jacinth moved forward, arms spread out as if putting on a display. Delicate gray wings, the color of shadows, unfolded from her back; they resembled a dragon’s, though they weren’t quite the span of her arms, and Harry didn’t think she could use them to fly. Her robes split at the back to reveal a gray-black tail that ended in a triangular point, and when she spun, Harry could see that her hair joined with her spine, melting into obsidian-like spikes along her spine that easily sliced holes in the cloth. She had two legs, but they nearly seemed like afterthoughts next to the smooth muscled slide of her back.

Harry heard Snape draw his wand. Before he could say anything, or Snape could intone a curse, Lazuli said, “Jacinth’s father is here.”

Harry looked up to see the shadows boiling in one corner of the room. Something formed there—a shape, dark and coiled, with no sign of legs, and no sign of a head, either. From its back splayed wings, from its chest projected a tongue. A maw opened and closed at one end, displaying teeth as sharp as Jacinth’s spikes.

“Severus,” Harry said softly, never taking his eyes away from the shadows. He could feel its—his—magic now, and it was mad, sliding, Dark but too wild for the Dark, shot with gleams of Light. *It is no wonder that Lazuli said she could give me knowledge of the paths between Dark and Light. She went there to mate with this—thing.* “Do not.”

“Do you know what that is?” Snape demanded, his voice choked with nearly as much fear as he had ever shown around the werewolves, if not the same rage and hatred. “They *hunted* us, Harry. To give them passage back to the world is madness. And they will have it, if there is a child even half of their blood alive.” He spun on Lazuli. “Why did you do this? Why?”

“I wanted to,” said Lazuli Yaxley.

Harry looked back to her. She had one arm slightly tilted, in such a way that he knew her wand was up her sleeve, and she had her lips parted in way that suggested her next words would be *Avada Kedavra*. She would not miss, either.

Harry could see emotion in her eyes for the first time. Love, such fierce love, and such implacable will. Harry had no doubt that she saw Jacinth exactly as she was, all the time, and loved her the more for it.

“You cannot negotiate a settlement with *them*,” Snape said, jerking his head at the shadows. The creature had lost most of his form, Harry saw, coming forward to coil around Lazuli’s feet and lifting his head to her arms. For a moment, her sleeve sagged, as if a chunk of her flesh had vanished. Harry thought of the creature’s teeth, and wondered what price a nameless beast out of the paths would demand for fathering a child. “It is not done. It is impossible.”

“The *vates* does the impossible on a regular basis.” Lazuli lowered her arm. “And this is his decision.”

Harry turned to face Jacinth. She had stopped spinning and stood with her eyes lowered, her hands locked together. Delicate gray webs fluttered around her fingers, he saw, opening and then closing again like breathing flowers.

“How do you feel?” he asked her, striving to make his voice gentle. “Do you wish to live in the world your mother wants me to build?”

Her eyes came up and met his, astonished. Then her face broke out in the most amazing smile, stretching the shadows of scales

beneath her skin. “You can *talk* to me,” she said.

Harry realized, then, that he was speaking Parseltongue; the sight of Jacinth’s eyes had probably been enough to make him drop into the language. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Jacinth rushed on eagerly.

“I can speak English, too, but not so well. It makes me sound like a freak. And none of the others can understand me in this language except Father, and he only talks when he feels like it.” She moved a step forward, and the intense loneliness in her eyes made Harry’s heart hurt. “You can *talk*,” she repeated, as if it were a miracle. “Will you come back and talk to me sometimes?”

“Of course,” said Harry quietly. “If you wish it.” He didn’t glance at Lazuli right now. This was between him and Jacinth. “And that will happen whether we become allies or not. But do you *want* your mother and I to become allies? It would mean other people knowing about you.” In Parseltongue, that came out more like “reading all your scent.”

Jacinth swallowed. “I—could you make them stop staring sometimes?”

“That’s what I would try to do,” said Harry. “Make them stop staring. Make them not care what you sound like when you speak English. But I might not win. It might mean people would know you, but hate you and fear you. And it would take years even if I did win. Do you want this?”

Her tongue flickered out again. Harry wondered if she was tasting his scent, reading his truthfulness there. Then her eyes came back to his face with such force he almost gasped.

“Yes,” she said. “Because I want to be able to walk down the street someday and not have people try to kill me, which Mother said would happen. Some stares wouldn’t be so bad, compared to that. And I could always insult them back in this language. And Father says when I grow my teeth, I can threaten them, and they’ll run.” She hesitated. “And that’s the world where you live, isn’t it?”

Harry nodded.

“Then I want to visit you there. Sometimes,” Jacinth added hastily, as if aware she might be asking for too much.

“You have it,” said Harry, and turned to face Lazuli. The shadow that had coiled around her was gone. She was watching him with an expression he had never seen before.

“Your daughter wants this,” he told her. “And if I could set Dementors free, I may be able to do the same thing for Jacinth’s father. I’ll fight.”

Lazuli sank so gracefully that Harry didn’t realize what she was doing until she was already on one knee. Then she shook back her sleeves, and Harry realized she was showing him her arms.

Her half-devoured arms.

“I paid this price for Jacinth’s fathering,” Lazuli said, into the silence. “Every day I will pay it. And I would pay it in death. I love her, and she is mine. Do you fight for her, there is nothing I will not do to support you. I know the meaning of sacrifice.”

Harry could only nod, and then Snape was grabbing his shoulder and spinning him around and trying to tell him something about Jacinth’s father.

Harry listened calmly. There were going to be arguments. He could not deny that. He would have to struggle hard for a compromise, if Jacinth’s father was an enemy of wizardkind the way that Snape said he was.

He looked back at Jacinth, who was now occupied in petting the coils of a shadowy body that wound around her.

So I’ll fight. It’s not the first time.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy: We Change

Indigena shifted the book in the dim light falling through the mouth of the burrow, and then sighed. It was no good. Lately, her Lord’s snake had been restless around light, so she would have to go above ground to read either by the radiance of the waning

sun or a cast *Lumos*.

Standing, she glanced back once at the Dark Lord. He did not move, his hands clasped on his chest and locked around the golden cup, the flesh-snake curled asleep in the crook of his elbow. Indigena knew better than to think he was in a coma, now, as she had when she first found him. Now, she knew that he was hunting, sweeping on deadly, silent wings through the currents of thought, all the more deadly because his prey, like the owl's, did not know he was there.

She shuddered and climbed the shallow series of steps that led out of the burrow, pausing to blink in the sunlight.

The hole was high up on the slight rise that cradled the Riddle House. Indigena could see Muggle houses if she looked in the right direction, but she had never wanted to. She preferred to look down on the graveyard instead, where the ruins of her thorns that had poisoned Rosier still lay, and on an old, abandoned garden. Indigena had started to coax the garden back to life.

That might be a pleasant place to read.

She had barely moved a step forward, though, when the air in front of her shimmered, and a sea eagle dropped through and flopped gracelessly to the ground. Indigena rolled her eyes and stared over his head at the garden. Perhaps if she concentrated hard enough, he would go away.

He didn't have the grace to. He changed back into Falco instead, and climbed to his feet, coughing slowly. Indigena studied him. She could see that the sides of his face had changed, the skin peeling off and sloughing away. That pleased her. He was devoting more and more time to the study of the Dark that had once consumed her Lord, had made him less than human even before he constructed the Horcruxes. That could only mean Falco was further along the path to Declaring. The sooner that happened, the sooner everything would be over. Indigena didn't really like Falco Parkinson, nor some of the things his presence obliged her to do.

Like be polite to him, for example.

"My Lord," she said, keeping her voice empty of the warmth she used for Voldemort. "May I help you?"

Falco glanced at her once, then turned to the burrow. "Why have you not yet removed to the dwelling I prepared for you?"

Indigena choked on bile. "Why should we?" she asked at last. "You could have filled it with traps, for all I know. Did you think that my lord *trusted* you?"

"This one is insufficient." Falco's glare might have taken in the Muggle town and the garden—Indigena felt her thorns lash at the thought—as well as the hole in the earth that Indigena had emerged from. "He deserves a habitation more fitting of his glory, and his destiny. I have made one for him."

"He will move when he is ready," said Indigena. "You forget, Lord Parkinson. Lord Voldemort is no boy to be bullied and pushed and shoved about like Harry." *And if you saw half as much as you think you do, you blind fool, then you would realize Harry is not, either.* "If he wishes to stay here and do important work, then he can stay here and do important work."

"I need to speak with Tom," said Falco abruptly, and pushed past her. "Stay here."

Indigena snorted and sat down in the grass, tugging the book out to lay across her lap. It concerned means of taming wild animals, including details of the numerous unsuccessful attempts to tame dragons. Indigena doubted that she would find what she really needed in here, but she was becoming desperate. Her Lord's plan would be ready soon, and his broken experiment was still not everything it could be. Indigena hoped to find a way to bring it under control. Her Lord was doubtful that it would endanger *all* their plans, but Indigena had grown warier since Lazuli had joined Harry. She wanted a guarantee that they would win, not merely the likelihood that they might.

She bent over the nearest page, skimming paragraphs she'd already skimmed, and then paused. *With those creatures whose wildness and danger is innate, like the dragon, there is one other method that may be tried: the golden bridle.*

Intrigued—she hadn't seen this before because of a few pages stuck together—Indigena began to read.

"Tom? Tom, are you here?"

He felt him coming, by the vibrations in the earth, long before the words struck his human ears. The flesh-snake stirred, and opened its eyes. Lord Voldemort swung its head so that it was pointing at Falco.

The older wizard came down the steps of the tunnel and halted in front of him, staring at him as if he had expected him to be on his feet. But a true Lord could maintain dignity in any position. Lord Voldemort maintained his, now, lying down and patiently clutching the threads of memory in his mind. What he did now did not come naturally to him; it was a variation on a very old bit of magic he'd once performed, and it depended on certain qualities in the victims' minds that made it necessary he encourage and nurture and prune certain kinds of thoughts, not simply implant his suggestions. It was hard to hold himself back, sometimes, and refrain from commanding those who should be his because of what he was. He had to do the best he could.

"You are here," Falco said, and frowned at him. His voice was blunt, too blunt. When he had his throne back, then Lord Voldemort would let no one speak to him this way. "Why are you not in the other house?"

The snake could see Falco's tattered silver beard, and torn robes, and glazed green eyes. More to the point, it could see the changing of his aura off to the sides of his body, where it had begun to decay and crumble in the wake of his new studies. Lord Voldemort had to stifle exultation. The old fool had turned to the paths, after all, and not been willing to pay the full price for them. The Dark had embraced Lord Voldemort when he Declared because he did not hold back. He gave everything of himself but his life to reach the one goal worth reaching: immortality. Falco was trying to hunt the paths while holding back, hesitating, wishing for Light. The Dark would sense that, and it would rip him apart, for that and for trying to use it for balance, and for daring to trick it and try to pretend that he would belong to Light, too, all these years.

"Because I do not wish to be," said Lord Voldemort, when he judged the time had come. He could have been a great artist, he could have, and right now he was seeing the work of artistry on Falco's face and mourning wasted opportunities. For this was part of his wreaking, part of his working, him and Harry, oh yes, and since Harry could not be here to see their joined triumph and would not appreciate it if he could, it was up to him to take pleasure for the both of them. "I prefer this cave and the memories it holds to the memories of the other house."

Falco's face took on an unusual cast of desperation, and he took a step forward. "It began there," he said. "It has to end there." And then he stopped, as if he feared that he had said too much.

He laughed at him, Lord-Voldemort-still-a-Lord-though-lying-in-the-dirt, thick and rich laughter that boomed like the earth shaking. And he cowered away from him, did Falco of the wrong desires and foolish mind, shaking his head as if he could make it stop shaking, clamping his hands over his ears as if that would change things.

"I know it," said Lord Voldemort, when he could stop laughing. The snake swayed back and forth in response to his mirth, making his view of Falco swing and rock. "I did not know everything at first, but five years ago I discovered the last vestiges of the truth. One cannot wander bodiless in the Dark and learn nothing. A strange thing, an unusual thing, to have a magical heir bound to one at a distance, sharing magic with one, instead of dying properly and returning the magic to one, but it has happened. I know him. I know the third. I know everything that you would have told me, Falco, and nothing you can say will make me remove there until I am ready. Yes, it will end there. When the snake coils, when death comes down, when the moment swings between three of us balanced and poised, it will be there. Even if it would have ended elsewhere, I shall make a point of seeing the despair in Harry's eyes before I destroy him." He laughed, and this time the thickness was even deeper and even richer, like flesh ridden with maggots before they ripened into flies. "Or will he destroy himself? I think he will, when he learns what has happened. Oh, I think he will. Will it not half-kill him to know this? A friend once said those words, thought those words, a variation of those words. And now the end is coming. Before it does, I will take from Harry everything that he has loved. And when I reveal how deep my claws have sunk, how he and no other is responsible for the harvest I have reaped, he will kill himself, and my magic will come home to me."

Falco remained silent until his eloquence ended. Then he shook his head, and said, "You are mad, Tom. But it is your techniques that I need now." He leaned forward. "I have been to the coasts, and still I cannot convince the sirens to listen to me. What did you say to persuade them?"

It took a long moment for Lord Voldemort to subdue his amusement, to stop dreaming of the distant day when his magic would be all his again, to diminish his irritation at being called by a Muggle name. But in the end, he managed. He would tell the fool Falco how to control the sirens, how to raise them. Of course he would. Using a brilliant plan like that only worked once. Harry would rise against Falco, and destroy him, because Falco was not willing to give himself fully to the Dark.

Oh, yes, he told him, did Lord Voldemort, and all the time the snake swayed beside him and dreamed of the end.

Out of that end, there would be no morning, but only silence eternal, in an eternal night.

Harry shut his mouth and looked expectantly across the room. Jing-Xi sat with her head bowed, her long dark hair playing hide-and-seek around the arms of her chair, her breathing deep and peaceful. Harry hoped he hadn't said something wrong, or, worse, said something boring and sent her to sleep.

But, in a moment, she looked up and shook her head, sending her hair scattering in other directions. Harry was almost sure he heard it squeal as it bounced, but, if so, it was probably another sign of her magic, rather than a spell she had set. Why would she want her hair to squeal when it bounced?

"That is a very good expression of what it means when a Light Lord cares for his people, Harry." Her face wore the faintest edge of a smile, as if she were proud of him and trying not to show it. "That you care for the people of Britain in such a way—and other creatures as well—is a good sign for the future. The others will be more inclined to accept you into the Pact when the time comes."

Harry nodded. "Good." And then he paused.

"Whatever matter of magic concerns you, Harry," Jing-Xi said, and leaned forward, "you must feel free to speak to me of it. There are things I can tell you that no one else can, that no one else will—not from any malicious, lying intent, but simply because they do not know how we exist, at this level."

Harry nodded again. He told himself that Jing-Xi's phrasing should not make him uneasy. After all, Lord-level was a common term for someone with his might in magic.

But it still made him wary, any implication that he was above others, inherently superior to them.

"I was wondering what will happen with my *vates* influence spreading outside of Britain," he said, and made a nervous gesture that he hoped aimed, vaguely, in the direction of Africa. "Already a few species like karkadanns can tear loose from their webs and come to me. Won't that cause conflict in other countries? If there's a Lord in the karkadann territory who becomes annoyed at me, how does that affect the Pact?"

"Currently, we have no solution for such a thing," Jing-Xi said. "As I told you, you are the first *vates* since the Pact was formed, Harry, since we began to look beyond the boundaries of our own magical communities and think that we owed the world a responsibility to join together. So, yes, it might mean open conflict if that happened and you annoyed a Lord or Lady." She hummed under her breath, as though thinking. "Though, truly, I would not think it the karkadanns you should be wary of. Monika, the Dark Lady in Austria, makes it her habit to breed magical creatures—"

"I thought that was illegal," Harry said.

"Monika has never cared overmuch about legalities," said Jing-Xi, as if that should explain everything. "Excepting the Pact, of course. But she breeds them, and is inevitably dissatisfied with them, and puts them aside, bound in a web. You are her natural enemy."

Harry groaned and tilted his head back. There were times, he had to admit as he massaged his brow with his silver hand, when he *did* wish that he hadn't chosen such a difficult path to walk as the *vates* one.

But he had, it was chosen, and there was no turning back, of course. What kind of person would he be if he did? Like it or not, he was *vates*, and he was in the position of Lord of the British Isles, since no one else would protect them from Voldemort. The sense of intense binding and protectiveness he'd felt when he embraced Marian and saw her unafraid of his magic had not gone away. *That* was what his wizarding world should be like, people touching him and taking from his magic what they needed without fear.

So he would conflict with Monika someday—if he survived his war with Voldemort. That was inevitable. Harry shouldered himself to accept the burden now. At least Monika did not have a prophetic bond with him, and perhaps she would be willing to talk instead of trying to destroy Harry immediately as Voldemort would do.

"There is another thing we must talk of, Harry." Jing-Xi's voice was devoid of inflection.

Harry glanced up, and saw that she had risen from her chair. She stood over him, and looked down, eyes deep and sad. Harry sat up. He did not think Jing-Xi would hurt him, but he was prepared to defend himself if she did. His magic rose around him, buzzing, and a dark cat formed, crouched, at Jing-Xi's heels.

She smiled, then, and shook her head. “I am sorry to have frightened you, Harry,” she said. “I only wanted to make you understand how serious this matter was, but of course you would already know that.”

She moved back and sat down in her chair again, hands displayed all the while, shoulders held in an unnatural hunched posture that looked like a half-shrug. Harry, watching, finally realized that she was using the signal she had taught him meant no harm between Lords and Ladies. He exhaled and let his magic fade until the cat was less than a shadow wavering on the floor.

“My Lady,” he said. “What is it?”

“There is a more pressing concern for the other Lords and Ladies than your *vates* path,” she said quietly. “That has only happened in a few countries, and most of the incidents were minor—individuals tearing their webs, not whole species. Besides, most know that that would happen with any *vates* in the world, whether or not he was the youngest of us ever to come to power.

“But now your *absorbere* gift is common knowledge among them, and the way that you stand magical heir to Voldemort. You are in the mid-ranks of Lords in terms of power, Harry. But you could easily become much stronger.” Jing-Xi met his eyes. “They fear that.”

“Have you told them about me?” Harry asked. “How I was raised to hate and abhor that ability of mine?”

“I kept them quiet that way for some time,” said Jing-Xi. “But some of them are watching, and they know that you drained Unspeakables in the British Ministry of Magic. That makes them fear that you are growing stronger, more confident, that the artificial restraints of your training are falling away.” She looked at his left hand. “And the hand is another sign. You are not a wounded little boy. You are a young Lord, not Declared, but still. As they see it, you are someone who might drain them someday, if only to defend his islands.”

Harry clasped his hands around the arms of his chair. “I see,” he said in a neutral voice. “Would it reassure them if I pretended to go backwards? Suddenly lose my confidence in public, wear a glamour that makes it look as if I don’t have the silver hand, and express concern about my *absorbere* gift?”

Jing-Xi shook her head. “They wouldn’t believe it, not now. Most of them have an idea how far you’ve come.”

“Then what should I do?” Harry spoke the words in a voice that he kept free of frustration, and thanked Joseph for that blessing. Dealing with the stubborn Seer was good practice for dealing with the whole of the obstinate, frustrating, resentment-causing world in general.

“You should press forward,” said Jing-Xi. “But do it with an eye on the future, Harry, and an eye on the world. They have spies in or near Britain who can pass information to them about you. You should have spies on them in return.”

“I do have a spy network that could span Europe, potentially,” said Harry, thinking of the Opallines. At one time, they’d started to open talks in other wizarding communities for him, but most of those had come to nothing; the official reasoning was that the other wizards saw how well Harry was doing with his war and determined he didn’t need their help. “If that would do.”

“It would be a beginning,” Jing-Xi acknowledged. “But you will need more in the end, Harry. You will need to grow.”

Harry sighed. “And you think I’ll be alive in a few years to care about this?”

He meant it as a joke, but it made Jing-Xi lean forward and say, “Quite honestly? You do not dare plan otherwise, Harry. On the morning that you defeat Voldemort, you will need to be ready to defend yourself again.”

Harry frowned. “Why? You think that Monika would choose that moment to make her move?”

Jing-Xi shook her head. “When the tunnel between you and Voldemort collapses and the transfer of his magic to you is complete, I fully expect you to be one of the strongest wizards in the world, because Voldemort *is*. There may be someone who would think that he or she could catch you off guard in that moment, reeling, drunk with victory, and not yet in control of your magic.”

Some of Jing-Xi’s stranger training made sense then, especially the parts where she had encouraged him to visualize tasks that would strain his power, and sometimes even to perform them. “You’re preparing me for that moment,” Harry whispered. “You’re trying to get me used to carrying more magic than I carry now.”

