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Chapter Seventy-Six: The Duel of Phoenix and Siren

Harry came out on the shore of the lake, sure that he'd brushed through wards as if they were spiderwebs, but not remembering if he had or not. His gaze was focused ahead, on the water and the sirens swimming there. He could see darker, darting shapes he assumed were the selkies, the usual inhabitants of the lake. The sirens swam with their heads lifted, their faces distended as they sang, but not enough to make them less beautiful. They were Dark creatures, every part of them made to compel and lure. Harry didn't think there was anything that would make them less beautiful.

I'll have to silence them and lessen their hold over the other students and professors first, Harry thought, as he narrowed his eyes at them. *Otherwise, Falco could command someone to attack me or hold them in a hostage situation, and I hardly need that when I'm trying to stop him from sending sirens to the attack in other waters, too.*

He tried a simple Silencing Charm first. Nothing happened. Harry nodded. He had thought it wouldn't—if it were that simple, then most wizards would have escaped siren clutches instead of falling prey to them—but he had wanted to make sure.

He could feel the strands of compulsion flicking into his mind, trying to weave webs around his thoughts. His will sliced them and speared them and dragged them away, but there were more and more as the sirens saw him, admitted him as someone dangerous, and focused their music on him.

I'll have to answer their weapon with a weapon.

Harry opened his mouth and called on the phoenix song.

It welled up from his throat as if it had been waiting for this exact moment, like a phoenix sitting in a bush and invisible until it was noticed. Harry felt the first rush of notes exit his mouth like the bouncing pebbles that heralded a landslide. When that passed, the landslide itself could come, a percussive symphony that made Harry feel a bit dazed to think he was making those sounds.

The sirens swam nearer and nearer the shore. Their leader, one with long, fluffy blonde curls, blue eyes, and a crown of twisted driftwood and pearls on her head, folded her arms on the bank and leaned forward to press her voice against Harry. A core of cool water slid down Harry's skin. He could feel the temptation to relax, to give in. The siren plucked at his desires for a holiday like fingers on the strings of a harp. He had only to yield, and he could have that pleasure he'd dreamed of. He liked to swim, didn't he? He could swim in this song, and no one would bother him.

Harry smiled, a bit grimly. The trap might even have caught him if he weren't used to having his holidays spoiled and his relaxation interrupted.

He flung the phoenix song like a spear at the siren, and she reeled back, catching herself just before she sank. She flipped her head up and hissed, and Harry caught a glimpse of sharp, curved fangs hiding among her ordinary teeth. A faint red mark was appearing on her pale cheek, as if she'd been burned.

Blue fire appeared around Harry in the same moment, wrapping his arms and his neck and his torso. He sang through it, spreading his voice like a net above the surface of the lake.

The phoenix was the singer of the Light, and the sirens the singers of the Dark. And they were creatures of water, and he was a creature—or at least the host of a creature—of fire. They were natural enemies.

At the same time, he didn't want to kill them. He merely wanted to break the web of their compulsion and drive them back. Harry knew that as soon as he stopped singing, though, or grew tired, they would renew their attack. They had agreed to aid Falco, from the image in Draco's spell. That meant they wouldn't simply swim free from his control as they had with Voldemort. They wanted this, this free source of prey that Falco had promised them.

He would have to come to some kind of compromise with them.

While, at the same time, fighting Falco, and making sure that they were held back from attacking people in the Thames and through whatever other bays or lakes or rivers Falco had sent them to.

Harry grinned, and thought the expression, to be proper, should be bloody and filled with half-chewed flesh.

I've done harder things, haven't I? he thought, and then paced forward, his eyes fixed on the siren queen. When she moved, he could see tendrils spreading out from her, clear glassy tunnels that tugged on the ears of the other sirens. More tendrils projected to north and east and south, though Harry had to squint to see them.

She's their queen. She's bound to them. And what influences her may influence them.

Harry aimed the phoenix song down the middle of that web. As he watched, the glass glittered and turned golden, lit as if by sunrise, and then his music shot away from him and down towards the distant places where other sirens swam.