“Yes.”

Harry leaned back in his chair and stared off into space. He had not considered that before, not really. He had simply assumed that once Voldemort died, he would have control of the power that he'd had until the end of fourth year, when Voldemort had resurrected himself and established the tunnel.

But if there were more—

I don't want it.

But wanting and not wanting had very little to do with his fate, Harry had to acknowledge. He had still not found a way around the sacrifices for the Horcruxes, but he had listened, reluctantly, to Regulus's talk about the warded shack near the Riddle house which evidently contained one of them. They should secure that Horcrux, Regulus had argued, before Voldemort either guessed or decided that they knew about it and moved it to safety elsewhere. Voldemort had seemingly forgotten that Harry would need to pass close by that tumbledown house to come to the graveyard last Midwinter, but he might remember at any moment.

They were going to try for that Horcrux this weekend. Harry might have resisted, but he had other plans in motion, too, and the love and liveliness he had felt when he looked into Marian's eyes, and even Jacinth's, prompted him towards this particular action. There was nothing that said he had to kill someone to cleanse that Horcrux the moment he had it. If he could have it, if he could study it, then it might become easier to find a way around the Unassailable Curse.

"They'll have to get used to it, I suppose," he told Jing-Xi. "And so will I."

Jing-Xi smiled, and it was a proud smile, like a banner or a call to war. "Indeed."

Connor hung upside down from his Firebolt, because he could.

Then he righted himself and continued on around the Pitch. No one else was out to see and contest him for the air. An odd mixture of rain and slush was falling, at once cold enough to get through most cloth and heavy enough to break many students' warming charms, and Katie had called the Gryffindor team's practice off early. It wasn't a particularly urgent time of year, either. They'd beat Hufflepuff handily a few weeks ago, and the match with Ravenclaw was three months away.

Connor didn't have to go inside with the rest of them if he didn't want to, though. He'd tossed the Snitch away just as Katie signaled for them to leave the Pitch, and then claimed he would find it and bring it in again. The rest had just shrugged and left him to it.

Since then, he'd seen the Snitch several times, even trailing at his heel like a lost puppy. It was there now. Connor spun the Firebolt towards it, and of course it darted away. But it didn't go far. Connor speculated idly that it didn't like the wet and the cold any more than he did.

He wondered why he'd wanted to remain outside. Surely he could think just as well inside, next to a warm fire, with Parvati curled up next to him, her hair wreathed around his neck and her head resting in the crook of his throat.

The thought made Connor smile, until a dash of rain, driven by a brisk March wind, hit him. He spluttered and shook his head, and went back to flying around, now and then hanging upside-down to see if that would drive these thoughts from his head. It didn't help, but then, Connor was slowly becoming resigned to the idea that nothing would.

He circled the middle of the Pitch in tight little rings, the Firebolt obedient beneath him, and finally admitted it to himself:

The noticing hadn't gone away.

He was still *seeing* things, even when he didn't look for them. He'd noticed a shy little Hufflepuff fifth-year who fancied Neville, even though she never seemed to blush or giggle when he was around. He'd noticed Luna Lovegood and Padma Patil talking more and more often, their hands brushing against each other, Luna actually seeming to notice Padma at least as often as she did the tables in the Great Hall. He'd noticed the mornings when Draco and Harry were snappish with one another, the mornings when they sported love bites, and the mornings when they both grinned like fools.

But it wasn't just noticing people falling in love and probably snogging, which would have been bad enough. Connor had turned around the other day and caught a glimpse of Millicent Bulstrode at the Slytherin table. He knew her, of course. She ate things. She was there. She was the daughter of one of Harry's allies. He knew a bit about her.

He'd never realized that she had a faint smile on her face in the mornings, when she didn't look quite awake, and was slowly eating her food instead of tearing it apart. He'd always thought it was a smirk, but it wasn't. It was a smile.

Connor dived at the grass, almost hoping to scrape through a puddle and toss muddy water into his face. It didn't happen, though, trained Seeker reflexes twitching him out of danger before he reached the ground and sending him back into the air.

He'd noticed that Ernie Macmillan, a conceited Hufflepuff boor, was actually harmless. Oh, he might brag about the purity of his family, but he didn't call anybody 'Mudblood.' He collected Chocolate Frog cards and went about his day with a small smile on his face, and he would tell anyone who asked him, at great length, about the small shop he intended to open when he left Hogwarts, mostly to make collecting Chocolate Frog cards and other small things easier. He would probably adapt to the changed world that the Grand Unified Theory created, Connor thought, and with much less fuss than other purebloods. He didn't see anything worth making a fuss about, unless it actually happened to him.

He saw the way Ron and Ginny fought, especially about her dating Dean now—one would have to be blind to miss a Weasley spat in Gryffindor Tower—but now he saw the way they crept back together, too, sometimes exchanging a smile the next day, sometimes talking to each other as if the fight had never happened. Connor wasn't sure they ever forgave each other, but they *did* forget. The Burrow wasn't an endless stew of boiling tempers, he had always known that, but now he knew why it wasn't.

He'd realized that Terry Boot was actually a fairly good artist. He never drew anything *beautiful*, but he drew useful things, like small diagrams of wand movements that were good for studying spells. He could dash off a complicated drawing of a human wrist and arm in three minutes, and then, if someone praised him, he'd look at them in polite incomprehension, as if accepting compliments on the way he breathed. Art did seem to be that instinctive to him, Connor thought.

He'd seen the dark circles beneath Peter's eyes, one day when they were alone for Animagus training, and commented on them before he could help himself. He was sure Peter was having bad dreams, and he remembered what that had meant for Sirius. Even Peter reassuring him, with some amusement, that he did not have Voldemort in his head attempting to possess him had not lessened Connor's worry.

They'd discovered his Animagus form that same day—a wild boar—but Connor's heart wasn't in his rejoicing.

And, worst of all—

Connor tried zipping very fast in several directions, on the off-chance that if he flew away from the thought, he didn't have to think it. But the thoughts were in his own head, and came with him, and slapped into the back of his head.

He was starting to think that Draco Malfoy could be a tolerable person outside of his function in making Harry happy.

He didn't know what had first given him that impression, infuriatingly. He saw the way Draco watched other people, with more observant curiosity than the malice that Connor had given him credit for. He saw the way he'd thrown himself into Animagus training; he *could* care about a study he had no guarantee would give him some kind of personal advantage, then. Of course, Connor was still determined to transform first, but that was beside the point.

The point was that he was starting to see all these little things, and it made life very complicated. He couldn't just believe people were good and evil any more. He saw frailties and weaknesses among people who weren't Gryffindors or Light wizards that awoke his compassion, and strengths that the people he loved best didn't have.

If I could stop noticing things, Connor thought, hanging upside-down once more in the hope that the blood rush to his brain would drown his thoughts, *I could stop growing up, or whatever it is I'm doing. That would be pleasant.*

"Connor Potter! You come down here this instant!"

The shout carried clearly through the storm that had now, mostly, translated to rain. Connor flipped himself back over in astonishment and blinked at the Pitch, absently thanking Merlin that he didn't wear glasses like Harry.

Parvati stood at the edge of the Pitch, arms folded as she glared up at him. Connor snatched the Snitch, skimmed down the Firebolt towards her, and opened his mouth to explain.

"What you were *thinking*, flying in weather like this, I'll never know," Parvati said flatly, and seized his arm. "It's a long way from the first day of spring, you realize?"

“Of course I realize—*ow!*”

She'd tugged him along, practically carrying him off his feet. “But maybe it's a good thing,” she added, with manic cheer. “That means that you get to practice those drying charms I showed you the other day on your Quidditch gear, since the house elves won't be washing it.”

“Parvatiiii,” Connor whinged.

She turned and faced him, eyebrow raised. “Yes?”

Connor went silent at the look on her face, the worry behind her eyes. And a small fire that had nothing to do with imaginings of the Gryffindor common room took up residence in his belly.

If I'm noticing other people, I also get noticed.

He leaned forward and kissed her. His lips were cold and wet, but she gave only a muffled protest before kissing him back.

Connor slid his arms around her, dropping the Firebolt to the ground, and had a final thought before he became too busy for thinking.

Maybe growing up isn't so bad.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy-One: Blood of Slytherin

“Promise me you'll stay behind me when we Apparate in.”

Regulus's voice was tolerant. “Harry, I'm not going to promise you that.”

Harry glared at him. “Voldemort could have left traps around the shack that would reach out to the Dark Mark—“

In answer, Regulus drew his left sleeve back, showing Harry the Grim that crouched on his forearm in place of a snake and skull. “I wish him good luck trying to reclaim me from Death,” he said. “You should be more worried about Severus, and yet you aren't snapping at him and trying to make him follow you like a duckling.”

“That's because he knows what would happen if he tried,” said Snape, striding into his office. Because he was in the mood to notice things like that, Harry noticed that almost no trace of a limp remained in his walk; the damage he had taken in the Chamber of Secrets more than a year ago was healed. Snape saw him noticing and gave him a flat stare. Harry hissed at him through bared teeth.

He could easily name the feelings that bubbled inside him as he paced back and forth between the hearth and Snape's door. Protectiveness, anger at the mere thought of someone who followed him being hurt, and determination to be the one at the front, wielding the magic that would be more likely to spare his life and shield those who followed after. The problem was that he couldn't explain them in a way that made them acceptable to the people he wanted to guard.

Regulus had quietly refused to let Harry go to the shack without him. He'd said that, as the one who'd brought the news of the Horcruxes, he had the right to see their capture of one through. And if he could sense anything about the Dark magic around the shack which Harry might not notice—an upbringing among Dark purebloods had to be good for *something*, he'd said—then he should test spells before Harry could.

Snape was coming. Harry had not been able to dissuade him. His Dark Mark had not tingled or burned in weeks, he said; there was no sign that Voldemort was trying to interact with it. His dreams had retreated into normal nightmares or bizarre interminglings of ordinary life and image-play. He had nothing to weaken him, and that meant he seemed to have fastened more firmly than ever onto the idea of becoming Harry's father, not just his guardian.

Draco was coming. Harry had looked into his eyes after he opened his mouth to protest, and shut it again, knowing better than to continue.

Argutus would come, because his scales might reflect hidden spells contained in the wards around the shack. In fact, he slithered in through the open door now and draped himself happily around Harry's shoulders. “*Here I am,*” he said. “*You may cease your*

waiting for me.” His tongue flickered, once, and he jerked his head towards Harry. “*You smell of anger and frustration. Why?*”

Harry sighed and stroked the snake’s head, ignoring Regulus’s and Snape’s piercing stares. At least they couldn’t understand him when he said something in Parseltongue. “I don’t want anyone else to be hurt. I—I remember the wards around the house as incredibly Dark, giving me a conviction that I would be cursed if I entered that I’ve never felt anywhere else. And Voldemort could have strengthened them or put in spells that only I am strong enough to oppose. I don’t *want* anyone else taking the risk or becoming the sacrifice.”

The Omen snake flicked his tongue against Harry’s cheek, light as a kiss. “*This is about them becoming sacrifices for the Horcruxes.*” Harry had told him about that, but only after emphasizing, repeatedly, that this was not an indication he wanted Argutus to make the decision Syllarana had. “*You don’t want to allow them to make their own decisions.*”

Harry winced. It sounded harsher in Parseltongue than it ever would in English. “I—“

Peter entered then, with Draco at his side and Henrietta not far behind. Between them, Peter and Henrietta had an unequalled knowledge of the theory behind Dark magic, they had told him. Snape might have more practical experience with it, but Henrietta had experimented and Peter had studied obscure meanings and symbols that they could need to unlock the riddles of Voldemort’s curses.

Draco stepped away from Peter and locked eyes with Harry. Harry glanced away miserably, knowing he had been seen.

A pair of arms slipped around his waist, and Draco sighed into his ear. “You’re making this a lot harder than it needs to be, you know,” he murmured at Harry. A stir at the door indicated the arrival of Owen and Syrinx, Harry knew, but he didn’t look up or back, if only because he would have rammed his head into Draco’s chin. “You have your role to play, and we have ours. And if we want to be at your side when you go into danger, you don’t have the right to shove us away.”

“I know.” Harry sounded pathetic. Responding to the tone in his voice, rather than the words—so far, he’d been frustrated in his efforts to learn English—Argutus rubbed against Harry’s chin. Harry stroked his skin with his flesh hand, since the silver one didn’t transmit much warmth as yet. “But this is probably the deepest instinct, Draco, the one I can’t shake. It’s one thing to theorize in a library about what needs to happen when we find a Horcrux. It’s another thing altogether to go into battle with one and not take the point, not be the guardian, the defender—“

“The sacrifice.”

Harry jerked against his hold, but Draco had as firm a grip on him as he’d ever achieved. “I wasn’t thinking of it like that.”

“That’s all right,” said Draco cheerfully. “I’ll think of it like that for you. You can’t just be the sacrifice and be done with it, you selfish idiot. You can’t just protect people, either. We *chose* to be in this fight, and we’ll fight beside you if we want. And your life is more important to the wizarding world than any single person’s here.” Harry shook his head automatically, and one of Draco’s hands shifted up to cover his mouth. “Ah, ah, just listen. And we’re important to you, and that means that we shouldn’t carelessly risk our lives, either, because our dying would make you feel like you wanted to die. So it has to be a balance, Harry. Doesn’t everything? You’re working as one of a team, not in a unique position. I know how hard that is for you, but it doesn’t mean we’ll change our minds.”

Harry bit the left corner of his lip, bit the right corner, and slowly, slowly worked his shoulders downwards. He tried to dismiss the visions that had filled his mind all night, of a curse opening dark wings on Snape and rending him apart, of Regulus’s Mark coming alive as Death claimed him, of a silver blade like the kind set on some ancient wizarding tombs to trap them sweeping out and cleaving through Draco’s neck--

He shoved that particular image away, shuddering. Just thinking about it made him near sick.

Draco bit the side of his neck, not on the place that Harry hated, but just close enough to distract him thoroughly, and stepped back. “You’ve talked to me about this often enough,” he whispered, when Harry glanced at him over his shoulder. “You must not have thought I’d listen to you.”

“When there was a mirror around?”

Most satisfyingly, Draco’s face rippled with irritation. “I am *not* that vain—“

“We’re all assembled,” Snape broke in coolly. “I think we should proceed to the Apparition point, Harry.”

Harry had to take several deep breaths before he could nod. “All right.”

Snape watched Harry closely as they moved along the Hogsmeade road towards the Apparition point. None of them remembered the house well enough to Apparate directly there, especially since they had last seen it in winter and it was now almost spring, and so they would arrive at the place from which they’d walked to the graveyard confrontation on Midwinter.

He saw many small things, things he would have been unaware of a few months ago when he was sunk in melancholy. Harry twisted his head from side to side constantly, his chin up and his eyes seeking out those who followed him. His hand now and then reached back and brushed Regulus’s robe or Snape’s arm or Draco’s hip. When he could, he walked in front of the others, or at least to the front, talking to Owen Rosier-Henlin and edging a bit ahead of him. He even moved his torso so as to shield most of his snake behind him.

Putting himself in the way of any danger that might strike us from that direction, Snape thought. Following his instincts ingrained into him from childhood—only this time, it’s not just his brother he’s protecting.

But things had changed. Harry would have argued more, at one time, or simply sneaked out of the school and Apparated himself to the shack, without letting anyone else come along with him into danger. Snape’s lips still tightened as he remembered the way Harry had forced him to stay behind in his third year, when he’d gone tearing into the Shrieking Shack to confront Voldemort in Sirius Black’s body.

If he has altered, so have we. Snape let his fingers brush the wand that rode in the holster on his waist. We can work with his magic now, instead of having to shelter behind it or coax him to use it.

And, resolved though I might be to letting him make mistakes, he shall not suffer their consequences unshielded.

The last months had been good for at least that one thing, Snape thought. They had taught him what it felt like to have only one person in the world who cared for him—Harry—and reminded him of his Death Eater days, when there had been another, Regulus, he thought lost forever.

Anyone who tried to kill Harry as Voldemort had, apparently, killed Regulus would have Severus Snape’s spells to get through.

And if Harry did not like that, he could be stunned and dragged unconscious back to Hogwarts, and then delegate such tasks as this to the trustworthy, rather than go on any more adventures.

Harry arrived with a larger bump that he would have liked; a small mound of projecting earth on the hillside had fallen away from where he remembered it. Well, that and Draco had apparently tried to Apparate by himself halfway through Harry Side-Along Apparating him.

“*Draco*,” he said in annoyance, turning around. Argutus was twining up and down like a dancer, looking at everything new in delight, and promptly unwound himself from Harry to vanish into the piled leaves.

Draco looked at him in complete unconcern, picking twigs out of his hair. “What?” he asked. “It’s time that I learned how to Apparate, too. I’m almost seventeen, and I don’t need you to drag me like a child everywhere.”

Harry settled for glaring at him, and turned to watch for signs of Muggle intrusion or wizard notice. The hillside’s trees were still bare, concealing slushy patches of half-melted snow, but a freezing rain had begun to fall, and Harry doubted anyone would come out to see them despite the scant cover. He counted the landings behind him, and then the pairs of footsteps, and relaxed a bit. Everyone had made the transition safely.

Syrinx came up beside him, one hand in her robe pocket. Harry knew she was touching a small golden kitten that Laura had sent her, which could scout for danger in an unfamiliar place. Her head turned and her eyes locked with Harry’s, calm and blank. “Ready, sir?” she asked.

Harry nodded. Syrinx took out the kitten, put it on the ground, and whispered instructions into the pricked metallic ear. The kitten scampered off immediately into the leaves and the wet, and faded from sight. Harry had thought the gold would reflect the light better than it apparently did.

“He’ll warn me if someone else shows up,” said Syrinx, and touched the earring that clung to her left lobe. Now that Harry thought about it, the kitten had been wearing one, too.

He chided himself for not noticing a detail like that. On a task like this, not noticing things could get someone else rapidly killed.

But he’d had no choice about their coming, unless he used conjured ropes or binding spells to make them stay behind. He collected them all with his glance, and then nodded down the hill towards the place where he remembered the house being.

“Syrinx will be watching for traps,” he said quietly. “So will Argutus, and so will I. But Voldemort may have left some we can’t locate immediately, or which are too subtle for the usual means of detection. Watch out, please. Don’t go charging ahead. Wands out.” That was useful only for Draco, though, since everyone else had already drawn his or her wand. Henrietta was looking around with a faintly wistful expression on her face, as if she wanted someone to blast now.

Harry led, Syrinx and Draco just slightly behind him. There might have been arguments about that. He didn’t let there be. He also ignored the freezing rain on his skin, though he could hear a few muttered warming charms behind him. He needed to watch out for magic, and the best way to do that was not through a shield of charms.

Jing-Xi had taught him to focus, to sharpen his sight, and pick out spells from the litter of the mundane and low-level natural magic around them. It was a skill Harry had used during his first year at Hogwarts, but not truly since; he’d grown so accustomed to the spells in Hogwarts that he could ignore them as he did the general shape of the stones and the light of the torches.

Now he made himself *see*, and not merely look. His eyes swept trunks and slippery grass and the trailing edges of wizard robes and trainers and boots, and then came back again, circling as restlessly as a young werewolf. The rain made no difference to the spells he could see this way. It would not have unless it were a magical storm, but his training gave him an extra edge, too, insuring that the cold didn’t distract him as he searched.

They neared the shack, and still Harry saw nothing outside the utter black hole of Dark that was the house itself and the flickering flames of his companions’ magic. But he didn’t care. There could always be something lurking he hadn’t uncovered. He stared at every trailing root, every fluttering movement in the trees, every shift of the soil, and refused to let anyone go ahead of him no matter how much they—well, all right, Draco—pushed at him to do so. Voldemort was cunning, if not intelligent. He could have set traps.

“Indigena!”

She had been reading in the garden, her skin enjoying the impact of the wetness and a Dry-Shield Charm keeping the pages unharmed, but she put down the book at once and vaulted into the burrow when her Lord called her. She slid down the steps more than she descended them, vines uncoiling from beneath the skin of her legs and clutching into the dirt. As she landed a few feet away from Voldemort on the dirt floor of the tunnel, she asked, “My Lord?”

“Someone approaches the ring, Indigena.”

The ring? She had been reading about circular components of the golden bridle spell, and for a moment her mind tried to present her with a diagram. But then she remembered the only thing that would have put her Lord into this much of a panic, helped along, perhaps, by the tight clutch of his hands on the golden cup. Someone was approaching the small house not far away where he had hidden the ring of the House of Gaunt, a hereditary treasure of his family and thus of Slytherin’s bloodline. And a Horcrux, of course.

An Unassailable Curse protected it, and a special surprise that no one outside of Lord Voldemort and she herself knew about, but Indigena, thinking, could see why the Dark Lord might be afraid that this particular person could pass the Unassailable Curse, if

“Harry,” said Voldemort, and spat. The spittle landed on the earth and sank into it with a sizzling sound. It took everything Indigena had to keep from flinching back. Under her shoulders, her tendrils curled close for protection, and the rose around her wrist tried to sink into her skin.

“Do you wish me to go to the house, my lord, and protect it?” Indigena asked. She had not had time, between tending her Lord and studying, to make every tree on the hillside into her devotee, but she was near it. The trees would not obey her commands perfectly if she asked them to attack Harry and whoever he might have brought with him, but they could slow him down.

“No,” said Voldemort, a low snarl in the back of his throat. “The idea that Harry could have learned about Horcruxes, and I not sensed it, with what I know—*inconceivable*. And yet—” He closed his eyes, and his body shuddered and went limp. Indigena waited, one hand braced on the floor and the other clutching her wand. She would go if she had to, she was mad to go if it meant that Harry had somehow discovered the secret of her Lord’s immortality, but she could not act without orders. She forced herself to concentrate on slowing the sick churning in her stomach, rather than doing anything else.

Voldemort was back, then, and he let out a long, low howl that shuddered through the chamber. Indigena felt his power spring up, blowing around him like a wind, and then drain away again through the hole in his magical core. She sighed. Until he could find a way to seal the hole, or convince Harry to undo the curse, her Lord could act only by using others as his hands and feet.

“Indigena,” he said, when the wind had died.

“Yes, my lord?”

“He knows,” said Voldemort flatly. “But if you attack, he will know that I know that he knows. I do not wish this to happen. And if I use the easiest weapon to hand, then I reveal myself too soon, and I cannot destroy *all* that he has loved.” He paused a long moment, then said, “It must be risked. Use the golden bridle, Indigena.”

She knew better than to protest. Besides, Harry might be to the house by now, and trying to break the Unassailable Curse. If he found its vulnerability—a vulnerability that the Dark Lord could never have foreseen when he cast it—then he might break it, or be able to guess how he could do so.

She sat down on the ground and began to speak the opening incantations of the golden bridle. She drew her wand in a circle around her all the while, and her plants sank into the soil to anchor her, and her left forearm flared and tingled and opened to a flow of bladed power.

Harry eyed the house. Closer to it, the feeling of evil, the stink of vicious Dark magic, grew worse. He had the urge to bare his teeth and whine. He knew now why Light wizards sometimes insisted that all Dark Arts were wrong. If they had encountered magic like this, they had a point.

The curses cast a steady feeling of doom and warning to stay away into the air. If was no wonder, Harry thought, that Muggles had never tried to knock the shack down, or explore it, even if they had been curious about it or wanted to build something here. Muggles were mad for building things.

The hillside remained untouched. Harry summoned his magic. Still he could see no spells implanted in the soil around the house, and he was running out of excuses to stand where he was. He could easily have remained there all day if it meant protecting his companions from danger, but they would not understand.

The house was still the ruin he remembered from more than a year ago, with no sign that anyone had been here since. Frozen mud caked the threshold and clung to the base of the walls. Harry stepped nearer, and nearer, and then reached out and laid his silver hand on the door.

Magic exploded all about the house in a silent lightning storm. Acid that would have devoured flesh leaped from the door. Harry already had shields up, snapping, singing, spreading, in response, and the acid splattered against the air a few inches from his and Syrinx’s faces.

Some had hit his silver hand, he saw, when he looked. But it did not work on metal as it would have on meat. It simply slid down, sullenly. Harry shook his wrist to get it off, and then studied the house again. He could make out the spell that had concealed the acid ward now, so dim and close-woven with the general trceries of Dark magic that trying to detect it was like trying to see a Granian in stormclouds. He grimaced.

“*Harry!*”

Draco had grabbed his shoulder and shaken it hard. Harry turned around with a leap. “What?” he demanded, picturing danger coming up behind him, one of the group missing, someone—

“Are you all right, you fucking idiot?” Draco had seized his cheeks and was staring at him. Harry felt his face flush. He tried to pull his head free. Draco wouldn’t let him go. Harry had to drive magic into his own limbs so that he could pull away.

“Of course,” he said. “I would have told you if I wasn’t.” He studied their pale, silent faces—even Syrinx looked as if she had seen him fall off a cliff—and realized then that the acid had shocked them. He snorted. “I hardly expected to get to the Horcrux without triggering a few wards,” he reassured them.

Draco made a strangled sound. Harry looked at him. “What?”

Draco pursed his lips together and shook his head. Harry frowned, annoyed. *He can be that way, then.* He faced the house again, and this time let his concentration on the rest of the world slip away, so that the house became the center of his vision. Then he sharpened the intangible “light” by which he saw magic, and some Dark spells he had missed before sprang out, pulsing.

The sheer scope and scale of the curses wrought on the house to keep intruders out made Harry dizzy. It was more than a web, it was a nightmare of thorns and briars of spells intercutting each other, intersecting in knots that made it seem as if they had edges, and then turning away again and speeding off into the air at impossible angles. There was probably a key somewhere, one strand that could be tugged to make it fall apart—Voldemort would not want to be held away from one of his Horcruxes if he had to fetch it quickly—but Harry had no idea where it would be.

Or it could just be that the Dark Lord was immune to all the spells on the house. With the scale of his study in other countries, and just how many spells Harry didn’t recognize and thought were probably Egyptian or New Zealand magic, it was entirely possible.

“I should have brought Thomas,” he muttered, taking a step forward. “Or Jing-Xi.”

“Harry!”

He glanced up. Regulus had pressed forward, and was kneeling next to the house, carefully keeping his hands inches from even the smallest of the thorn-spells. He had one hand clamped on his left arm, over the Grim mark. The Grim’s shadow splayed in front of him, sniffing curiously at the shack.

Harry walked over to him. Regulus glanced up. “There’s an Unassailable Curse here,” he said softly.

Harry felt his face drain of blood. “You’re sure?”

Regulus nodded and passed a hand over his eyes. “Death taught me to recognize them,” he said. “She thought—well, she thought I might need the knowledge.” He laughed, but the laughter, to Harry, had a hollow sound, and for a moment he felt the weight of what they faced threaten to overwhelm him. “Why, I can’t imagine,” Regulus added, with a sarcasm Harry would have thought more fitting for Sirius.

“Is it a curse that someone would have to die to break?” Harry asked quietly.

“No,” said Regulus. “I suspect he wouldn’t want that, just in case one of his Death Eaters had to retrieve the Horcrux or he came alone, once. And it isn’t the kind of curse one casts casually, that.” He drew his wand. “I’ve been studying Unassailable Curses,” he explained out of the corner of his mouth. “Still no way around them that I can find.” He caught Harry’s eyes in a brief, intense glance that Harry turned away from. “But I can identify what their major components might be.”

He extended his wand towards a thin dark line that looked no different from most of the other spells to Harry, except that it coiled around most of the thorns in a pattern like a lazy figure eight. “*Vomica erinyos comperta!*”

The curse blazed to life. Harry grimaced and put his flesh hand in front of his eyes. The blaze was manifested as thick, oily flames.

“Blood,” said Regulus.

“Vampires?” Harry asked, when he thought he could bear the sight of the curse afire. “Or we have to bleed someone to get inside?” Blood magic had been part of the protection for the locket Horcrux, Regulus had told him.

Regulus shook his head. “Not that kind of blood,” he said. “I should have said—heritage.” He turned his wand around, frowning, then cast a few more incantations. The curse blazed twice and was still once. Regulus stared, and then laughed. Harry laid the silver hand on his shoulder. It made him sick to hear such a sound from Regulus.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I asked if the curse was tied to the heritage of a specific family,” Regulus replied. “It seemed there were few families he could

have used. Most of his Death Eaters came from diverse backgrounds. Sure enough. He used his own.” He glanced at Harry again. “Only the blood of Slytherin can break that curse.”

“And he’s the only descendant of Slytherin left,” Harry muttered, remembering what the shadow of Tom Riddle had told him when he tried to control the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. A Parselmouth descended from Slytherin had had to control that snake, no one else. “Bastard.”

“Rather.”

Harry rapped his flesh hand against his knee. “Are there any other Unassailable Curses on the shack itself?”

Regulus shook his head. “Only that one.”

“Then we need to know a way to break that one, most of all,” Harry breathed. “I can get Thomas and come back to study the others.” He stared for a moment more, then turned to Snape. “Severus, I’ll meet your eyes and transfer the memory of what the spells on the house look like to you. Then you plant it in the minds of the others with Legilimency.” He glanced quickly at Draco, Regulus, Peter, Henrietta, and Owen. Syrinx stood off to the side, eyes slightly closed as she listened to the golden kitten’s reports. “I want you to tell me if you recognize any of the spells. If not, just prepare to hold the memory so that we can study it when we get back to Hogwarts.”

“But you don’t want us to break the spells if we recognize one?” Henrietta asked hopefully.

Harry shook his head. “Destroying one spell we do know might trigger the spells we don’t. And I think we may only get one chance to approach what’s in that house, anyway. Better to study it and then retreat and come back when we’re prepared.” He could feel relief growing in his chest. He wouldn’t have to ask any of his companions to die for him today.

He locked eyes with Snape and reached out with his Legilimency. Snape grimaced when he received the vision, and then turned and looked at Regulus. Harry met Draco’s eyes.

Syrinx jerked and cried out. Harry spun around. He had been expecting Death Eaters to appear to defend their master’s Horcrux at any moment, but he had hoped they would not. *Must they die after all?*

“What is it?” he asked.

“The kitten’s gone.” The war witch plucked the earring from her ear and laid it on her palm, staring. “Not enough time to see anything useful, sir. Just the tip of a wand, and then he was blasted.”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry gently. He knew the Gloryflowers’ bond with their artificial animals ran deep enough that the loss of one hurt, and he felt a pulse of anxiety for Argutus. “But he died bravely, and he’s told us there’s danger.” He looked around, but saw no sign of Argutus. Closing his eyes and picturing a snake, he hissed a call to return in Parseltongue—all he could do. He had no mental bond with Argutus to compare to his one with Sylarana.

He reached out his arm to Draco, preparing to Apparate him, and hoping that this time Draco wouldn’t get it into his head that he needed to be an adult. Luckily, Draco took his arm with alacrity, and Harry turned to see the other Apparition pair forming, Syrinx stepping up to Snape without a qualm.

“ ‘And so, I missed my chance with one of the lords of life,’ ” a voice intoned from the other side of the house. “ ‘And I have something to expiate; a pettiness.’ Running away from me would be such a pettiness, Harry.”

Evan Rosier came into view, smiling. He held a glass bead with blue lines radiating from it. Harry studied the lines where they curved off into the air, and resisted the temptation to swear. If he hadn’t been concentrating so hard on the curses on the house, he might have noticed when the lines established their web. As it was, there was now an anti-Apparition shield over the immediate area, and Harry recognized the general pattern as a variant on Ariadne’s Web, the spell that had sheltered the school of Durmstrang last year. He would have to destroy or steal the glass bead in Rosier’s hand to gain control of the web.

“Do you like it?” Rosier tilted the bead in his hand, admiring it. “I have studied hard in the past year. It was something to do when I could not sleep.” He lifted his head, and his eyes were wild and dark and laughing. “ ‘Like a king in exile, uncrowned in the underworld, now due to be crowned again.’ You have taught me what it is like to be an exiled king, Harry, and for that I must thank you. But I have missed you.”

“I told you once,” said Harry calmly, ignoring the drawn wands and hissed-in breaths from around him, “that the next time I saw

you, I would kill you.”

“Oh, yes, you did,” said Rosier agreeably. “But I think that you should look at me and see what I’ve learned first, Harry. *Pulmo dominatio!*”

Harry braced himself to fling the spell back the moment it tried to get control of him; Rosier was an expert in spells that got under shields and affected the human body, like the Blood-Burning Curse that he had afflicted Harry with the first time they fought in proper battle. But Harry thought he could resist it, now.

He felt nothing. Then he heard a gasp and felt a head sag against his shoulder, and knew whose lungs Rosier had taken control of.

Draco.

The world went white. It took Harry a moment to realize it hadn’t gone white just for him. His magic was flaring in a wide circle of shining fire all around him, beating in time with his own heart, closing in and turning around Rosier like a torture wheel. Rosier was watching it with an expression of childlike delight. He wagged the glass bead, as if to remind Harry of what was at stake.

“That was pretty,” he remarked to Harry. “You must show me that again sometime.” He paused reflectively. “Or you could bring me raspberries. I have developed a taste for them, in place of the blueberries that you never brought me.”

“Let him go, Rosier,” Harry said, trying to block from his mind the descriptions of what he’d read the Lung Domination Curse as doing. Victims could die slowly from lack of air, instead of quickly. Their lungs could fill with fluid, and they could drown on dry land. They—

“You should have acted more quickly,” said Rosier. “You let me talk, and that is always a bad idea, Harry. How many enemies’ lives will you spare while your friends die?” He smiled at him. “Let us make a wager. I say four. How many do you say?”

A curse soared over Harry’s shoulder before he could recover his self-possession, aimed for the glass bead in Rosier’s hand. It hit a shield Harry hadn’t even seen, and shattered. Rosier laughed.

“I am much stronger now, Henrietta,” he said. “My magic has increased wonderfully. Did I mention that?”

“Let him go, Rosier,” Harry said. The world had become simple, as simple as the rage his wheel of fire expressed, as simple as the desperation that was slowly eating his brain from the inside out. “Let him go, and you may have whatever you wish of me.” He lifted his wrists to show that he had a silver hand attached to the left one. “Do you want this? You can have it.”

Rosier’s eyes blazed. “You are so kind to offer your hand to me, Harry,” he murmured. “But I think I want something else.”

“What?”

“Do not trust him, Harry.” Snape sounded like nothing human. Harry flicked him a glance and saw his magic crouched around him as a muscled shadow. “He will keep no bargain he makes.”

“Do shut up, Severus,” said Rosier. “You can’t advise him in this situation.” He turned his gaze to fix on Harry. “And I think I prefer your right hand to your left,” he said, and showed his teeth. “I am hungry, I think, for red, wet flesh, and not so much for cold, hard silver.”

Harry felt the waves of his emotions crashing over him. Fear and rage alternated so quickly he could hardly tell them apart any more. All he knew for certain was that Rosier might as well have gripped his own lungs with that curse. His breath came in time with Draco’s needy, gasping ones behind him. He did feel Draco sag briefly, in the manner that meant he was trying his possession gift, but then he gave a jerky sigh, and Harry knew it had failed. Probably Rosier was too insane for Draco to possess.

“Harry,” Draco whispered, and Harry bent towards him, never taking his eyes from Rosier as the air grew more and more tense. “I can’t control him, but there’s something—I can’t see it well—a golden bridle, wrung over his thoughts—if you can break that, I think—“

And then he stopped talking, and Harry looked to see his face turning blue.

He faced Rosier again, and *screamed*. His ring of white fire soared, leaping like a fountain, gouts of power rising and then falling right back down into place, so they looked less like fountains and more like blades as the moments wore on. Harry wanted to kill. He was mad to do so.

“No talking, no,” Rosier said. “Did I give you permission to do that? *Naughty* Draco.” And Draco started breathing again, but only in shallow pulses that Harry knew couldn’t sustain him. “Now, Harry, come forward and hold out your hand to me, so that I can bite your palm. I prefer my meat alive when I can get it.”

Harry moved forward, ignoring the stifled gasps and curses from behind him, never yielding Rosier’s gaze. He had a moment, and no more, to decide what he should do with the information Draco had given him.

Perhaps at another time he would have planned and plotted. But now, everything was so simple. He had to save Draco. He trusted Draco absolutely.

Thus it was that as he came to a halt and held out his hand for Rosier to eat, he leaped through his eyes, in a burst of Legilimency.

He saw at once what Draco had meant. Beyond Rosier’s eyes was not the chaos he would have expected of a mad person, the chaos that Snape had once seen in Sirius’s mind when he was being driven insane by Voldemort’s possession, but a lashing sea with a bridge over it. The bridge resembled a golden bridle if seen from a certain angle. And underneath that bridle, the chaos fought still.

Someone had grasped Rosier’s mind and constrained him to appear.

And if Harry broke the bridle, then he would be setting Rosier free to do as he willed.

Only a moment to make a decision, and Harry chose freedom. He could not do otherwise. He was *vates*, and the mad things, the wild things, the Dark things, they deserved their freedom, too.

And Rosier held Draco on someone else’s orders.

Harry cleft the golden bridle. It withered, falling away like the phoenix web. Someone fought him for a moment, but that person was not strong enough to hold on to the spell in the face of Harry’s magic. He gripped the bridle and shook it to death between his teeth.

And Rosier was free.

Indigena gagged, feeling as though someone had punched her in the belly, and flopped on the floor of the tunnel as gracelessly as Falco dropping out of the air. She coughed and coughed and coughed again, and then moaned softly at the merciless pounding in her head.

“Indigena?”

Somehow, she roused herself and crawled to her Lord’s side. His fingers felt her face, and he whispered, “Harry knows that Evan was under the bridle spell?”

She nodded, and let her head fall forward, to rest on her Lord’s chest. He did not smell bad, like dirt and flowers and soft cool things. It gave Indigena the strength to summon breath to reassure him.

“But he—didn’t spend much time in Evan’s head,” she whispered. “He didn’t have time to see the source of the bridle, nor where it was attached on Evan’s body.”

“Good,” said Voldemort, his fingers clamping into her hair and on the back of her neck. “Then we will move slowly, and subtly. The others are more certain. Only our mad Evan, our broken one, needs such measures. Do not repeat the spell, and Harry cannot trace the pattern.”

Harry felt for a moment as if he were falling into an abyss, a black, churning sea, crushed with lightning, that reared up to meet him. And then he was free himself, as Rosier’s natural insanity reasserted itself, and flung him out of his mind.

He was lying on the ground, a torn bite in the center of his palm, staring up at Rosier. There was blood on his teeth, and wildness in his eyes. And realization, if not sanity.

He dropped the glass bead and crushed it beneath his heel, all the time never taking his eyes from Harry's. Then he aimed his wand at Draco—Harry remembered, as if in a daze, that he had not used his wand to cast the Lung Domination Curse—and shouted, "*Finite Incantatem!*"

Draco took a deep breath, to show Harry he could.

A timeless moment passed, swinging like a pendulum, during which Harry looked into Rosier's eyes as he would the eyes of any wild creature he freed. He saw the same hatred he had seen there when he used the phoenix tears to heal Rosier's wounds in the graveyard last Midwinter.

And they were enemies again, and Harry tried to make the ring of white fire race in and swallow Rosier, and Rosier leaped away, the distinctive *crack* of Apparition shattering into silence. Argutus's lunge carried him futilely through empty air a second too late, and he chose, hissing, to twine about Harry instead.

Harry turned, forced himself to his feet, tamed his magic, snatched Draco close, and Apparated. The others followed without discussion. Harry knew they didn't need to be told where he was going.

He landed safely on the grass outside Hogwarts, breathing in the scent of Draco's hair, clutching him as if he would never let him go, and tasting the slide of rain over his skin and his lips.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Seventy-Two: See What Beauty Falls

Draco took a deep breath, because he could, and then another one, because he could see Harry watching him.

Harry had lingered to tell the Headmistress what had happened and to answer questions from the others as they arrived, with bare courtesy. Regulus had stepped back and prudently let him go when his magic sprouted from his face in bizarre bronze tendrils. Draco was of the opinion that this was the right thing to do.

And not only because Harry would be calmer if not forced to answer question after question, of course. Also so that Harry could take care of him.

It was a wonderful feeling, to know that at that moment, he was the center of Harry's world and Harry would have done anything to protect him. He'd taken Draco back to their bedroom and conjured food for him from a robe that he never wore anymore. Draco had protested at first, expecting it to taste like dust, but in fact it tasted like grapes. He'd had to eye Harry sideways and wonder how much of what he did in class failed not because he didn't have the talent but because he was trying to channel raw power through the conduits of spells too small for it.

Harry had fed him the grapes, eyes so intent that Draco had felt unable to talk. Meanwhile, his magic roamed the room, snakes twitching their tails and hissing whenever Harry looked at them. Sometimes Harry hissed back, and sometimes he talked to Argutus, but for the most part he kept up a low murmuring of constant reassurances that Draco could only make out some of the time.

"Love you... would have torn him apart if he hurt you more than that... should have torn him apart the moment I saw him... Merlin, Draco, no end to the things I would do for you... has to be a better way to protect you... felt as if my mind was ripping out of my skull when I knew that he'd hit you with that spell... so clever, even in the middle of that pain, to feel the golden bridle in his mind and be able to tell it to me..."