And what should I sing of, to convince them?

Harry lifted his head and sang of freedom.

Falco sighed when he heard Harry's voice. The boy was simply determined to oppose his plans, wasn't he?

But he was not as angry as he once would have been. He was too tired.

Hunting among the paths of Dark and Light, as well as cornering the wild Dark and demanding it teach him, was hard, endless labor. He had done the best he could, because he was fighting for the most sacred of causes, the balance of the British wizarding world.

But he carried the marks of his lessons on his body, and he always would. He almost looked forward to the death that he assumed would come now, when he faced Harry and Harry Declared Light to balance him.

But what mattered was that his death would restore the balance, and prevent Harry from being either undeclared or *vates*. He had to keep his gaze on that goal, and use it to pull himself through the hard, muddy roads that lay between him and that final, redeeming moment. He only hoped that he would live to see it.

He had visited Tom, and learned his technique for controlling the sirens, as well as a few other tactics that a Dark Lord would use. It had hurt his sense of the fitness of things to see Tom lying in the dirt, as if he did not understand the importance of his power and the position he would have again. Yes, Harry had cut a hole in his magical core, but there were ways to get past that, and Tom would find them.

Falco lifted an arm and held it up to the sky. He felt the wild Dark's attention center on him. Until sunset and the balancing moment, the Dark was still in control of this part of the year, slightly more powerful than the Light. And it paid attention when such a powerful wizard made a gesture that looked like the beginning of a Declaration ritual. Falco had felt it patiently dogging his steps as he set up this trap, and now it hovered just out of sight, sometimes watching the sirens and sometimes watching him.

"I yield myself," he began. "I yield my power, my magic, my soul, my heart, my mind, my body. I accept the strictures of wildness against order, of compulsion against free will, of war against peace, of solitude against cooperation, of deception against truth." He took a deep breath. "I Declare myself Dark, and name myself a Dark Lord."

The magic in his chest coalesced into a single bolt, which he flung into the sky. Above him, it turned and swirled dark green, as if his power had bruised it. Then the wild Dark caught the bolt, strengthened it, and sent it roaring back to him like an arrow fledged with night. Falco dropped to one knee as it hit him, but made sure it was only one knee. The wild Dark did not truly care for submission on the part of its wizards, even as it demanded that some acknowledgment of its greater power was made.

Falco took a deep breath, and counted the days over in his head. He would, of course, attack when he had the best chance of winning, even though he did not really believe he could win. This was meant only as a prelude, to show that he was serious and could act like a Dark Lord, in case Harry was tempted to doubt him.

Forty days. He would attack on Walpurgis Night, of course, the night when the wild Dark was in full force.

He felt claws hook around his shoulders as the wild Dark settled on him, and glanced to the side to see that it had sent him a dark bird, like a blackbird if one discounted the glossy blue markings on its wings. It hooked one foot through its beak and gave him a truly evil stare through one small eye.

Falco faced forward and began to prepare his next attack. He had studied Tom's tactics and the history of the Dark's magic to learn how this was done, but he had some of his own ideas, too. Harry had hit him with a flood of memories in the Department of

Mysteries that Falco had not been prepared for.

But he could absorb those memories, and learn them, and make weapons out of them.

He took the first blade in hand, and held it tight, while he gazed into the distance, towards the shore of the lake, and watched Harry wrestle with his sirens.

Rufus blinked, feeling as if he'd just awakened from a dream.

It was the most *interesting* feeling. He'd been sitting in his office, speaking with Elder Juniper about what further concessions to the magical creature the Wizengamot was prepared to make, when an image of water had surged in front of him. He couldn't immediately tell if the water was the river or the sea, and it hadn't seemed to matter. He should walk out of his office, and keep walking until he saw it. Then he should plunge forward. He need not worry about drowning. There would be hands waiting to catch him. He could almost see the hands, in fact, rising pale arms that gleamed as if from the reflection of lit water.

And then the compulsion had faded, and now he was hearing music, a rising and skirling song that made his heart beat faster and filled his eyes with tears. Rufus shook his head and turned away from Juniper. The Elder would never forget such a weakness, and Rufus must find out what had caused it soon.