Draco leaned back on the bed and let Harry touch him with his hands when the words weren't enough any more. For the most part, Harry used the right one, but Draco reached up and clasped his left wrist, letting him know without words that the silver was welcome. And it was; the combination of Harry's magic working to bind it to his body and a warming charm made it only a little stiffer and smoother than Harry's right hand.

Draco reveled in the fact that no one else would ever know what the touch of those hands felt like, and in the gaze Harry gave him all the while, as if he were the most precious thing ever to exist, treasure and lover and friend all rolled up into one. He could have asked Harry to do anything at that moment, and he would have done it.

He didn't intend to use that power, of course, except to save Harry's life if necessary. But he didn't care. The point was that he had it, and he *could* have used it. Draco closed his eyes, and twitched a bit as Harry spelled his clothes away and went to work,

kneading his skin and breathing over every sensitive place on his body and caressing his groin as if he thought that it would vanish in the next moment.

The other times they'd bedded each other stood out clear and sharp in Draco's mind, mosaics of leaps and angles. This one didn't. This one was curved, blurred, blending, sliding from a moment of pleasure to another moment of pleasure, colors exploding behind his eyes, pleasure soaking his belly from the inside and his hands and his chest and his legs and then his belly from the outside.

Harry gathered him close when he was done. He used his hands, but other than that, he might have shifted Draco's weight by main force or magic; Draco couldn't open his eyes to see. He lifted his head for a kiss, and it was there. He leaned his head on Harry's shoulder, and it was there.

He couldn't open his eyes, he was so sated, but he could imagine the picture Harry must make, crouched over him, eyes blazing as he stared at the far wall and, Draco hoped, plotted vengeance on Rosier.

He did wish he hadn't had to go through such an experience as the Lung Domination Curse to get this kind of treatment, Draco reflected drowsily. But he had had his place in Harry's life reconfirmed in a very pleasant way, and now he drifted on the edge of bliss. He favored giving up all thought about his dangerous experience today in order to flirt with sleep.

Sleep won, and seduced him—though not as thoroughly as Harry had—into a slumber that Draco felt as a leaping wave of blackness creeping up from his legs. He might have tensed when it passed over his chest and above his still-laboring lungs, but he did not. He was comfortable, and he was relaxed, and then he was gone.

Harry waited until he was sure Draco was asleep to lower the barriers over his magic.

The air all around him went hot, bright, blazing, like a desert at noonday. Harry saw golden trees take form on the wall, but they looked blasted and blistered, as if they had stood too long in that fierce sun. Snakes looped through them, but their heads and tails were both narrower, and they showed fangs as they moved. Lynxes were nowhere in sight.

The black cats were everywhere. One of them jumped up on the bed and nudged at Draco, causing Harry to draw him more tightly into his arms, then lifted its head and locked Harry's gaze, green eye to green eye.

Harry saw the rage there, and he met it, because he had to, in a struggle only slightly less fierce than the one with Rosier had been. He swung between the desire, the need, to find and kill Evan Rosier so he could never do something like that to Draco again. And not far behind the anger was the desperate, maddened despair. Draco would be in danger every time they went into battle, unless Harry did something about it. And it was up to Harry to do something about it, because he was the reason Draco was in danger. If he had not cared about Draco so much, then his enemies would not have concentrated on Draco and tried to kill him.

He knew he could not solve either of those problems in the simplest ways, the ways that would have been available to someone like Lucius Malfoy. He could not order Draco to stay behind and out of danger, because that was a violation of his free will. Nor could he simply seek out and kill those who threatened Draco.

He regretted not killing Rosier on sight.

He did not think that he had it within himself to kill people on sight.

When he tried to think about it, even given the rage in the cat's eyes and the rage that had turned the room around him golden instead of deep purple and green, all his vates instincts revolted, screaming. His love of freedom was the only emotion as deep within him as his love of Draco, and it was able to combat it. He could not simply kill someone he thought was a threat, only to find out later that that person had been an innocent, or someone coming to offer terms of surrender. He could live with the consequences that might follow leaving someone alive to talk, but not the other. If he slew someone by mistake, then the shadows of suicide would come back, and he would look into the abyss he had when he let Loki kill Kieran.

But neither could he live if Draco were destroyed.

That was what he had understood in the moments after they arrived back at Hogwarts, not the moments when he tried to think of something to do to get Draco free of the Lung Domination Curse or the moments when he sprawled at Rosier's feet. As undeniable as the will to allow people their will was the one that said his mind, his heart, his soul, were wrapped up in Draco. If Draco died, he would follow. And if he allowed something to happen to Draco, again, suicide out of guilt would be the road he

had to choose, the one his sense of right would *make* him choose.

And yet he couldn't do that either, since the wizarding world needed him alive to fight Voldemort and achieve as much as he could of the tasks of a *vates*.

For a moment, just a moment, Harry closed his eyes and mourned in silence that he had not been born Connor instead—the twin who turned out to be destined for perhaps one task and that far in the future, after he had learned a few lessons in love and compassion. He didn't *want* his magic, he didn't *want* whatever thing in him made other people follow him into danger, he didn't *want* his past, not if it made him have to face choices like this.

But the moment passed, and Harry opened his eyes again and scowled at the far wall.

So he could not take the simple methods. So wishing that things were different did not mean they would suddenly change into those different configurations. So his definition of what was most important in life and what he should do with his magic would not agree—probably never agree—with anyone else's.

That didn't matter. The choices and the consequences of his choices were still there, and needed to be lived with.

And that was what made him different, Harry thought, as he eased backward and pulled Draco with him so that his head rested on his chest. The cat had lain down beside him and was licking its claws. Now and then Harry felt a swipe of its tail or its flank, feeling solid and smelling musky. *Real*. His magic was strong enough to bring a creature like this fully formed into life.

He must live with them. Very well. Then he would. He was life-focused, not death-focused, despite the thoughts of suicide that seemed to be wheeling more and more often around his head this year. If he lost people to the Horcruxes, then he would have to live on. He could not think of death as an end, because he had given his life to larger things, responsibilities that would still need him no matter how much he wanted to die.

And I don't think that I would have been happy any other way, not with my training. Harry had to acknowledge that. He did not know how to relax, how to drug his mind and send it into submission. The closest he came to it was during flight, and that was more often an occasion to think about things he couldn't manage on the ground. And even in sex with Draco, he was chasing Draco's pleasure and his own as fiercely as he could, and then, almost the moment their bedding ended, his mind pounded and raced down a new track again.

He would be destroyed if Draco was, and he could not afford to be.

That was one truth.

He would not abandon his principles against vengeance and binding the wills of others, and that was another. Besides, Draco had proven himself in battle several times now.

So the best answer that Harry could come up with was a bodyguard. He would ask Draco his opinion of the choice, but he would not accept any attempt Draco made to persuade him out of doing it, any more than Draco had let him escape without bodyguards after the Ravenclaws cursed him last year.

Besides—

Harry smiled, and the black cat looked up from licking its claws and nudged its head forward, sliding it along his side, making him tangle his fingers of the silver hand in its fur and stroke it.

He knew how to spin the idea of a bodyguard so that Draco would see it as a privilege of uniqueness, rather than the intrusion that it had tended to represent to Harry. Harry knew all about the vain side of his lover. Most of the time, he could ignore it, or he only used it to tease Draco. This time, it would be useful.

He stroked Draco's hair and looked down at him with a faint shake of his head.

"I'll charm you," he whispered. "Persuade you. Manipulate you. You're a Slytherin, and you'll understand, if you figure it out, that it was merely a case of my following the traits of our House."

The cat licked his flesh palm with a rough tongue, rasping over the wound Rosier had made. Harry glanced at it in surprise, then shrugged. He supposed he should bind it, but it had stopped bleeding and it didn't hurt. He would take himself to Madam Pomfrey if it became infected.

He lay back and closed his eyes. He should sleep while he could. The moment he was awake, he had questions to ask Snape and others of his allies—specifically, those who bore the Dark Mark on their arms.

“No.”

“Severus.” Harry was calm. Snape knew that from the way he hadn’t retreated into formality the moment Snape refused. “I do want to do this. I know that you’re a talented Legilimens and can sense most intrusions into your thoughts, but if I’m right, then Voldemort’s using a spell that compels thought, and he’s a very strong compeller. I just want to look for traces of the golden bridle that I saw in Rosier’s thoughts. That’s all.”

Snape bared his teeth. “Nothing has happened to me,” he said, looking Harry in the eye. “Since I ended the Sanctuary dreams with the one that told of Regulus’s death—“

Harry stepped forward, but Snape’s withering glare stopped him.

“I spoke of it with Joseph,” said Snape. “And that is over now. I have thought about it, and soothed the stirred memories back to sleep, or else made an effort to integrate them into my life and coexist with them.” That he had not told Joseph everything about his last dream, including what would have made him look most weak, was not the point. “There have been no vivid or compelling dreams since then. Rosier’s line about lost sleep likely means nothing.”

“But Indigena taunted him about bad dreams when he kidnapped Connor,” said Harry, “and he went mad. I think he knew he was being controlled, then, or figured it out. I don’t think they were working together at all. Indigena, or Voldemort working through Indigena, made him send those letters to Connor, and those carved wooden figures, and compelled him to wait until they were ready to summon Connor to Hawthorn’s garden. Otherwise, do you think Rosier would have remained focused on one goal for that long? I had the feeling that it was impossible for him. He is simply too chaotic, and he would have wanted to do something more to get to me than to merely summon my brother to an ally’s house and cast a few curses at him.”

Snape had to admit that the scenario sounded unlikely to him, too. But he could still not believe that the Dark Lord was trying to control him by means of bad dreams or a golden bridle spell. He would have sensed such a thing. He was a Legilimens second only to Voldemort in Britain now that Dumbledore was dead, and an Occlumens second to none. If there was influence in his mind through dreams, then Voldemort could not have hidden it from him.

And he did not want to allow Harry to read his mind.

“Severus. Please.”

Snape tossed his head and turned away. “I do not wish to,” he told his fire flatly. “There are things in my memories that you do not need to see, Harry.” He had been dreaming about the Marauders lately, and remembering the way that Dumbledore had allowed them to stay in the school when he should have expelled them after the attack on Snape. And he had allowed a werewolf to attend in the first place, madman that he was. Snape clenched his hands. Now and then he woke so full of hatred that he had to lie still and breathe deeply for a long moment before he could stand and make ready to teach Potions. Joseph said it was a healthy sign, a healing sign, that he could remember that much hatred without either burying it in an Occlumency pool or taking it out on his students, but Snape knew it made him shake with remembered darkness.

Harry did not deserve to see that wave of loathing directed at his father—the man who had sired him, say rather—at the moment when Snape was trying to be the best father to him that he could be.

“Please, Severus,” Harry tried this time, as if the combination of the word and the name in that order would work a miracle where so far they had not.

Feeling as though his first name were tugging on him like the bridle Harry wanted to look for, Snape turned around again. “Why don’t you ask the others first?” he asked harshly. “Why don’t you ask Peter?”

“I already did,” said Harry. “Asked, and looked into his mind. No trace of a golden bridle. And he said his dreams were no worse than usual. They’re finally calming down now, after keeping him awake for a relatively long time. Hawthorn and Adalrico and—“ He paused a moment, as though reluctant to say the name, then finished. “Lucius said they haven’t dreamed of violent memories or anything else recently. And Regulus’s mind isn’t his own since he came back from Death, but she fills it with visions that have nothing to do with Voldemort.”

“Then why would you think that I could have dreams that do?” Snape whispered, closing his eyes. “Am I alone, and none of the others, to be compared with Rosier?”

Harry touched his arm. Snape opened his eyes to see Harry taking a deep breath as though to prepare himself for climbing a mountain.

“I think he would target you before any of the others,” Harry whispered, “because he was working that golden bridle on a man strong and difficult to control. Rosier is only harder to control than you are because he’s mad.” He paused, throat working. “And he would target you because he knows that you mean the most to me out of anyone who wears a Dark Mark.”

Slowly, Snape knelt, holding Harry’s eyes all the while. Harry looked nervous and miserable, the way he usually did when saying that one person was more important to him than another, but he didn’t glance away.

Snape dropped his barriers. Harry was through into his mind, in a little rush of Legilimency that he greeted with a gasp. Then he caught himself, and began to swim with more grace than Snape had expected, heading towards the center of his mind, sifting memories with gentle fingers and looking for Merlin knew what sign of the Dark Lord’s tampering.

It was—uncomfortable to have someone else in his mind. It always had been, Snape thought, which was one reason he was glad that he had learned most of what he knew of Occlumency and Legilimency out of books, rather than in combination with a teacher. His mind had been his secret refuge during his school days when others taunted him, and even sometimes from his mother’s words. He could abandon Eileen’s lessons and retreat into a corner where he was the Half-Blood Prince, son of pureblood royalty even if unacknowledged, and someday everyone would admire him for his brilliance with spells and potions.

Sometimes he caught a little jerk or flinch from Harry, but luckily, he did not have to confront any particular memory when that happened. Harry’s touch was light, flitting from one part of his mind to the next. Snape suspected that came from his respect for someone else’s free will. Harry would never be the best Legilimens in the world, simply because he had none of the liking for domination that had made Voldemort so proficient in the art.

Then he was out, and Harry stood gazing up at him solemnly. Snape waited, not knowing what he had seen.

“No trace of a golden bridle,” said Harry. “And I saw no dreams that he’d sent in your memories.” He reached out and put a hesitant hand on Snape’s arm again. “Thank you. I know that must have been hard for you. And you’re one of the bravest men I’ve ever met, Severus.”

Snape stared. It hadn’t occurred to him that part of the solemn shine in those green eyes came from admiration. But it did, and he could only stand there as Harry gave him a quick hug and then slipped quietly to the door. He did pause there, looking back with a faint smile that warned Snape he was about to say something to lighten the mood.

“Are you sure the Sorting Hat never considered you for Gryffindor, Severus, with all that bravery?”

Snape looked for something to throw, but Harry was already out the door.

“I don’t understand why we’re here,” complained Melinda Honeywhistle, tapping her quill against her scroll.

Harry ignored her serenely, along with the other reporters who shuffled their feet and muttered agreement. They stood in the center of the Hogsmeade road, in a roped-off section that still left foot travelers room to get by. Beyond the reporters, whom he’d invited, Harry had attracted a good deal of curious attention from the villagers. That suited his purposes. He currently hovered off the muddy ground in the center of the ropes, not on a platform, but borne along on currents of pure magic. That suited his purpose, too, which was to impress people to death.

“You will in a moment,” said Harry, and turned his eyes upwards, since he’d seen a moving shadow. Alas, it was only one of the thestrals, rising idly from the Forbidden Forest and turning on a thermal. Harry watched him, and stifled the impulse to rise and join him. He *could*, yes, but only a small portion of the crowd would be able to see the creature he flew in company with, and those who could would be terrified. “If he comes, of course.”

“You invited us here for someone who might not even *appear*?” Honeywhistle’s face was ugly when Harry glanced at her again. “You should have a good excuse for this, Potter.”

“That’s not my name anymore,” said Harry, with enough force that she started and took a wary step back from him. Harry raised an eyebrow, and pretended to let his anger drain away. He hadn’t been angry at all, had suffered only a tiny spark of irritation, but they didn’t need to know that. Sometimes using Slytherin manipulation was the best thing to do after all. With the control he could have over his emotions if he wanted to exercise it, Harry had managed to persuade Draco to accept Syrinx as a bodyguard, to persuade Peter that his form really was a lynx and he was ready to move on to more complicated Animagus training, and to interest these reporters to attend this showing, all in the last week. “At least I have that much in common with the one I asked to appear here this morning. He did have a name, once, but I only call him by it out of his courtesy. I would suggest that none of you try using it.”

He saw an older wizard’s lips shape the question, but he wasn’t about to give the name away.

Besides, in that moment Dobby arrived.

He coalesced out of the air, his shape coming together from a myriad white sparks that until that moment seemed to have lain dormant in the mud. They rose and spun around each other, then joined into a shape that Harry had to swallow a chuckle at. Dobby had chosen the body of a black unicorn, though the horn itself was white, and the tail was a mix of red and white and green, and his eyes were green and blazing, and—

Harry narrowed his own eyes a bit. The unicorn had a white scar shaped like a lightning bolt extending from the base of his horn to the top of his eyes.

I’m sure he only means to make a point.

Dobby blinked at the reporters who surrounded him. Those eyes weren’t just green, Harry saw when he glanced into them. They had the same golden sparks, the same immense wisdom, that he had seen when Dobby took him to the bedside of Jiv and her son.

And the *magic*. It poured into the world a few moments behind Dobby, soaking the people who watched, turning the air damp and moist with a half-felt rain. Dobby reared and brought down a single hoof that flashed from black to white as it moved, striking the ground.

The mud and the cobbles of Hogsmeade tore, and a spring of water fountained up, singing quietly to itself as it flowed along the street. Some people stepped away from it with a cry, but others came forward, looking half-dazed from the amount of magic in the air, and bent to drink. Harry smiled. His own senses were alive and awake, and he didn’t have to ask to know that the water was cold and clear in their mouths, quite the best thing they had ever tasted.

“This is what can happen,” Dobby said, his voice so sweet that it was like that water being poured over his ears. Harry shuddered, gooseflesh lifting on his arms, trails of pure delight pricking around the center of his back. “I was once a house elf, and then Harry freed me. Now I have gone back to what my kind was meant to be. Shapeshifters of the moment, changing as we move, changing to reflect what we learn of the world, which is everything.” He turned his head, and let the horn glint, cleaving the air until the edge of it seemed like a needle. “Long ago, we entered the house elf form, giving up some of our greater power in order to learn about the limits, and it was thus that wizards found and tied us with the webs. And we forgot what we were. Now, because we have begun to be free, we have begun to remember.”

He turned and laid his horn on Harry’s shoulder. Harry forgot how to breathe. Despite the scar and his odd-colored tail, Dobby had faultlessly imitated the other aspects of a unicorn, including the graceful curve of its neck, like nothing else in the world, and the warm, soft animal smell of its fur.

“Thank you, *vates*,” Dobby said, so softly that Harry had no doubt it was meant to remain private.

Harry couldn’t speak. He nodded. Dobby flung himself back abruptly, rearing in midair, his hooves dancing above the cobbles and mud as though he were afraid of rousing a spring everywhere he went, and arched against the sky.

“When you free us,” he said, his voice soaring to follow his motion, “you free one of the primal magical forces of the world. When you free us, then see what beauty falls!”

His legs bent, his hooves following the path of them like shooting stars, and when he reached the end of his kneeling motion, he exploded.

The sparks that flew everywhere from him were like black snowflakes. One brushed against Harry, burrowed blindly along his sleeve for a moment, and then reached bare skin and latched on.

Harry *saw*.

For a moment, he caught a glimpse of the path the shapeshifters walked on. It was nothing like the paths of Dark and Light, not a defined road so much as what Dobby's people—and almost he felt their name, teasing at his teeth and tongue, there and then flown—had chosen to do with their existence at the beginning. Long-lived, immortal if they wished to be so, existing in the midst of immense magic, able to change shape, they altered, and altered, and altered again, flowing through all the other powers in the wizarding world and the Muggle one.

Why had they been created? They did not know, and that did not matter. They did not think they had been bred for a defined purpose like the flying horses had been, but even if they were, they no longer remembered it. What mattered was that they were there, they existed, and they had a coherence and an identity of their own that did not depend on anything anyone else said.

And then they were bound.

That trapped them in one shape. More, it trapped them in one relationship to wizards. They were no longer free to approach individual wizards if they wished and initiate bonds of friendship or love or enmity with them. They, who had been the freest of the magical creatures, were trapped in servitude, and convinced it had been their idea and was their nature, and that was all they knew.

And now a *vates* had come, and his breaking of the webs could restore to them choice, the freedom of stars and skies and an endless, uncircumscribed life and body. They were again what they had been, partnering wizards in the great dance if they wished, but not compelled to do so. There were no words for what that meant, and no words for how keenly interested Dobby was, among all his other interests, in making sure that the rest of his kind achieved it again.

Wizards could make up for what they had done only by letting the race they called house elves free. And that was all.

The moment ended. Harry gasped, and saw Dobby, in unicorn form again, spring forward, hooves drumming like bells on empty air. Straight up he ascended, a flying shape, ridiculously-colored tail streaming behind him, and in the sky he burst again and was lost.

Harry slowly surveyed the crowd. Many there were crying openly, and one or two of the reporters had fainted in shock. Melinda Honeywhistle was still on her feet, but she swayed back and forth, her lips blue. Harry nodded, and awkwardly cleared his throat. He had intended for them to meet Dobby and see what could be gained when the house elves were free of their webs, but Dobby had made a far more convincing argument than he could ever have done.

And that was right, Harry thought, the satisfaction slotting into something deep within him. Ultimately, what he wanted was not to make the magical creatures dependent on him, or dependent on the good will of wizards, but able to speak in their own voices, make their own arguments, and live their own lives.

When one could do that, the beauty that fell out of it was greater, by far, than the beauty wizards might achieve when they still had house elf slaves and bound the other creatures as servants.

“Thank you for coming,” he said into the silence and tears. “You can always ask me if you have questions.”

He turned and floated back towards Hogsmeade, mind shaking and stamping its hooves like a unicorn. He had promised himself, in the wake of Rosier's attack, to live life as best he could, and take precautions to insure that the people around him could survive, without becoming paranoid about it in a way that would steal all the joy out of surviving.

Based on what he had seen from Dobby—the creature who had been, at one point, called Dobby—he still had a lot to learn.

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Chapter Seventy-Three: Oaths and Ties

Unlike the last time it had happened, Harry wasn't snatched out of a sound sleep. He was sitting in the middle of the Slytherin common room, attempting to find the best way to phrase a Potions essay. Draco leaned against his shoulder. Now and then he shifted so that his head pushed into Harry's robe, and muttered sleepily. Harry watched him with a faint smile. He wasn't more than half trying to do his homework. The fire and Harry occupied him far more. Syrinx sat on the next chair, her attention on the motions of her wand. Harry knew she was practicing war witch spells, without actually putting enough force behind the incantations to make the spells happen.

The door to the common room flung open, and Harry moved. He didn't realize it until a moment later, when he found himself facing a blinking Owen, but he had dropped his essay, turned so that Draco lay on the couch instead of on his shoulder, and then whirled so that he was in front of both Draco and Syrinx.

Owen blinked one final time and held up his hand. "I'm not a threat, Harry," he said, voice threaded with anxiety.

Harry dropped his head, and managed to exhale. "I know that." He could see Michael peeking in through the door of the Slytherin common room now, though he dropped back immediately when he caught sight of Harry, and knew what this meant. "Your little sibling is being born?"

"Yes," Owen said. "Come with us, since you promised to stand as the child's godfather, and give her a name." He hovered, looking at Harry expectantly.

"Her?" Harry was already tapping his wrist to speak with Snape and Peter, though, and tell them where he was going, so for a moment he couldn't look back at Owen for the answer. When he did, he surprised a small smile teasing the corners of his mouth.

"Yes," said Owen simply. "My mother suspected it was a girl, but she discovered it for certain a week ago. The magical signature from her womb was simply too much like a witch's, she said." For a moment, a shadow brushed his face with its wings, but then he shook his head. "Father would have liked to have a daughter," he murmured. "As it was, I shall like having a little sister."

Harry wondered how much of Owen's behavior came from a driving, consuming need to be like Charles. He started to move forward, but a hand caught his shoulder. Draco stood behind him.

"I want to come with you," he said.

Owen caught Harry's eye. "That is not a good idea," he said, "for a variety of reasons."

He didn't need to enumerate them all. Harry understood. Michael, of course, must attend the birth of his younger sibling, but if Draco came with them, then the atmosphere would be tense and uncomfortable. That was the last thing Medusa Rosier-Henlin needed right now. Not to mention that the addition of Draco would require the addition of Syrinx, and that would further enlarge the circle of whom the family shared this birth with, beyond what they wanted.

Harry took a deep breath and faced Draco. "I'm sorry, Draco," he said. "I'm going to ask you to stay here."

"You can't force me to," said Draco, as if he had latched on to the notion of free will and nothing else. *Well, perhaps he does think that I'll always let him come with me if he just says that he wants to often enough,* Harry thought. *There's little else that I've denied him, or wanted to.*

"I can't," said Harry. "But you can't Apparate yet, and Owen and Michael and I can. That's enough to make you stay here." He caught Owen's eye, and Owen nodded and turned to lead the way out of the Slytherin common room. Michael had waited in the hallway, luckily. Harry supposed that he might have a modicum of sense, though he hadn't often shown it where Draco was concerned.

Draco grabbed onto his arm and held firm. Harry could see his face flushing as he realized how much they were the target of curious gazes, but even that didn't make him loosen his hold. "I want to go with you," he said, and, when Harry hesitated, evidently thinking that Harry was going to give in, rather than try to find a way to shake him off without hurting him, he lowered his voice. "Please, Harry? Since the attack by Rosier, I simply don't feel safe."

Harry shook himself in irritation, warming the skin under Draco's hands with his magic until Draco let go with a gasp. "Not this time," said Harry shortly. "And you're safer behind the school's wards than you are with me, Draco."

There was a new light in the gaze with which Draco regarded him, meanwhile blowing on his fingers as if they were singed. Harry didn't like it, and suspected they would have an argument later. But he turned and went back to the couch they'd been sitting on without a word. Tragically, he buried himself in his homework again. Syrinx, on her feet and with her wand half-drawn, sat down. Her bright eyes were fixed on Harry's face. Harry couldn't tell what she was thinking.

Owen's hand caught his wrist. "Come on."

Harry nodded, and turned away. He knew how to balance one set of obligations with another set of obligations, and sometimes, he simply couldn't give in to what his boyfriend wanted.

Owen Side-Along Apparated Harry through the Rosier-Henlin wards, and let him go as soon as it was polite to do so. To his eyes, accustomed to seeing magic in the way his family had done for generations, Harry simply shone too brightly for comfort. He had summoned magic to drive Draco back, and hadn't let it go. Lightning bolts played about him, glowing and sizzling and striking the floorboards.

"Where is Medusa?" Harry asked quietly, stepping away from Owen and looking around the kitchen. It seemed smaller and darker now that his mother and his brother no longer played here as they had used to, Owen thought, looking around himself. Then he deliberately shoved the thought away. His mother still lived. His brother still lived, and had stepped past some of his infatuation with Draco, if his latest words were to be believed. He had no reason to think that more tragedy would befall his family.

"This way," he said, and guided Harry down the short corridor that led to his mother's bedroom.

She labored on her bed with her blanket over her legs, her breathing sharp and short but otherwise controlled. His mother would not indulge in the indignity of screaming, Owen thought. He came to her side and put his hand on her forehead. Medusa opened her eyes, saw him, and smiled faintly.

"Harry—has come?" she asked, timing the words around contractions. Owen watched her belly ripple under the blanket for a moment, and did not look away, much as he would have liked to. He knew Medusa had midwife spells that would help her ease the pain, keep the sheets clean and away from her skin, and clean up the blood and afterbirth. But the thought of what was happening to her body made him uneasy nonetheless.

"He has," he said, and Harry stepped up beside him and made a short bow to Medusa. Medusa nodded back, and then dropped her head back with a loud grunt as a pushing pain made itself known.

"What would you like me to do?" Harry asked quietly.

"Catch the baby when she comes," said Owen, and pointed to his mother's legs.

Harry blinked. "But surely a mother should be the first one to touch her child?" he asked.

"No," said Owen, wondering where he'd got that odd idea. "In the older days when house elves helped with most births, their hands were usually the ones that touched the pureblood children first." He gestured to his mother's jerking hips. "Who touches her first isn't what makes the difference. It's whose magic she feels first. House elf magic is neutral as far as children are concerned; they only react to human magic. In some cases, yes, it's important for their mother to be the one to touch them, but you're the one who will teach her to live in the world without fearing power, Harry. It's only right that she should feel your magic sweeping across her skin first."

Harry nodded as if he understood, but his face had gone pale and his eyes glossy for a moment. Owen wondered if he was reliving bad memories. If so, he was past them in a moment and kneeling at the end of the bed. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked Medusa. His power unfurled around him. This time, probably because he wasn't angry, there was only a low, shimmery glare that Owen felt well-prepared to deal with.

He heard the door open, and glanced up to see Michael entering. He nodded to his twin, then looked back as their mother spoke.

"Yes. Talk to me."

"What about?" Harry asked, as if the request hadn't disconcerted him. Come to that, Owen thought, he wasn't sure it had.

"The world as it will be when you have finished your *vates* duties." Medusa had to kick out the words around the babe kicking and struggling at *her*, but she managed. "The future you plan to build. Tell me about that."

Harry nodded. He was rubbing circles on Medusa's belly now. Owen didn't think it was his imagination that her contractions had grown less violent. "Very well. I plan for creatures to spend a lot of time talking to one another." A faint smile. "I'm sure that you've heard about the freed house elf who showed all those reporters what his people used to be like?"

"Can't—open—the—*Prophet*—without—it," said Medusa. Owen stepped forward and picked up the vial sitting ready on the bedside table, holding it so that his mother could see it. She nodded, her hair so stuck with sweat to her forehead that it didn't even move as she did so. Owen laid his wand against his right arm, holding the vial carefully in his left hand.

“*Diffindo*,” he whispered.

As his blood poured from the cut into the vial, Harry went on talking, voice low and patient. “Giving back their voices to everyone, or hearing the voices that have been silent, will mean talking. And arguing. And debate. I fully expect some of the swift processes to slow to a crawl, because now we have to think about what we’re doing to trees and centaurs and house elves as we move along. We might not be able to talk to some of the magical creatures; that was one reason we thought most of them unintelligent for so long. But some, like phoenixes, who will talk to us, can talk to them.” Harry hummed, and a strand of blue fire uncoiled from his throat and flickered along his hair. Medusa’s eyes followed it in wonder. Owen knew she had heard the phoenix song from a distance on the morning Harry ended the rebellion, but she had not seen the fire so close before. “There’s no reason for us to put up barriers any more, for us to say that we can’t help others because we can’t understand them. We *can*. What we’ve been putting off doing is using that understanding. We want things fast. We don’t like the idea of limits. We think everything should be ours just because we’re wizards, or humans, or purebloods. But it’s not true.”

“That—will—be—“ Medusa had to break off, her mouth opening in what looked like a wide yawn, and Owen knew it was the closest his mother had come to a scream. The vial was full now, and he corked it, while performing a spell that healed the cut on his arm. “Hard,” she finally finished, with a grunt and a gasp, blowing the pain out in a voice only slightly higher than normal.

“It will be,” said Harry. His hand continued to rub soothing circles. His silver hand rested on the bed, bracing him, and he never took his eyes off Medusa, though sometimes, Owen noted, he watched the blanket bobbing up and down, and sometimes he watched their mother’s face. “I think most humans are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as the center of the universe, so even Muggleborns can’t escape that trap. But it doesn’t really matter. Things will change. We’ll become part of the magical world, not the center. We’ll realize that other creatures have a perfect right to ignore us, and to interact in ways that don’t include us.”

“And—other—Lords?”

“I’ll deal with them,” said Harry. “Bargain with them until the end of time, if I have to. Or fight them, though that I really don’t favor, and won’t unless it’s a case of giving up my *vates* duties or my protection of Great Britain if I don’t.” His hand was rubbing in time to his words, Owen finally realized, spreading a soothing shell of protection around the babe. “I’m committed to this. I fully expect to die before it’s achieved. If something like it can be made before I die, then it will be made with my help, not against my will.”

Medusa let out a single high, thin screech, which Owen could pretend was like the battle cry of a harpy if he let himself. “The babe comes,” she said. “You must be in place to catch her, Harry.”

Harry adroitly flipped the blanket back and bent close. Owen shuddered. *Better him than me*. Yes, birthing rituals were sacred, but most of the time the father and a midwife were there to help it along. Owen did not want to see his mother’s vagina close.

A moment later, Medusa let out an enormous *whuff* of breath, and Owen felt some of the magic she’d enchanted the bed and blankets with spring into motion, as they began to ease her daughter’s passage into the world, clean up the afterbirth that followed, and clot the blood.

Then he heard a thin, pinched cry.

Harry sat back up slowly, face slightly dazed. In his arms wriggled and cried a bloody babe, smaller than his forearm, head twisting back and forth until Owen almost feared that she would snap her neck.

And Harry’s magic swirled and flared around her, light that blazed and danced like magnesium on her skin. For a moment, she stopped crying and stared up at him, eyes wide in astonishment.

Owen seized the moment to perform the duties he had to as family head, and stepped forward. Harry held his little sister up, and Owen gently dripped the blood from the vial onto her forehead, down along her chest, and across her arms and legs.

“Cradled safe, protected, within the blood of Rosier-Henlin,” he whispered. “I claim you for our family.” Most often, this ritual was done when the child had her name, but that wouldn’t matter so much as the fact that she had been born safely and then claimed. At one time, this would have been used to insure that a potential bastard child took after the father, and a stronger version was used to bind a magical heir to the family.

They had need of neither of those uses—Owen was as capable of imagining his mother in battle as he was of imagining her unfaithful to his father—and so the ancient magic took hold, setting all the blood on the little girl’s body, both her mother’s and her own, afire. Harry gasped, but Owen put a hand on his shoulder.

“It’s all right,” he said, in that tone that had soothed his brother when Michael was being his most difficult. “See? The flames don’t scorch her.”

And they didn’t. They danced, pure dark green to inform anyone who liked that the Rosier-Henlin family claimed Dark pureblood allegiance, over her torso and head, and parted, swaying bright veils, over her face. In a moment, they were gone, and the blood burned away.

Harry reached out as if in a daze, and a basin of warm water sprang into being next to him, conjured from pure magic. Owen blinked, then cursed to himself. He knew there had been *something* he’d forgotten.

Harry cleaned the girl without taking his eyes from her. Owen couldn’t tell what he thought, of the wrinkled face, or the red, small body, or the high, piercing screams. But his magic was what—Little Sister, he would call her Little Sister for now—felt, and that would serve her well later in life.

Owen did make sure to have a warm cloth that Harry could wrap her up in. By the time he did, she had stopped crying, as she got used to the feeling of powerful magic and was no longer cold. Her eyelids drooped, and her head bobbed on her neck. Harry supported her head, carefully, and then held her out to Medusa.

His mother looked longingly at her daughter, but shook her head. “Not until you have named her, Harry.”

“But won’t she be hungry soon?” Harry’s eyes were huge, standing out behind his glasses. Owen bit his lip at the hysterical urge to laugh. He only felt he knew what to do because he was playing the role of family head even more than the role of much bigger brother. Harry looked half-terrified, as if Little Sister were about to be kidnapped by werewolves.

“She will,” Medusa acknowledged, and Owen saw her smile through her exhaustion and pain as the midwife spells urged her legs shut. “So you had best name her swiftly.”

Harry gave a quick little jerk of his head. “And you—the Rosier-Henlin naming traditions—“

“We give Little Sister entirely into your hands,” Owen interrupted him, with a bow. “Name her what you feel is most appropriate, Harry. Don’t worry about what names female ancestors of ours have had.”

Harry swallowed, and nodded, and then stood staring at the baby in his arms for a long moment. Owen waited. He felt a fragile silence in the room even more powerful than that which had begun with the birth, and he could hear the deep steady breaths from his twin, waiting by the door.

Harry knew what he would *like* to name the little girl. He just wasn’t sure that it would fit in well with the rest of the names in the Rosier-Henlin tradition. He toyed with the idea of naming her Charlotte, after her father, but for all he knew that might cause Medusa pain every time she looked at her—and the one thing he was certain of was that no one in the family would change her name once he’d given it.

Terror wheeled around him in a blaze darker than any of his creative magic as he stared into the tiny, sleepy, scowling face a few inches from his. *Such responsibility. I’ve never had this much responsibility for defining a single life before.*

He let himself look once more at the trust in Owen’s eyes, and Medusa’s. He couldn’t see Michael’s face from across the room, and he had the feeling that it was probably just as well.

He gave himself permission to use the name he would like, and breathed across her forehead first, whispering the name into her ear, so that she would be the first one to hear it, and always carry a small piece of private knowledge in her heart. That was one of the pureblood birthing rituals he’d studied, and always enjoyed and valued. She stirred, but didn’t wake.

Harry looked up and said quietly, “Her name is Eos Rosier-Henlin. For the goddess of the dawn, because of the dawn she will live in.” This time, he pressed his lips to her forehead in a kiss, which made her squirm and struggle back to wakefulness. The ritual had to include an original blessing, preferably one that connected with the meaning of the name. “Welcome to the world, little one. May you never forget the meaning of time as the original Eos did, and likewise may you never be a slave to it.”

Eos began to cry then, but Harry had heard Owen’s exhale of breath. He looked into Medusa’s face as he handed Eos to her, and saw only contentment.

“That will do very well, Harry.” Medusa drew forth her breast and gently arranged her child in position. Harry wasn’t sure why that made him blush and turn away, when he’d been between her legs. But he’d been too involved in the blood and making sure that he was the one to touch Eos to really care, then. “A new name, in both my family and Charles’s, but my name is Greek, and hers is, as well. A sign of good luck.” She kissed Eos’s forehead in turn.

Harry sighed, nearly falling over then and there with relief that he’d not done something wrong, and looked at Owen, unsure if there was anything else he needed to do. But Owen was engaged in smiling a smile very like his father’s, and reaching out to stroke his newborn sister’s head with delicate fingertips. Harry knew the ritual was done. He would wait until they went back to Hogwarts, since he could tear the wards on the home to escape, but he would prefer not to.

He leaned against the wall, and became aware of someone leaning next to him. Harry turned his head, and started in surprise. He hadn’t even realized Michael was still there, and he hadn’t expected him to approach him if he was. But instead, Michael was leaning forward and staring at him.

“That’s really important to you, isn’t it?” Michael asked.

“What is?” Harry asked, unsure which of the many aspects of the ritual or the birth just past Michael could be referring to. “New beginnings?”

Michael gave a jerky nod. He hesitated. Harry waited. He recognized the expression on Michael’s face, not because he’d seen him wear it before but because he had seen it on other people. It meant they were thinking. It was a bad idea to push someone like that into speaking before they were ready.

“I’ve thought,” said Michael, so softly his words were like ripples in running water. “I’ve changed my mind. Could I—could I *please* become your sworn companion again? I was wrong, and you were right, about the damage I caused last time, and with Draco. But I think I understand what you are now, and what Draco is, and I don’t want this gaping chasm between you or him or my brother and me to open up any further.” He shut his mouth with a snap, as if he thought he had said too much, and waited.

Harry sighed, and shook his head. He wanted to trust. He wanted to give second chances. But too much had happened between them.

Michael looked lost. He parted his lips, then looked away and shook his head. “I fucked up that much, huh?” he whispered.

“It’s not just that,” Harry said. “Or not solely that.” He didn’t know how to phrase it, mostly because he hadn’t imagined that Michael would ever want to become his sworn companion again. He trod carefully, phrasing the words in his head long before he let them pass his lips. “It’s also Draco. He would throw a fit. He might try to possess you again. And there’s the chance that he would give in to the temptation of trying to flirt with you, simply to rouse my jealousy or to see what would happen.”

“So he would do it because he was bored?” Michael’s eyebrows nearly reached his hairline.

Harry nodded.

“And you love him, and you approve of this.” Michael let out a deep breath. “And you don’t think he’s a weakness in your alliance?”

“I didn’t say that I approve of it,” Harry said quietly, hoping Owen and Medusa couldn’t overhear them. *What a conversation to have on the day the newest scion to the Rosier-Henlin family is born.* “It’s a fault in him, but I can’t force him to change. I can only keep it from happening again, as much as possible, by attending to circumstances around me more than I did when it originally occurred.” He blinked at Michael, who was still staring. “Do you understand me? I don’t mean to blame you for loving Draco, or for what he did. You tried to protect him even then, and that’s a sign that your feelings ran deeper than he realized. But I won’t chance it happening again.”

“You really don’t want another sworn companion,” Michael said flatly.

“I could use one.” Harry didn’t have to work to maintain his temper. He didn’t think Michael understood his reasons for refusing him. “But it’s not you. It can’t be you. I’m sorry.”

Michael turned away from him, and murmured, “Do you know what it feels like to have your brother refuse to talk to you, because, by his standards, you did something to wrong the rest of the family?”

“Well, *yes*,” said Harry.

He saw Michael’s shoulders stiffen, but he said no more. Instead, he walked over to the bed and began to greet Eos with soft touches and softer words.

And that was right, Harry thought, rubbing his silver hand across his eyes. He wasn’t a stranger in this bedroom. The one who really didn’t belong, who was only here by the grace of the family, was Harry.

He waited in silence and patience for Owen to be ready to go back to Hogwarts. He wasn’t looking forward to the confrontation that would happen when they arrived. Draco would understand his reasons for attending the birth no more than Michael had understood his reasons for refusing to accept a new oath from him.

Draco didn’t.

“I want to know why you left me behind,” he’d said, very directly, and Harry, who had picked up his Potions essay as if he actually wanted to work on it, had replied as directly.