That was when he noticed that the Elder seemed to be having some troubles of his own, at least if the cough and the fist that scrubbed at his face were any indication. Of course, he recovered soon after. Juniper was a politician, and one who had survived years of power changes in the Ministry bobbing relatively near the surface—too powerful to indiscriminately anger, too weak to be seen as a threat every time the power change happened. “The bloody hell's that?” he demanded now, and his voice was gruff to conceal the presence of his own sorrow.

Rufus tapped his wand against the office's enchanted window in answer. It sped through several views that showed various glimpses of London in which nothing remarkable happened. Then they appeared to hover above the Thames, and Rufus saw its gray waters churning as magical creatures swam free around the foot of a Muggle bridge. From flashes of yellow hair, and given what had happened to him just a moment ago, he would guess they were sirens.

Hovering in the middle of the air above them, as much on display to Muggle London as the dragon had been, was the misty image of a young man wreathed in blue fire, singing in the voice of a phoenix.

“Harry *vates*,” said Rufus. *That should have been my first guess.*

“Must he be so *public* in everything he does?” Juniper demanded, leaning over Rufus's shoulder to frown out the window. “The other Ministries are going to think we're holding a damn *festival* for the Muggles. Come learn about dragons! Come see that phoenixes are real!” He waved a disgusted hand.

“I don't think he means to be,” said Rufus, and sat back with a little sigh to wait for the end of the display. “He's saving the world again, Elder, and that is sometimes a rather noisy endeavor.”

Harry talked to the sirens.

He made every note he shed carry images of open water, oceans where Muggles never came, rocks where the sirens could sun themselves and never have to duck under the water for fear of a passing ship, air that would carry their voices to charm fish and dolphins and never leave them in fear of a sailor. Blue poured through his voice, and green, and the silver-white of foam. Did the sirens really mean to swim in this crowded, contaminated water for the rest of their lives? The seas around Britain swarmed with rubbish, with humans, with ships. But the oceans beyond the horizon were there, wastes of water only to those who could not see, as the sirens could, as Harry could, the remarkable freedom in them.

The siren queen answered slowly, clotted music pushing through her mouth. They had made a bargain. They would help the old wizard, and charm Muggles and wizards into the water. It fulfilled their deepest instincts. They were creatures of compulsion. They could not help but do what they were doing. The vision Harry offered was attractive, but without people to compel, an essential part of themselves was missing.

Harry changed his song, made it sharp and merciless. He showed the siren queen how she had served Voldemort, how she had

served Falco, how she had done nothing but swarm around the coasts of Britain for months because she had to have some master to guide her. And was that really either being at liberty or compelling the people she wanted to compel? *He* knew the sirens were capable of greater things, that they did not need to depend on humans. But if she wanted to, if she wished to turn her back on greater things to answer some petty conception that wizards had formed of her people, then of course she could do so.

The music flowed more freely from the siren queen's mouth now. Of course she did not wish to serve others. But it was what they did.

And had they ever considered anything else?

Harry pitched the phoenix song high, his mind on Fawkes in the last dance he had done, so glorious and so wonderful that the thought of caging him seemed absurd. Phoenixes chose whom they bonded to, whom they served, if they served anyone at all, and they retained the will to leave an unworthy companion. And wizards *respected* them for that, for their freedom, as they would never respect sirens.

That was absurd in and of itself, the queen's voice said, filling Harry's mind with images of lapping, hot pools of dark water. Of course they should respect sirens. Sirens could kill them, and phoenixes would not.

But even they had the ability, Harry said, and cast out intricacies of warbles that charted the way around sharp beaks and curved, gleaming scarlet talons. Wizards knew there was a touch of danger in them. But they loved them nonetheless. And they would not love sirens.

We need no man's love, the queen sang.

Harry smiled, and strung his response, a series of rests and high notes that leaped and rose and dipped like waves and troughs, along her reasoning. They didn't need human love, did they? Any more than they needed human respect, or human victims. They could swim free of all of this. Their lives would only intersect with humanity's when they decided they should do so. They had gone from one master to another, really. Voldemort's trick of breaking their web had been only a trick. He had enslaved them again at once.