“Because you would have caused tension with Michael, and intruded on the birthing ritual for Eos,” he said, sharpening the quill on the heel of his silver hand. Draco had told him that was disturbing. Harry had argued that it was not, as long as the hand still wasn’t alive enough to feel what he did to it. “And Syrinx would have had to come, and there was no explicit invitation to include her.”

“That’s not very fair to her,” Draco pointed out.

“It’s right,” Syrinx said from her chair, in a puzzled voice. “Why would it have to be fair?”

Draco shot her an annoyed glance. It was true that, most of the time, he enjoyed having a bodyguard. Syrinx was silent and efficient, and knew her place, including enough pureblood rituals to correct Draco if he was about to make himself look like a fool. But she reminded him of nothing so much as Harry in the first two years Draco had known him. That wasn’t an image he liked, or a memory he wanted to encourage to return.

“Harry,” he insisted, focusing on him. “That’s not a good enough reason. I wanted to go, and you left me *behind*.” He let a carefully considered petulant tone into his voice. He was willing to sound like he was whinging if it would get him what he wanted.

“I didn’t bind you,” Harry said. “I just said that you weren’t going. In this case, I considered Owen’s will, and Michael’s, and Medusa’s, more important than yours, Draco. That’s all.” He bent down and put his quill to parchment.

“You *burned* me.”

“Made you let go of me,” Harry corrected absently, at the same time as he corrected a mistake on the parchment. “And it didn’t hurt, Draco. I know that you took your hand away before my skin could truly get hot.”

“You don’t really care, do you?” Draco could hear his voice rising, and was glad that most of the other Slytherins had gone to bed. Those who remained watched him with barely concealed amusement. He found himself unable to mind, though. He could make a scene, and perhaps that would change Harry’s absent words to apologies. “I told you I haven’t felt safe since Rosier’s attack. You wouldn’t have cared if you came back and found me gone again, or under the Lung Domination Curse.” Of course he didn’t believe that, but he wanted to make Harry say he was sorry.

Harry looked up at him.

Draco took a step back, feeling as if he’d been hit with a lead weight. With a quick shake of his head, Harry gathered up his essay, quill, and inkwell, and turned for the common room door.

“Where are you going?” Draco called after him.

“Out of your sight,” Harry responded, voice straining on the edge of calm. “You’ve been acting like a brat all week, Draco. I indulged it. Why shouldn’t I? You’d had a bad scare. I almost lost you. And most of what you did was harmless enough, and hurt no one other than me. Now, you’re being unreasonable, and you *know* better. You’re not afraid, you’re just trying to use my fear

of losing you to manipulate me.”

“That’s what Slytherins do,” said Draco, hiding behind a weak defense.

“No, Slytherins manipulate *subtly*,” said Harry, and he walked out of the common room. The door shut behind him with a grating slide.

No one else in the common room would look at him, Draco found when he turned round. He picked up his homework, and, fuming, went to bed. Most of him was just irritated, though, not angry. Harry would return in a few minutes, and apologize, or laugh with him over it, and then tell him the real reason that he hadn’t wanted Draco to come with him tonight. Perhaps it had to do with fearing to daze Michael with Draco’s beauty again.

The minutes became hours, until Draco had to accept that Harry wasn’t returning to their bedroom that night.

And that made him think that perhaps the reasons Harry had given him *were* the real ones, and the emotion that had made him stagger back when Harry looked at him—disappointment—was real, too.

Draco punched the pillow savagely. He’d thought that he had some kind of absolute control over Harry after Rosier’s attack.

It hurt to realize that he didn’t, and that Harry was still perfectly capable of walking away from him when he thought he was being childish. Even Harry’s tolerance, it seemed, had limits.

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Chapter Seventy-Four: The Voices of the Light

“Harry. I wish to speak to you, sir.”

Harry turned in surprise. He knew it was Syrinx; there was no one else in the school who addressed him as “sir,” bar the one time Snape had grown a very, very dry sense of humor over a Potions mishap that Harry should have known better than to make. “Syrinx,” he said, with a small nod, and snapped his fingers at one of the library chairs to move it over for her. He was once again in the library, following every tale of willing sacrifice he could to its end and trying to see some hope along that track. Syrinx had come in so quietly that she hadn’t attracted Madam Pince’s notice, much less his own. “Please, sit.”

She took her seat at once, with a delicate quickness Harry remembered from his own days of training. He swallowed his envy. Syrinx only had this absolute certainty of her place in life right now, he reminded himself. When she finished this stage of her war witch training, then she would take back her emotions and the other things that made her more like a human than an automaton. So she did not really lead the simple life he had led five years ago—and even that life had been more complicated than it seemed, crisscrossed by the shadows of betrayals he hadn’t known about at the time.

“What would you like to speak to me about?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder. Sure enough, Draco stood nearby in another aisle of books, poking sullenly at them. Syrinx would not have gone far without him.

“I carry a message for my family.”

Harry nodded slowly. If the message was urgent, then Laura Gloryflower would have contacted him herself, by means of the phoenix song spell. This made it much more likely to be a formal situation, requiring a face-to-face meeting and someone of the Gloryflower bloodline to carry out. “And what would she have of me?” he asked, dropping into formal cadences. He heard Draco stop poking among the books and come to stand at his shoulder. Harry didn’t look at him. He did intend to speak with him, to tie up the trailing loose ends of the argument they’d had over his coming to Eos’s birthing ritual, but for the moment Syrinx’s calm, pale face took all his attention.

“My cousin serves the Light,” said Syrinx, and paused, waiting for a response.

“It is honored in its servants,” said Harry. Draco snorted, but luckily didn’t say anything Harry would have to pinch him for.

“She watches the reputation of the Light soar up and down in the world,” Syrinx continued serenely. “For the past year, she has watched its travails with a wide eye and a blushing cheek. The Light has done monstrous things to secure its own power. Even though she did not follow Albus Dumbledore, he was the Lord of the Light in Britain, the representative of our allegiance. His actions touch every one of us.”

Again the pause, and Harry gave the only response he could make, though it wasn't the one he actually believed; the constraints of this dance demanded acknowledgment of the truth of the messenger's words or an addition of praise, nothing more. "The Lord of the Light did indeed abuse his power."

"The monitoring board and the end of the rebellion were believed to be a new era for the Light," Syrinx continued. "And now she sees that they were not. The monitoring board listened too well to that witch, Aurora Whitestag, who wished nothing more than to manipulate you. They danced on the end of her chain as if she were someone who mattered, who could make their lives harder if she did not control them. And she undeclared!" Syrinx paused a moment as though to calm down, though Harry was sure the passion in her voice was all Laura's and not her own. "The Light has relied on your power, passively, so far. It is time for that to change. I am here as a representative of Gloryflower and Opalline both. Paton Opalline and Laura Gloryflower ask if you will join them in a formal family alliance, similar to the one that you currently maintain with both the Parkinson and the Bulstrode families."

Harry took a breath of surprise. He had never suspected that either family would initiate such an alliance; Paton had seemed happy enough with the connection that Fergus's death had established between them, and Laura had fought at his side in her own way, such as by sheltering Delilah from the werewolf hunters. And to put themselves into the company of Dark wizards! More to the point, to know that they were doing so, to draw attention to the parallels themselves...

That, more than anything, told Harry how much Dumbledore's actions had embarrassed Laura.

Syrinx still waited for his answer, he saw when he looked up. She sat with her hands folded and her head tilted back, baring her throat. The meaning of *that* gesture was not lost on Harry, either.

"I accept," said Harry. "If they wish to tie themselves to me, and if they know what they bind themselves to, an undeclared Lord-level wizard—"

"You misunderstand," said Syrinx, and for the first time, a faint smile graced her lips. "They bind themselves to a *vates*. And they bind themselves to Harry." Her hand slid over his forehead like a blessing. "My anchor."

Harry frowned and shook his head. "How can I be the one whom your sanity depends on?" he asked, now that it was clear they were out of the confines of the ritual. Syrinx would never have made such a personal comment if they were not. "I haven't done much to encourage you to choose me that way, and—"

Again, he was interrupted. Syrinx was laughing quietly, with a tone of pure joy in her voice Harry had been sure she was incapable of. She touched his earlobe in a gesture that reminded him of the one with which she'd touched her own when she spoke to the golden kitten near Voldemort's warded house.

"You are too used to looking at things from a Dark perspective," she said, "too used to having allies who require endless persuasion and tugging and flattery until they are satisfied. You have little idea what your exploits look like through Light eyes, sir, and none at all what they look like through mine. I find what you have done enough. More than enough, admirable as the morning air is." She gave him a light kiss this time, on the forehead above the lightning bolt scar, ignoring Draco's growl. "If you wish me to tell you the tale of how the past few months have looked from my perspective, I will. But the Light sees differently than the Dark. It can tell when the Dark has a good idea, and it adopts it. But we are not as the wizards you have known." She smiled at him. "I look forward to helping you know us."

Harry nodded, a bit dazed. Syrinx paused, then added, "If it makes you feel better, it was nothing you did, directly, that caused this. The immediate cause was learning what we had done to house elves in the name of having servants. My cousin's family and the Opallines intend to free them."

Harry had to swallow several times before he could speak. The example of such powerful Light families doing this would send currents running through the wizarding world. Some Light families who right now followed the example of bastards like Cupressus Apollonis might start freeing their house elves because the Gloryflowers and the Opallines had. "I cannot thank you enough."

"You can thank us by letting us become your allies."

Harry nodded once more, and then Syrinx stepped back, turned off her smile, and became part of the bookshelves. Harry faced Draco. He knew that Syrinx could listen to every nuance of this conversation and not repeat any part of it to another living soul. And it was something to know that Draco would be safe even as Harry talked to him. A nightmare last night about Rosier stepping through the wall to Portkey Draco away as he had Connor made Harry simultaneously snicker at his own fear and be glad to have Syrinx there.

“Draco,” he said softly, and Draco promptly turned his head away. Harry grasped his cheek and turned his face back. “Look at me.”

Draco’s temper had been boiling for most of the week, and Harry was sure that it would spill over as soon as they locked gazes. It took a few moments longer than that, but then Draco was ranting, though he kept it to a low, heated voice that did not wake Madam Pince’s wrath.

“What do you want me to say, Harry? That I’m sorry? I could say that, I suppose. I tried two days ago, and you didn’t accept it. Or I could say that I’m sorry I accused you of violating the standards of free will, but you know what I’m like when there’s something I want and you deny it to me. You know how I was *raised*, as the sole heir of a Dark pureblood family. And you know what I can do when I’m pushed. You know what I’ve given up for you, what I’ve initiated for you—“ He made a flying gesture that Harry assumed was meant to take in their joining ritual. “You know what I am. And then you persist in trying to make me different than I am, expecting some behavior from me other than what I can give. What can I say? I’m a brat.”

Harry waited patiently until he wound down, then said, “No, you aren’t. Or you don’t have to be.”

Draco blinked at him, eyes narrowing slightly.

“Sometimes, what you describe is a source of strength,” Harry said, and leaned nearer, until Draco seemed fascinated and couldn’t glance away from his eyes despite several small, flickering movements in his face. “It drove you through those first two years when I barely acknowledged you as a friend and thought you would get bored of me any moment. And sometimes your stubbornness meant that you were the only one not to leave me in a moment of crisis. The Chamber of Secrets, Draco. I still remember that.” He caressed Draco’s cheek with a thumb. “I am sensitive to what you’ve given up for me and what you’ve initiated for me, yes. But I think the passage of time has fossilized some of your conceptions of yourself.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Draco breathed, looking as though he didn’t know whether to be angry or to give in to the caress.

“I know you don’t,” said Harry quietly, and kissed him, the first kiss they had shared since their argument. He drew back before Draco’s tongue could touch his. “You have strength and weakness mixed, and the weakness is made of attitudes that even you think of as frail, chinks in your armor. But you refuse to abandon them, because you think admitting them at all would mean another weakness. The furthest you get is this sulky half-defense of them. And if you really could only be a child and a brat and that was all, I would accept that argument.

“But I’ve seen you at your highest and your best, Draco, when you put forth the effort. I know who you really are, the man you try to hide from.” Harry raised his eyebrows, locking Draco in a gaze whose sheer intensity made Draco flush. “The man who defied his father for me, who possessed the Minister, who helped me in the graveyard last Midwinter, who chose the most dangerous method of Declaring to the Dark because it was the only one that answered his own pride. You *can* be that person, Draco. Not all the time, but you can climb much closer to him than you are now even in your moments of relaxation. And I don’t feel inclined to indulge the childishness that hides him any longer.”

“So you’ll let me know when my behavior is acceptable to you, will you, now?” Draco made his voice as frigid as he could, but it shook on the last words, somewhat destroying the effect.

Harry gripped his shoulders and shook him. “You utter *idiot*,” he said, putting as much disgust and as much affection in his voice as he could. “I want you to be better for *your* sake, Draco. Because I’ve seen what you are when you push yourself, and what you are is magnificent. You degrade yourself, not me and not the Malfoy name, when you shove your pride down like this and pretend you were never more than a bratty earthworm. *Rise*, Draco. I know that you can do it. You have the ambition to do it, when you let yourself know that. You aren’t this child, and I won’t let you pretend that you are, any more than you would let me pretend not to be a Slytherin.”

He shut Draco’s protest with a kiss, fierce and strong, a demanding call for a response, and stood. “I don’t set a date when I’d like you to change your mind on this,” he told Draco. “But I want an equal, Draco, damn it. I’ve seen him a few times. And I would like it very well if you could find him by the vernal equinox.”

Draco frowned. Harry could hear what he was thinking: that that was only a week away. “Why?”

Harry gave him a slow smile. He deliberately reached for slyness and seductiveness, two qualities he had never really tried to add to his expression before. Draco bit off a tiny moan, and then stared at him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Harry whispered. “And maybe you’ll get to.” He winked once at Draco, then turned around and

walked out of the library. He had to acknowledge that he'd done all the Horcrux research he could for today.

Besides, the taste of Draco's mouth and the slightly stunned expression on his face, which was like the look Harry imagined he must have worn when Lucius presented him with his ultimatum about the rebellion, had given Harry a rather urgent problem that needed taking care of.

He met the Gloryflowers and the Opallines for the swearing of the formal family oaths in Hogsmeade, pertinently enough, since that was also the place where Dobby had shown the reporters the image of house elf freedom and started this. Harry smiled as he watched more and more Opallines appear. Some of the younger children, of course, couldn't really understand the purpose of the ceremony, but they knew they were in a place where they could pack snowball-like shapes out of the mud of the streets and throw them at each other. That was part of the definition of happiness.

"Harry."

He turned sharply, surprised to hear the joy in that voice—perhaps simply because it was so long since he'd heard it as other than harassed. Calibrud Opalline caught his hands, not seeming to notice that one was gradually warming silver, and drew him nearer for a kiss. Harry gave it to her, and then pulled back and looked at her questioningly.

She appeared smug.

"What?" Harry asked, glancing around. Paton was making his way towards him, talking in Manx to a child he held whose long hair swayed around the face and hid most of his or her features. Angelica Griffinsnest was scolding a girl Harry thought was her granddaughter for throwing mud, and the girl was pretending to look sorry about it. No one else seemed to be suffering Calibrud's secret source of excitement.

"None of our family is going to have any more house elves." Calibrud clasped her hands demurely in front of her, but Harry wasn't fooled. The shine in her eyes made stars look dim. "And more than that, we're gradually going to reveal ourselves to Muggles, little by little."

Harry understood her smugness then. This was something Calibrud had wanted for a long, long time.

"Where?" he asked. "Not on the Isle of Man, surely."

Calibrud shook her head. "No. The British Ministry would simply come in and *Obliviate* all the Muggles. But one of my cousins has a—special understanding, shall we say, with the Ministry of Portugal?" She laughed quietly. "And it will be small, at first, tricks they can put down to magicians or mad people. But they'll teach the Muggles the meaning of enchantment again, slowly. The unicorns are already running all around the world and bringing back the magic. I think it's time that the wizards participated in that revolution, too. Freeing our house elves is just the first step of many. We say that we value magic, that we love it more than the distinctions of blood and allegiance, and that powerful wizards are honored among us. We can at least try to live as if we believe that."

"But what about the International Statute of Secrecy?" Harry asked, his mind racing. He knew Scrimgeour's people had struggled mightily to preserve that in the face of Acies's attack and the sight of a dragon soaring over Muggle London. He couldn't imagine the rest of the wizarding world would react kindly to it if it were to happen in Portugal, either.

Calibrud said nothing, but looked smugger.

"They're changing that?" Harry asked in disbelief.

She shook her head. "You misunderstand. We have people who are willing to risk going to prison in all sorts of countries so that we can bring magic into the world again. It's nothing more than what you risked, when you came back after the end of the rebellion. It's not as much as werewolves risked in these last few years, living among us and fearing that someone would denounce them at any moment. It's time that ordinary wizards shared part of the risk, don't you think?"

Harry licked his lips. "I—"

"And before you can come up with any nonsense," said Calibrud briskly, "just remember that you may have inspired this, but you're not at fault for it, and you're not responsible for the consequences. The glory and the blame are ours, both. You've made us more willing to act with freedom, *vates*. Is that not a grand thing?"

“A dangerous thing,” Harry said, all the stories he had ever heard of Muggle persecution of witches and wizards surging back full force.

“Oh, of course,” said Calibrud. “Change always is. But that’s one reason it’ll happen slowly, with some Muggles being *Obliviated*, but others remembering. A unicorn here, a hippogriff there, a childhood friend who’s a wizard over there. Piece by piece, Harry, and we fit through the cracks. They can’t catch us all.” The smugness seemed to have carved permanent lines on her face by now. “And given our family, they’ll trace out the patterns of connections for a long time before they realize that chaos tends to follow wherever Opalline bloodlines flourish. And even then, they simply can’t shut us all out. We’re too essential.”

Harry chewed his lips for a moment. “You do realize that the family oath will require me to come to the rescue of anyone in your family who goes to jail?”

“No, it doesn’t,” said Calibrud, voice patient. “Really, Harry, it does not. Not if we break a law, and we *know* that’s what we’re doing. If we’re used as a hostage by one of your enemies, and you know about the situation in time to save us, then yes. But not when we take risks that we know are risks. It’s the same clause of the oath that doesn’t try to kill you if one of our children trips over a rock and smashes her head open—or is eaten alive by a dragon.” Shadows in her eyes then, and no smile around her lips, but that lasted for only a moment before it welled back up. “You can only do so much, and we can only do so much. The ordinary accidents of living in this world, and any extra chances that we decide to take, are not your fault.”

I have to learn, I suppose, in the end, Harry thought, as he looked into her expectant eyes. *Dobby and the other magical creatures can make their own arguments. And my allies can fight their own wars. Really, I should be glad that I’m such an inspiration in the first place, and not worry about what they do with that inspiration. It is their own will.*

He held out his flesh hand. Calibrud clasped and shook it. Paton was at their sides then, and he smiled at Harry.

“Shall we begin the oath?” he asked.

Harry lifted his head, caught a glimpse of Laura Gloryflower’s golden curls moving forward, and nodded. “Certainly.”

“And after the oath,” said Calibrud, her voice quivering with excitement like water dancing on the brim of an over-full cup, “I have something else to tell you, Harry. Or ask you.” She bit her lips and went still, the brown skin of her face darkening further with a blush.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Very well.” Then he drew the knife he’d prepared from his pocket and called the attention of everyone to him with a brief flare of phoenix song. Paton rearranged the child in his arms, and Laura approached quickly. Calibrud was already holding her left arm out.

Draco flinched as a mud-ball splattered against the Shield Charm he’d hastily raised around himself, then glared in several different directions, moodily. He didn’t want to be here. He wanted to be far away, doing other things. But he’d had to come, because today was the declaring of the formal family alliance, and he was not going to be anywhere other than at Harry’s side.

At his shoulder came Syrinx, duplicating his movements gracefully. Draco glared at her. She looked serenely back. There seemed to be nothing he could do that would disconcert her.

Draco bowed his head and kicked a piece of paving stone sticking out of the ground, then scowled because it made his foot hurt.

He felt as though he stood on the edge of an abyss, while below him several people, including Harry, already circled on the wind roaring through the gorge. They called out to him enticingly, told him to come and play, that it was fun. And Draco refused to step off the edge because, well, he couldn’t, could he? He was bound to the edge of the cliff by pureblood pride and family duty and all that he knew was true of himself. He wasn’t a daring Gryffindor, and he was never going to be some fantastic martyr for the sake of magical creatures like Harry was. Harry could love him for what he was or not love him at all.

But then he looked at people like Connor Potter and Parvati Patil, who had changed out of recognition since third year, and the thought crept sneakily into his mind that who he was could alter.

And what if what Harry said was true, and there was something fiercer, higher, better, in himself that he could achieve all the time? What if Harry was right, that he could grow up, and that growing up meant changing more than he had so far?

It was *hard*, though. What Draco remembered most about the moments when he had lived life at its highest pitch, at least afterward, was how much effort it took. It left him panting and exhausted. It left him certain that he could do no more, and had to collapse into bed and sleep for a few weeks. And it wasn't so long ago that he'd Declared to the Dark. Or, if he looked back on Rosier's attack as a moment when he had risen above the pain and dashed into the madman's mind to learn the secret of the golden bridle, the last moment like that was just a few days ago. Why did he have to change now? Why did he have to have another moment like that so soon?

Because Harry thinks you can be better than you are.

Draco knew he looked sulky. He didn't care. He could look sulky in public if he wanted.

His father's voice answered his thought as if summoned, a stern declaration. *Malfoys do not show their emotions in public, because their wills trump their desires. What they wish, passionately, is always more important than what they may want in any one, fleeting, childish moment.*

And this was a childish moment. Children sulked, Draco knew.

And Harry had said that he knew Draco was a man, somewhere under the façade of sulkiness and petulance. And he had said that he wanted an equal. Draco had thought, at first, that that only meant he didn't want Draco trying to exercise power over him the way he'd tried to the night of the birthing ritual.

Now he had to think that it meant Harry wanted Draco to be able to keep up with him, understand the same kinds of thoughts, do the same kinds of deeds—on a level of matched glory, if not exactly the freeing of house elves—and participate in debates on an equal level even if he didn't agree. He had to know enough so that he could disagree in a manner that didn't involve whinging.

Harry was calling him on to be an adult. Draco wondered if, after all, his mental picture shouldn't involve stepping over a cliff to fall onto the winds of a gorge where other people circled, but should look like climbing a mountain to join Harry, who was bouncing impatiently on one of the upper ledges, waiting for him, convinced that it was only Draco's slowness and not any inherent incapacity that held him back.

He didn't want to think that, because it meant that the accusation Harry had made against him during the Presence of War, that Draco could do anything he wanted but was lazy, was true.

And that meant he had no one but himself to blame.

He came to a stop behind Harry, his head spinning, overflowing with ideas and thoughts he could not stop thinking. It wasn't fair. Even when he didn't actually have conversations like that with Harry, his partner's voice was in his head, the words unfading, whispering at him. He scowled at Harry's back.

The family oaths were done. Calibrid Opalline, the Squib woman whom Draco still couldn't *believe* Paton had chosen as his heir, was stepping back, her pale hair rustling around her dark face as she handed Harry's knife to him. Then she cleared her throat. Harry looked up at her.

"I did say that I had something I wanted to ask you when the oath was sworn, Harry," she said. "And it is this."

Harry would be raising his eyebrows, Draco knew, though he couldn't see his face from this angle. He simply knew him that well.

Calibrid smiled. "Will you marry me?"

Draco felt as though someone had cast a Freezing Charm on his chest. He stared. Harry, equally caught without words, backed up a step from Calibrid and nearly slammed into Draco.

"No, he *bloody well won't!*" Draco found his voice at last. "What kind of witch do you think you are, interfering in a sacred joining ritual like this?"

"A sensible one," murmured Calibrid, eyes intense, "taking a wizard who deserves an excellent partner from one unworthy of him."

Draco could not speak. The Freezing Charm seemed to have reached his tongue. He reached out and dug his hand into Harry's shoulder. He knew from the way Harry winced that he was hurting him, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Harry laughed a moment later, tone light. Draco told himself he was the only one who heard the strain in the back of his voice, let alone knew what it meant. “Calibrid, it’s a funny joke, but—“

“It’s not a joke,” said Calibrid, not moving. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and if she was conscious of the eyes staring from either side of her, Draco could not tell. He was reluctantly impressed, and furious with himself for being impressed. “And it’s not the price of our alliance, either. I have offered. You would make me an excellent husband, Harry. I have no reason to doubt your honor or your worth. You aren’t Declared for the Light, but given what you have achieved so far, that doesn’t matter; undeclared, you have done our world far more good than Albus Dumbledore. You would have a family around you who likewise loves and honors you. We would take a two-year ritual, which would conclude on the second anniversary of this day.” She smiled, and Draco couldn’t tell if her eyes were cruel, either, when they came to him. “Spring is the best time to begin a joining.”

“You have no right to do this,” Draco hissed at her.

“Yes, I do.” Calibrid was calm. “Until Halloween of this year, and the seventh ritual that you two pass through, anyone has the right to *ask* one of the partners for his hand. The partner does not have to agree, though.” She darted a glance at Harry that told Draco she was hoping he would agree, and that, no, this was not a joke. “And while it would be extremely bad manners for a Dark witch to ask you something like this at any point since the first Walpurgis dance, I am a Light witch. The same rule does not cross Declared allegiances.”

“I want to know what you *meant*,” Draco said. He could feel himself vibrating. His breath had sped up until he was aware that he sounded on the verge of hyperventilating, but he couldn’t seem to slow it down. His face was flushed with heat, and his hands were digging and twisting into each other even though he hadn’t told them to.

“About Harry’s worth?” Calibrid gave him a slow, scornful glance. “If he hasn’t already proven himself to you a hundred times over, I do not know what poor words of mine can convince you.”

“Not that,” said Draco. “About my unworthiness of Harry. Why did you say that?”

Calibrid’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Do you really want me to answer that, Malfoy?” she asked. “In front of these witnesses?”

“*No.*”

That was Harry’s voice, not his, and then Draco found privacy wards springing up, encircling them. Sound from the outside of the sphere died. He could hear his own rushing breath, and the slight squeak of Harry’s feet as he stepped away from both of them.

Calibrid wasted no time.

“You don’t share any of Harry’s ideals,” she told Draco bluntly. “You fight beside him, but plenty of people do that. Everything I’ve heard of you calls you someone who whinges and lies back instead of trying to get real labor done. You hardly care about anyone but yourself; if you care about Harry, I think it’s only on accident, and when his will happens to coincide with yours. You take advantage of his love for you to be horrible to other people.” She looked evenly at Harry for a moment. “I don’t say all the fault for that lies with you,” she added. “If adults will not discipline children, or even reward them for their bad behavior, of course the child will do it again.”

Harry flushed.

“You have *no* idea,” said Draco, the roaring of blood in his ears making it difficult to be sure of what he was saying. “You have *no* idea what we’ve been through together, what I’ve shared with him—“

Calibrid laughed unpleasantly. “No, I don’t,” she said. “Because you don’t show any sign of that in your outer behavior towards him. If you have a deep and intimate bond with him, *I’ve* never heard anyone say so. They talk about how you undermine him in public, pick at him in private, and act like a spoiled brat to anyone who crosses you. If no one outside your inner circle can see you as daring and splendid, then are you really daring and splendid?”

“I love Draco,” Harry said quietly.

“I have no doubt of that,” Calibrid assured him. “But he isn’t a match for you in love, Harry. He can’t be. He just isn’t open enough to the world.” She turned back to Draco. “I’ve grown used to reading people, especially since I’ll have to be the political leader of a family who avoids war. I know expressions, and I’ve learned to tell to a nicety how much the people I watch actually care about the others around them, and give them credit for existing and having wills and minds of their own. Harry is one of the most open I’ve ever seen. You’re one of the most closed. How in the world are you going to be good enough for him? You’re not

just normal. You're selfish. You require much more work than someone normally open to the world would. And so you add to Harry's burdens instead of complementing his strengths."

Draco could not see by now, anger and tears making his sight blur. He opened his mouth, prepared to fling an insult.

"And now you'll try to insult me," said Calibrid, calm as ice at Midwinter. "Of course you will. You don't know any other way. Why would you? It's what a child would do, and you're a child."

Draco snapped his mouth shut, and stared at her. His head echoed with snatches of remembered words, but the most powerful one was *they*.

The Squib bitch wasn't the only one who thought this way of him. Harry's other allies did, too. They hadn't seen enough of what he really was—what he could be, in moments he shared with Harry—to think him strong.

And that was *wrong*, and the only way he could ever show them how wrong they were would be to—

To change his public image. To act the way he dreamed of being. To behave like an adult, and not a child.

The way that Harry had asked him to consider doing.

Draco *knew* he was greater than the Squib bitch thought he was. He was better than any of them, all of them.

He just had to show them that.

He stepped forward and put his hands on Harry's shoulders. "I want to go back to the school now," he said quietly, never taking his eyes from Calibrid's face. She gave him a contemptuous smile. Draco let out his breath and reminded himself that he could not expect her to change her mind about him just because he had confounded her expectations once. "If you're done with the formal family alliances, can we do that?"

"Of course," said Harry, his own brow furrowed, and dropped the privacy wards.

Draco waited while Harry bid farewell to those who had come to talk to him, and then turned back towards the school. As soon as they were out of their sight, on the road to Hogwarts, he saw Harry's shoulders tense.

He thinks I'm going to yell at him, take out my anger at Calibrid on him.

Draco stopped and put one hand beneath Harry's chin, tilting his head up. Harry met his eyes with a resigned stare.

Draco kissed him gently, slowly, with attention to detail. Harry groaned. Draco waited until he heard Harry panting into the kiss, then broke it off and leaned their foreheads together.

Harry was smart enough to recognize a Moment when he saw one. He waited in silence until Draco spoke.

"I am going to show everyone that I am worthy of you," Draco whispered. "I'm going to show them what I really am."

Harry stepped away and stared at him. Draco saw the quick leap of hope in his eyes, and how he almost immediately tried to destroy it. That made a pulse of sorrow slip through Draco, that Harry would assume anything like what he promised was too good to be true.

"I promise," he said. "Now it's something more than just your asking me, or even wanting to do this to prove something to myself. I didn't know other people regarded me this way." He felt his mouth trying to twist into a sneer, and prevented it. Insults would not help him get revenge on people who *expected* insults from him. "I'll show them that I'm your equal—and your superior, even, if you don't watch out."

Harry smiled.

For the first time since the night of their argument, Draco felt warmth sweep through him. The approval in Harry's eyes healed the disappointment he'd felt then.

"I knew you could be," Harry murmured. "I can't even imagine what you'll be like once you finally start living at that level that you *can* live at, all the time."

“I’ll be the one getting marriage proposals,” said Draco, and he heard the acid of jealousy burning behind his voice.

“I wouldn’t have accepted, you know that,” said Harry, in the kind of tone that made it a self-evident truth.

“I *know* that,” Draco said. “That doesn’t matter, Harry. What matters is the reason she had for proposing to you. Not thinking I’m worthy of you! I’ll show her.”

And he could. Steel had replaced the hot anger, as if he’d grown a new spine.

I’ll become the kind of person I can be, not the kind of person they want me to be. I’ll fulfill my potential so well they’ll be ashamed of themselves for questioning it.

I’ll show them who I really am.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Gloom’s Own Country

“Severus.”

“Severus.”

“Severus!”

It seemed that he heard the name everywhere, now that the Dark Lord had instructed him to look for it and think of himself that way. Albus called him by it when he wanted Snape to talk to him about some new strategy in the war against the Dark Lord. McGonagall called him that when she wanted to warn him against harassing her precious Gryffindors—not only that, but she expected to be called Minerva. Moody, whom Albus had hired to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts this year, grumbled it as an ironic greeting when he stumped past him in the halls.

And all the while, Snape—Severus—became more and more aware how much he despised them.

The death of Harry had broken them, all of them, in ways that it should not have, given that the supposed object of the prophecy, the Potter brat who looked most like his father, was still alive. Albus’s eyes were misty often now, as if he saw the end of his life approaching and was half-glad. Some essential snap had gone out of McGonagall’s voice. Moody taught grimly, as if he expected his students to survive rather than triumph.

And James Potter came to the meetings of the Order of the Phoenix looking as if someone had roped him and dragged him through the mud behind a Granian.

Snape enjoyed those meetings more than he could say. He must, of course, give false details about Death Eater tactics and make sure it contradicted none of what he had said so far; he must dance around Albus’s constant attempts to make him more accessible and friendly to the others; he must know that on leaving these meetings, he went straight back into the world that made him so uncomfortable, the world of Hogwarts where he taught useless information to the children of his enemies. But for a brief hour or so—the Order of the Phoenix never gathered in one place for longer than that, these days—he could stare at his worst enemy’s face and know that he had helped kill his son and was going to find out and deliver up the location of his other, and Potter had no idea.

On this day, when he came into the room, Potter was the only one there. Snape made his footsteps as silent as smoke, and came up beside him before he could hear him or turn around.

“Si—“ Potter began, turning his head. He seemed—forget that Black was dead, too, half the time. He jumped in enormous surprise, and his throat worked as he swallowed. Then he said, “Severus.”

“James,” said Snape. It was the first time he had ever willingly done as Albus told him, and called another member of the Order by his first name. Potter tensed, his hands flexing over the arms of his chair. Snape took a seat across from him, watching him carefully all the while, noting the way his head tilted and the hazel eyes behind his glasses seemed to widen in time to his panicked breathing.

“What do you want from me?”

It was the barest whisper, but Snape heard it. He made sure not to give any sign of how much it pleased him. "I want what you want, James," he said. "The defeat of the Dark Lord, and the freedom to act in accordance with my views again." Only the first part of that sentence was a lie.

"You're lying," Potter breathed.

Snape could suppress his first, startled reaction, too. No one knew the details of his spying; many of them did not even know that he had been in the graveyard when Voldemort rose, or that he regularly went back into his Lord's service. Potter was merely striking out, hoping to hit a nerve, not aiming at what he knew would frighten Snape or expose him as a double agent. "About what?" he asked blandly.

"Wanting the defeat of You-Know-Who." Potter stood and stalked towards him. "I *know* you would be just as glad to see him take over, so that you could have the pleasure of torturing my wife and son."

As usual, Potter saw this great war of ideals and hatred and revenge all in terms of himself. Snape did not allow a muscle to move, nor the bland expression to leave his face. "Whatever lies you must tell to accustom yourself to working with your schoolboy enemy, Potter," he said, and looked away.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*"

The spell bound him to the chair, of course. What Potter didn't know was that Snape commanded enough wandless magic, in situations of intense rage, to break the binding and stand. And this had abruptly become a situation of intense rage.

He let Potter get a few steps closer, wand bouncing in his hand. He wanted to *destroy* the man, not merely wound him.

"Severus," Potter mocked. "I know you're lying, *Severus*. You know you're lying. You're as black-hearted as you ever were, and I don't know why Albus trusts you. You only remain part of the Order so that you can carry information on our activities to—" He took a deep breath and forced the name out. "Voldemort. You knew more Dark Arts than the rest of us put together when you came to school for your first year, didn't you? I always wondered where you learned them. Now I think I know. You grew up in gloom's own country. Albus told me a little about your childhood, the last time I asked. Not that I think what your mother did to you excuses the way you've acted to my own children, just to make that clear. In fact, it only makes me wonder if you ever actually broke free of her influence."

Snape felt a white light build behind his eyes. It burst out of him with a soundless roar that rattled the windows of the meeting house, though Snape doubted it shone through them. The Order had spells up to shield the sights inside the house from spying wizards as well as nosy Muggles.

When he could see again, the heaviness was gone from his limbs, and Potter lay on the ground, stunned, barely breathing.

Severus wasted no time. Potter was still only wildly guessing, but he might inspire the other Order members to begin distrusting him, and that would ruin Severus's own plans for remaining a double agent. And there was what he had said about his mother.

No one talked about Eileen Prince to Severus's face. Or behind his back, for that matter, and he silently promised himself that Albus would also feel his wrath, as soon as it was safe to exercise it.

He knelt beside Potter and drew a small vial of silver potion from his robe. He had created this potion, but hadn't tested it thoroughly yet. For the most part, he wouldn't have used such a liquid even on his worst enemy, because it might cause less pain than Severus wanted to create.

Now, he did not care. Or perhaps he had the faith, implicit in some Potions Masters at flying moments like an artist's faith in his work, that this one would achieve what he had made it to do. He poured it carefully down Potter's throat, and then massaged his throat muscles until he swallowed.

Then he sat back and waited until those hazel eyes fluttered and focused on him. "What happened?" Potter muttered.

"You're going to forget what really happened," said Severus, his voice calm and stern. "You'll remember that I came in, called you James, and we had an amiable discussion. It shocked you, and you accused me of being a double agent, but I reassured you I wasn't, and you believed me. Do you remember all that?"

"Yeah," Potter breathed. "Yeah, I do." He extended a hand, and Severus grasped it, pulling him to his feet. Potter pulled his hand

back at once, then nodded as if embarrassed. “I’m sorry I accused you—Severus.”

“Not at all, James,” said Severus, and then took a seat on the chair as they waited for the others to arrive. He could feel the silver potion stretching through Potter’s veins like a liquid Imperius. He had only to whisper orders, and Potter would do what he wanted. The effect was more like a Memory Charm than Imperius, in that Severus would need to create new memories to convince him what he did was his own will, but it worked. And by the time the other members of the Order arrived, Severus and James were laughing together, and Albus smiled serenely as if his ridiculous policies had really achieved this all on their own.

Severus smiled at him, and showed none of the rage that lay inside him, gnawing on its own chain.

Albus. You fool. You do not know what you have waked in me. But you shall see soon enough. How I hate you, old man.

Snape rose with a yawn, the strips of the dream feathering around him and falling away. This time, he didn’t wake up with much hatred, other than a remembered crust of hatred towards Dumbledore. He felt satisfied, as if he had accomplished something in the dream that pleased him very much.

He shrugged, and checked on his potions. The purple one was almost a game now; he made it more deadly little by little, and sometimes it smoked and overflowed and otherwise refused to obey what he asked of it. The silver potion, which would help to heal gaping Occlumency wounds like the ones Harry had suffered from Tom Riddle’s attack in his second year if Snape could ever perfect it, lay shimmering in a cauldron beside that.

He turned to face the round of Potions class and the dunderhead students he would have to teach, most of them without even a tenth of Draco’s or Harry’s or Granger’s competence. But he felt less resigned about it than he usually did, almost as if this life had been his own free choice.

He felt, for a moment, as if he walked in morning’s own country.

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Chapter Seventy-Five: On the Rise

Harry blinked and carefully closed the door of their bedroom behind him. It wasn’t that it was all that unusual to come back to Slytherin and find Draco sprawled on his belly in the midst of a series of books and parchments. He had done it when he was still trying to visualize his Animagus form, and then again when he thought he would be able to transform a few weeks after he found it. And sometimes, when he had to write a Potions or Astronomy essay that he wanted to be near perfect, he would lose himself in a maze of words that even Hermione might envy.

Now, though, Draco had several maps hovering in the air around him, directing them with sweeps of his wand. He lay on his stomach over an enormous book, reading the words at the top of the page and moving gradually downwards as he finished one set of them. Sometimes he glanced up and waved his wand again, and one of the maps shot down to him. Draco would make a careful mark on it, and then send it back up to join the hovering circle.

Harry came nearer, making Draco jump when he sat down on the bed. He doubted Draco had seen him beyond the paper. “What are you doing?” he asked curiously. It had only been a day since his meeting with the Opallines and the Gloryflowers, and for Draco to have decided, already, that he was going to do something like this, whatever it was, was—

Unlike him. Unless he really has changed his mind about being lazy and wanting to reach for everything he can do in the last day.

Draco gave him a smile. Harry scanned it for traces of grimness or irony, and couldn’t see any. “Calibrid reminded me that I need to make a place for myself in your alliance, Harry, and as more than your lover,” he murmured. “But the Dark purebloods don’t have any particular reason to listen to me over you; they already know you, mostly, and understand the advantages of allying with you. I don’t have a pull with the undeclared wizards, and the Light purebloods are wary of me because of my family’s reputation. You’re better set-up to approach the magical creatures than I could ever make you, and Jing-Xi gives you a contact with the other Lords and Ladies. So I wondered what kind of political allies I could contact and initiate diplomacy with in order to make myself indispensable—“

“You already are indispensable, Draco,” Harry said. “Please. You have to know that.” The thought that Draco would think *now* that Harry didn’t want him as a partner because his political connections weren’t perfect hurt.

“Oh, I know.” Draco leaned back, caressed Harry’s knee, and then kissed his right hand, which hung down near him. “And if I only cared about your opinion and mine, then I might be content with that, Harry. But I can’t. I need some political prominence and allies of my own. And I need to reverse the image that most of your allies have of me, as some spoiled and indulged pet who’s allowed to run about biting their ankles and dirtying the carpet.”

Harry choked. “Calibrid didn’t put it *quite* like that,” he pointed out.

“No, she didn’t.” Draco’s face was politely blank. “But that’s the way I think of it. And, right now, my opinion counts the most. I want to be better than that. And I’ve found a way.” One of the maps zipped its way over to him, and he spread it out so that Harry could see it. “What is this of?”