Would they like to see what it was like not to be slaves?

And voices answered from everywhere, bay and inlet and lake and ocean and river running to the sea. *Yes*.

Harry ignored the ache in his throat that came from his tiring voice. He *could* do this. He would spin them a vision of freedom so enchanting that they would never want to come closer to shore than the side of a rock where they could sit and comb their hair. They should have their own existence, separate from everything a human could conceive. Harry would not be able to paint the whole of it, since he was human, but he would show them the traces of it and hope they would follow them.

And then he staggered, because a memory had hit him like a knife. Suddenly he could not see the lake, or the grass at his feet. Suddenly, he could see nothing but the day that Lily had told him he would never have a lover or a family, because he was needed to protect Connor. He felt as if he were seven years old, and the reasoning echoed from every corner of his mind, picking up resonances from his training, whispering in circles that he could not break.

Harry flung his voice against the bonds. It didn't seem to make a difference. The memory closed in on him and constricted him like a net, and he felt himself shrinking to match it. Other memories flickered past him, fading when he grasped at them. Draco, and Regulus, and Snape, were fading, fading, fading, and he did not know why.

Falco had spun his web carefully.

Its heart, its spider if one willed, was the memory of Harry being told he would never have a family or a lover of his own. That was powerful. But, by itself, it would have done no good. If Harry had simply lived through the experience at one time, the most Falco could have hoped to do was distract him with the image.

The anchors of the web were the corners of Harry's mind where he still wished for a life something like that of his childhood self. Falco found envy of a girl undergoing war witch training, for the simplicity of her existence and her ability to put emotion away at a moment's notice. He found a time just a few months ago when Harry had tried to slide all his negative reactions into Occlumency pools, and what had happened when that attempt failed; along with the relief had come self-disgust, that he could not manage it. He found a dream, suffered more than a year ago under Tom's curse, of a world where Harry existed only to make

alliances for his brother, and how *happy* it made him, a deep and soaring joy that he'd taken care to shield from his allies. In small and scattered parts of himself, Harry still wished to be what he had been. If nothing had ever changed, his life would have hurt much less, and he would not need to take so much responsibility for so many positions he felt inadequate for.

What made the trap perfect was that it depended on what Harry *wanted*. Let Falco set up the web, and Harry's mind would weave it for him.

He stepped back, holding his breath as he watched. This might be the moment when Harry Declared, after all, he thought. Urge him deeply enough, and Harry would have to call on the Light, and use its power to rise from the trap.

"What's happening now?" Juniper demanded abruptly.

Rufus, who'd looked away from the struggle in the sky to the paperwork on his desk, glanced back, and then stood. "I don't know," he said. His voice rippled and shook with tension. He couldn't be bothered to worry about that, or what effect it might have on Juniper's future treatment of him.

Something had happened. Something was going wrong.

The misty image of Harry bound in phoenix fire had faded. Now it only showed as a dim outline against a much stronger image of a white spider crouched in the middle of a black-and-white spider web. Through the web whispered two voices, voices which Rufus could hear as well as he had the phoenix song a moment before, and, seemingly, the siren song before that, though he did not remember the siren song as an experience of music.

Harry, you'll never have children.

Why not, Mum?

Because children take time. They take almost all your time when they're little, and they would be little for several years. Do you remember being little for several years?

Some of it.

Rufus shuddered. He recognized Lily Potter's voice, and Harry's, though it was younger than it sounded now, of course. He was not sure what made him wince more—the thought of what this scene being played out over London right now meant for the defense against the sirens, or the fact that he had a seat right next to something this private, now dragged out on the stage of the public sky like a flayed corpse.

And you would have to devote all your time to them, and to your spouse or partner.

I wouldn't have any time for Connor!

Of course you wouldn't. And it wouldn't be fair to your spouse or partner, would it? Just like it wouldn't be fair to your father if I had someone to serve like you have Connor, and I spent all my time away from him.