Harry peered at it cautiously. It looked like an unfamiliar coast, dotted with unfamiliar wizarding communities. He was just about to say so when a name he knew caught his eye, though it looked much smaller on the map than it would in real life. That would come from the map showing only the magical part of the city, he thought, and not the Muggle part. “America,” he said. “New York, and part of the coastline.”

“Very good,” Draco murmured. “We haven’t heard from the American wizarding communities. Of course, some of them think this is a European war, and they don’t think that much about what would happen if Voldemort won and left Britain. Or perhaps they think their Muggles would protect them.” Draco snorted. “They *live* with them, and they can think that?” He waved his wand, and the map looped back into the air, dancing with the others. “But if that attitude turns out to be widespread among them, then it will make them that much easier to manipulate.”

“You’re looking to extend the alliance across the oceans, aren’t you?” Harry asked flatly.

Draco looked at him.

“I don’t think it’ll work,” said Harry, compelled to be honest. “Even the wizarding communities who are much closer to us aren’t taking an interest in the war. They think I can defeat Voldemort, and they don’t want to be noticed by him if I can’t. How much more is that going to apply to the Americans, since they’ve got a whole ocean between him and them?”

“Those oceans are going to look pretty damn small if he breeds flying creatures,” said Draco. “Or enchants some device that could permit intercontinental Apparition. Or, for that matter, captures the Floo Network. I’m looking ahead. I’m sure I’ll find some people among the Americans who want to do the same. Besides, Harry, you forget the larger import of your own work. It’s not the war with Voldemort that will last and last all your life. It’s your *vates* task. And there are magical creatures in America, too, bound so that they don’t interfere with the Muggles. There are probably more of them, in fact, since European Muggles poured in so fast that the wizards and witches didn’t have time to set up sanctuaries. They had to work with webs and do the best they could to hide them in plain sight. They knew the Muggles would kill them as *exotica*.”

“And they’re still bound,” Harry summarized.

“Do you see the tide of Muggle occupation growing less, at all?” Draco’s voice was dry. He waved his wand, and a different map flowed down to him. This time, Harry caught a glimpse of several lakes, and a peninsula shaped vaguely like a hand. “They had a terrible time with the freshwater sea serpents around Michigan. They’re living practically under some of the Muggles now, because there isn’t any better place to put them.”

“And if my presence breaks those webs—“

“It’s not going to be pretty,” Draco finished. “There are too many magical creatures side by side with Muggles, instead of off in some remote mountains or forests the way they tend to be in Europe. Oh, some are hidden, but not enough. And the American witches and wizards have this—this *delusion* that the way they do things is oh so much better than the ways more established magical communities do things. That includes killing magical creatures who escape their bindings, rather than risk them being seen by Muggles and having to *Oblivate* the Muggles.”

Harry hissed between his teeth, and the shadow of a black cat appeared beside him.

“I rather thought that would irritate you.” Draco sounded amused. “And the Ministry has its own customs and ways of doing things, too, including an obsession with informality that, oddly enough, *still* makes them infatuated with formal rituals. They’ll pretend to scorn me when I contact them, but they’ll be secretly flattered that someone from an old pureblood wizarding family is doing it, and they’ll be impressed that it’s someone with such an important place in the alliance. I really don’t think they would accept that someone like Calibrid Opalline could still be just as important to you. It’ll look better that it’s your partner.”

“I—this is wonderful, Draco,” Harry said, a little helplessly. He hadn’t thought of reaching out to the Americans for help. He had so much to do that he’d focused on moving forward, and preparing to fight the concrete threats that Jing-Xi could tell him about. But perhaps it was time that he thought of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow surviving, even thriving, beyond the immediate purpose of freeing British magical creatures. “I don’t know if you’ll be ready to do all this immediately.”

“Oh, I’m not.” Draco indicated the immense book he lay on. “I’ve been reading the history of magical communities in America, and I’ll read more. By the time I contact them, I want to be able to make them dance to my tune. I might be able to do that right now with a British wizard, but I’m smart enough to realize the limits to my knowledge. They just won’t be limits much longer.” He smiled.

He looked so smug that Harry couldn’t help himself; he leaned in to kiss him, and Draco returned it with interest. When he heard parchment creak and crackle around them, though, Harry pulled back. “I’m interrupting your studying,” he said innocently. “Of course you’ll want to finish that first.”

Draco groaned and reached out as Harry moved backward, though his hand fell short on the bed. “Harry, it’s been a *week*…”

“But it won’t be much longer,” said Harry, and winked. “The vernal equinox is in just a few days, remember?”

Draco lifted himself on his elbows and stared at him steadily. Harry stared back. He knew Draco read the silent challenge in his eyes. So far, Draco seemed intent on keeping his promise to live up to his potential and strive for greatness, but it was only one day since Calibrid had so stung him. There was no saying that he would keep up his intensity until the vernal equinox.

“You’ll be spending the day with someone you can be proud of, Harry,” Draco said, when the stare had lasted long enough to make them both, apparently, feel slightly uncomfortable.

Harry inclined his head, and withdrew.

Draco glanced at the bed. The papers and parchments he’d been studying earlier were safely out of the way. The enormous *History of Wizards in America* that he’d used to start working his way into, well, the history of wizards in America lay on the bedside table, nearly tipping it. Even their trunks were shoved back against the wall, and Draco had gently but firmly put Argutus out the door when the Omen snake had tried to enter earlier.

He closed his eyes.

He knew now, humiliatingly, why he hadn’t been able to do this so far. How many books had he read in which he’d seen some sentence about will, and how important it was? He could *want* to achieve this, but until he really focused his will and aimed it towards the desired end, he would always fail.

Now he did not intend to fail. He gave himself over to the swimming desire. He was in one place. The vision he wanted to reach stood at the other end. He had to cover the ground between himself and it, and this first time, he had to do it with nothing but will.

The books had advised him to go more slowly, but Draco had *done* that, and nothing happened. He simply couldn’t be determined one day, and then slightly more determined the next. It had to occur all at once, or it would never occur.

Draco bent himself towards the task.

It was hard. He felt as if scrambled forward with an enormous load of rock on his back. His head was bent, and sweat trickled down his neck, and distracting noises came floating up from the Slytherin common room. He could hear Syrinx pacing on the other side of the door where he’d exiled her, if he listened hard enough. He could imagine Harry bursting into the room and disrupting his concentration.

He could imagine sagging back onto the bed and saying it was all too much. He hadn’t told Harry about this, just in case he did fail. So there would be no one to scold him for not achieving it.

Except himself.

Wrong or not, the general magical community had an impression of him that Draco had never intended. It was up to him to correct that impression. Spreading rumors of his magical competence would not do it. Promising to work harder and then never

working harder would not do it. Telling Harry of what he wanted and receiving praise would only mean that he put off the effort, because he could live for weeks on Harry's praise.

And that was another reason he was doing this, wasn't it? He had something unique to offer to Harry's alliance if he could master this. Oh, sure, there were a few other people helping Harry who could do the same thing, but they all had the advantage, or disadvantage, of being *known* for it. Draco could hide his skill, because no one would expect him to have it. That might save their lives on a battlefield someday, or on a spying mission. Voldemort would guard against those people he knew to have this skill, but not against Draco.

That got him past one twist and turn of the passage. The image he wanted to reach had drawn a little closer.

And there was the image of what Harry's face would look like if he found out that Draco could do it. Draco imagined a pair of arms gathering him closer, a pair of wide green eyes shining with approval and joy. Perhaps Harry would even break the self-declared fast of sex that was lasting until the vernal equinox, and share the bed with Draco for something other than sleeping.

The image was closer now, bristling. And Draco had the feeling that the hardest part of concentration yet lay ahead. Neither the thought of Harry's approval nor improving his own reputation would carry him through this rocky country; he'd already used them as climbing rope.

He panted. For a moment, his concentration did waver, and almost break into pieces. But then he leaped sideways, and caught the rope he needed.

He wanted to do this for his *own* sake, too. If he could be more than he'd always thought he was, if other people had seen this greatness in him and he hadn't, then he wanted to *have* that potential. The way to have that potential was *not* by making efforts and then slipping back. Other wizards might do that, but not a Malfoy. Not a wizard like him, always stronger and better than other people thought he was.

Not Draco.

He burst through the last stretch separating him from the image. And suddenly it was easier. The rocks he'd carried and climbed fell all about him, tumbling light. His body lowered and grew stronger, and then he was through, tumbling, his mental self colliding with the image and wrapping it all about himself.

Draco cried out as he felt his bones shift and his face elongate, his body shrink and his skin ripple and turn inside out. It hurt, an instant of compressed agony that might have been enough to make him give up the transformation. But all the books had said that once it began to happen, physically, the hardest part was past. It was the concentration that took all the time and effort.

He opened his eyes, aching as if someone had grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and slammed him into multiple walls, but also aware of an intense feeling of accomplishment. He stood and stepped forward. For a moment, human knowledge and animal instincts fought in him, and then the instincts won and Draco found himself moving easily on four legs.

He stared into the mirror he'd left leaning near the wall. After a moment, he spun around and examined his reflection from the back, because he positively could not believe that an animal could be so handsome.

He was a white fox, just as he had seen in his vision. His fur was a deep cream color, so that he wouldn't shine unnaturally beneath the moonlight, but stood some chance of blending into snow. His paws were neat, quick, and light. His eyes were gray, and he had no marking anywhere on his body except a slight strip of black around his muzzle and mouth that served to accent his equally black nose.

His nose! Scents were flooding him, when Draco could pay attention to anything but the way he looked. His ears flagged up and down, and he could hear sounds through the walls that his Housemates would be embarrassed by if they knew about them. His brush swished softly back and forth, a living thing on its own. When Draco paid attention to it, then it grew heavy and awkward and slow, but it picked up speed again the moment he started watching it from the corner of his eye and mind.

He had done it. He had achieved his Animagus form before any of the others had. And he had done it because of the strength of his will.

Smug, Draco reached for the will to transform back, and found that this came much more easily. He knew what it was like to be a wizard, after all, had known for most of his life, and the shape of large limbs and an unsensing body snapped into place about him. Draco found himself staggering, half in and half out of his clothes, and blinking at the mirror.

He tried to change back into a fox.

A short uphill struggle this time, and he could do it. Draco turned around to admire the color of his fur again.

The bedroom door opened. Harry's irritated voice said, "Draco, why were Argutus and Syrinx outside—"

Draco turned and trotted towards him. He heard Harry's voice die. When he looked up, he couldn't read his expression well—not only was he further away from Harry's face than usual, but his fox eyes saw things differently—but he didn't have to. The flush on those cheeks and the scent around him told how much he approved.

Draco jumped neatly into Harry's arms, and settled back, and waited for praise.

Connor decided he'd had enough of *that*.

"That" was Draco staring at him all the damn time. Granted, he mostly did it in Defense Against the Dark Arts, given that that was the one class where Draco sat behind him and could do it most easily, but sometimes he stared at meals, too, and whenever they passed each other in the corridors. When Connor came to visit Harry in the Slytherin common room, Draco sat on a chair nearby and rarely tried to join the conversation unless specifically invited, instead murmuring a few "yes" or "no" responses, and staring at Connor.

He caught Draco's arm as the other boy left Defense Against the Dark Arts, and turned him so that his back was to the wall. Draco smirked at him, and glanced down at Connor's hand. "I hate to tell you this, Potter, but I'm already thoroughly taken."

Connor dropped his arm as if it were made of dragonfire, before realizing that was exactly what Draco had intended him to do. He settled for a snort and a disgusted look.

"You've been watching me," he said. "I want to know why."

And then Draco paused and licked his lips and looked nervous. As the moments passed and there was no Slytherin, sly answer forthcoming immediately, Connor's interest grew. So this wasn't a game after all, then, or an attempt to make him feel uncomfortable around his future brother-in-law. It was something more serious, and that might mean Draco wasn't perfectly confident. Connor preferred that. He had some chance of disconcerting Draco in turn.

"I've been trying to see the past Connor and the future Connor in you," said Draco, which sent Connor back into a state of confusion.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It—there was that Pensieve Harry gave me for Christmas," Draco said. "Filled with memories of times I hadn't actually shared with him, mostly childhood memories. And you're there so often. In so many of them, the most important person in Harry's life. I wanted to know what you were like." He made a vague gesture at Connor's chest. "And I wanted to know how you could be like—this. You've changed since then, but I don't know how you did it."

"Of course you don't," said Connor, and stepped back from Draco, relaxing. It wasn't so very wonderful that he should want to know, was it? Draco was practically shouting his intention to change to the whole school. Since Connor had had to shift his own perception of and actions around Harry so dramatically, he was probably the best one suited to give him advice. "Not even Harry knows. By the time he really started looking, I'd already accomplished most of it."

"So tell me how," Draco said.

Connor shrugged, and half-closed his eyes, forcing himself to return to memories that, by now, had lost their sting and become part of his daily reality. "After—Sirius killed himself, and I heard the truth about the prophecy and watched Harry free the Dementors, I realized how much of what I'd believed was built on lies. Harry helped me a bit with the grief, and so did James and Remus, but so many people had sheltered me from the world most of my life. I *wanted* to think about things on my own. So I pretended I was more healed than I actually was. Harry was so tied up in his attempts to get along with Dad, and then with dealing with the beginnings of this alliance he's got now and with Snape, that he didn't notice. Dad might have, but he was more occupied with getting Harry back from Snape, and Remus was grieving for Sirius.

"So I could think about things like the end of considering myself as the Boy-Who-Lived without anyone interfering. And I saw

two roads I could take. One ended in resentment of Harry, jealousy of him for having the title I'd always believed I was mine. And the other ended with being content with my own ordinariness, and a support for him instead of a rival or an obstacle. That was the road I chose. I worked as hard as I could to accustom myself to what I am now. I told myself every day that Harry was the Boy-Who-Lived. I made myself try to see the way Dad and Mum—I mean, James and Lily—"Connor had fallen far enough into his story to forget himself"—had really acted around him, instead of just assuming they'd treated us the same. When I flew, I remembered that Harry could do better.

"And I saw all the things he'll never have, all the things I can do that he never can. He doesn't even notice when someone loves him, most of the time. I know when someone loves me. He has a hard time asserting his own will and insisting on his own rights. I don't. He torments himself over his mistakes. I don't. I love Harry, but there is no way under the sun that I would want to be him."

He thought, for a moment, of telling Draco about the noticing he'd started to do lately, and how he thought that was probably Harry's fault, not Parvati's. But he couldn't bring himself to. For one thing, he still sort of hoped the noticing would go away, and he wouldn't have to be what it was calling him to be. For another, Draco didn't really *care* about that, about him. Connor was wise enough to know that. Draco cared about him in relation to Harry, and if he could understand Connor better, he would get along with him better, and that would please Harry. What Draco Malfoy did, he did with himself as the center of the universe and the only point of reference.

And, finally, Connor wasn't sure how to describe the noticing without sounding stupid. So he'd noticed that Lavender Brown was very kind to the Gryffindor fifth-years, and that Dean always stared off into space just before he started panting, and that Neville had kept a little plant alive on his windowsill for weeks that wasn't supposed to stay alive in this climate? So *what?* It sounded stupid.

"Thanks, Connor."

He opened his eyes, and blinked. It wasn't like Draco to call him by his first name. But now he had, and now he even nodded and moved away stiffly, as if cradling the new knowledge to himself made it difficult to walk.

Connor shook his head in bemusement, and went to go study his Animagus transformation. He had made it part of the way to the boar image last night before falling back. That was all right, Peter had said. Just keep driving forward, and he would reach it eventually. And a boar was a perfectly fine form to have. Blunt, strong, cleverer than many people thought they were, able to bring down barriers that separated them from others.

On the way back to Gryffindor Tower, Connor noticed three secret sneers, one blossoming romance, and the sources of two future disputes. The result was that he flopped back on his bed when he reached the Tower and scowled at his ceiling instead of beginning to study right away.

Stupid noticing.

Harry woke on the day of the vernal equinox feeling both smug and hopeful. He thought, he really thought, that Draco had changed enough that what he'd planned for the first day of spring could happen after all.

He'd worked through most of his correspondence and all his homework during the rest of the week, and he was sure that leaving for a few days would harm nothing. And he *wanted* to leave for a few days. He wanted to show Draco what he had planned, and he wanted—

He wanted a holiday, damn it.

He'd wrestled with the thought for a long time. He'd thought, at first, that it was selfish of him, and then that Christmas ought to be enough, or the upcoming Easter holidays. But Christmas had been ruined by the news of the Horcruxes and what he'd have to do to neutralize them, and Harry couldn't be sure something else wouldn't happen between now and Easter to upset his plans. So he was going to take Draco away for a few days following the equinox, the balanced day of Light and Dark, the moment when power passed from Dark to Light, and he would refuse to worry about any of the other problems that could plague him for the space of that time.

He went down to breakfast humming quietly, and received the owl that came from Hogsmeade with a smile. Draco was late, but Harry had expected that. Since it was the equinox itself, Draco would want to do something dramatic. Harry ate with an eye on the doors to the Great Hall.

Draco stood there a moment later. He came at once to Harry, his stride more confident than it had been since long before the day when Calibrud scolded him. Harry allowed himself to sit back and admire for a moment. Draco looked so much better when he forgot to worry about defending his own sulky desires, and instead set about influencing what other people thought of him.

If he wants to dispute the Grand Unified Theory, he should write against it, Harry thought, as he stood. *Not whinge about it and expect people to listen to him that way.*

Draco met him with a kiss and a murmured instruction to sit down. Then he drew his wand with a flourish. “I have a new spell to show you, Harry,” he said. “One that I’d been thinking about for the past few days, but which I just worked last night.”

Harry sat down with what he knew was a giddy smile on his face, but he didn’t care. What mattered was that Draco had made a new *spell*. He loved the moments when Draco showed off his power and his will and what, together, they could produce. If nothing else, it moved Draco further out from under his shadow, and gave him more freedom and independence.

Draco held his wand in front of him and closed his eyes. A moment later, a trickling yellow light began to play from it, and formed into a ring in the air. Harry leaned forward, seeing an unfamiliar image through it. It looked like a coastline, a rocky one that might have been in Northumbria or Ireland or Scotland itself.

The incantation Draco used must have been nonverbal, because Harry continued to hear no words as the image slowly swayed back and forth, seeking something. Then it focused on a figure walking majestically towards the water’s edge.

Harry hissed in his breath. “Falco!” he whispered.

“Yes,” Draco said. His voice trembled with strain. “The spell—seeks out one of your greatest enemies, and then shows them to you. I was going to try for—Voldemort, but I thought it was too risky.”

“Too right,” Harry muttered, eyes focused on Falco. He had knelt beside the rocks, and stirred one hand in the shallow waves now, eyes fixed on what looked to be water no deeper than a tidepool.

Then the water wrinkled, and a sleek head lifted itself from the surface, long yellow hair flooding down its shoulders. Harry hissed again. It was a siren, one of the merfolk Voldemort had freed from their web in Greece and hunted Britain’s coasts with for a time. Scrimgeour had warned Harry that Falco seemed to be spending time near the coasts, but Harry had not known that he had come so far as to get a siren to speak to him.

Falco said something now that the spell didn’t pick up. The siren nodded, and pulled her head back beneath the water. Falco stood up, still gazing into the ocean, a tired expression on his face.

He Apparated. The spell’s image went dark for a moment, and then he appeared in a clearing that made Harry sit up. He *knew* that clearing. It was in the Forbidden Forest, not so very far from Hogwarts.

Falco extended his hands, and they were full of wooden disks, which were familiar to Harry from a certain attack Voldemort had instituted on the autumnal equinox the year before last. He began to place the disks in a circle around himself. Harry had no doubt that he intended to use them the same way, to command sirens to attack up bays and rivers and so on as Voldemort had—perhaps even send them up the Thames into London itself.

“Draco,” Harry said. “Does this spell show what’s happening right now?”

“It’s supposed to,” Draco said warily.

Harry stepped away from the table, his breath already rushing freely in his lungs, his hand clenched. The silver hand flexed and bent a bit, but still wasn’t accustomed enough to his body to obey him completely.

“Listen, Draco,” he said. “You’ve definitely earned what I meant to give you for the equinox, but now it appears that I have to teach Falco a lesson.”

“Harry—“

Falco, in the image, raised his hand.

A moment later, the sirens’ compelling voices rang out from the Hogwarts lake, striking through the school’s wards as if they

weren't there, twining around the ears of students and making them face the doors of the Great Hall glassy-eyed.

Harry grimaced and ran, weaving wards behind him that ought to keep the other students inside for at least a little while; under compulsion, they wouldn't be thinking rationally enough to dismantle them immediately.

So much for my holiday.

~*~*~*~*

76) The Duel of Phoenix and Siren