Juniper touched his shoulder. Rufus, feeling sick, glanced up at him, only to find the Elder's eyes fixed on the sky.

"And now what's happening?"

Rufus blinked and turned back to the struggling sea of images, trying as best as he could to ignore the voices.

A longing to relax and let the memory wrap him swept Harry. He *could* go back into the egg, and then everything would be over. No one but Falco would ever know it had been weakness that made him surrender, and not simply the Dark Lord's overwhelming strength. He had the magic of the wild Dark backing him now, making the web, a tool of compulsion, thicker and stronger. No one would ever know what had happened. And Harry himself would lose the memories, and never know he had been anything different than what he was now.

He still wanted that simple life. He still thought it would be easier, when he was exhausted from a long day of making mistakes

that other people would never have made, to give in and let his training have its way.

He had told Draco that some of his sacrificial instincts were never going away. That was true. They were too deeply buried in him. He would always bear some scars, would never be completely healed.

And it was those same instincts that saved him now, sparking out like shards of broken bone or eggshell from the sides of his mind, and slicing through the strands of the web where they tried to come down.

Oh, yes, it would be comfortable to surrender, but since when had comfort ever been a priority of his, or something he needed?

And oh, yes, he would be happy, since for him the world would never have changed from what it was when he was a child, but what about Draco, Snape, Regulus, Connor, Peter, all those who had learned to know and love him the way he was? They would be devastated. He could not do that to them.

What would happen to the sirens, and the vision of freedom he had promised them? What would happen to the other magical creatures? Harry could not abandon them, either. It was not something a true *vates* would do. For the sake of others, he had to continue with the same degree of freedom he had now.

He whirled through the strands of the web, and cut it loose. A stray thought did whisper to him as he watched it drift through his mind, a bit of displaced silk.

If there was a way that I could still accomplish everything I need to do, but not feel the emotions...

And then he remembered that, no, he needed the emotions, because Draco needed them from him. And his affection was the only thing that seemed to get through to Snape, not his rational arguments. Harry hissed and shook his head in irritation. Yes, he had changed, and he was too adult to go back into what he had been as a child, but it was still a shock, to be confronted with *how much* he had changed.

He faced the sirens again, and saw the siren queen drifting with her eyes fixed on him, uncertain.

Bring it home now.

Harry channeled his anger through the phoenix song, making what had begun as fury at his own enslavement into fury at the mere *thought* of slavery, of any creature and to any master. The sirens should swim free, out into waves where they would never see the sight of a human being. They should dive as deeply as they could, explore the secrets of the ocean bottom that no one else would see. What lay in the water? Harry, limited and trapped by his human body, could never know. The sirens could.

And then the siren queen's voice turned to align itself with his, like one fish of a school swimming the same way as another. And then more and more turned, and Harry felt the sirens in London and elsewhere face the stream that was running to the sea. Turn, and turn, and *plunge*. They would go home. No mere human could stop them, and no mere human could command them.

Why would I want to? Harry replied, through the medium of the phoenix voice.

The siren queen laughed at him, and said, *Because all wizards have that element of desire to command*, and then plunged away before Harry could tell her he did not. When he opened his eyes, the school was gone from the lake in front of him, swimming into hidden tunnels in the bed and sides, too small for any human to access, but which would carry them ultimately to the ocean.

Harry's throat was so sore he didn't think he could speak aloud for hours, and his mind felt like stirred rubbish. He wanted to collapse. But instead he turned to the Forbidden Forest and Falco, because that was what he was supposed to do.

Falco felt the moment when his trap failed, and he sighed, because, although he understood the memories of Harry's childhood much more than he had when he first faced his enemy, he did not understand the memories of Harry's adulthood. Obviously, Harry had changed since his seventh year, and the fleeting desires he felt to go back to what he had been were not strong enough to overcome all the changes, bridge all the gaps and lead him back.

He waited until Harry was close enough to see him go, and then changed into his sea eagle form. Harry tilted his head back to watch him lift. He did snap out a few spells, but Falco's shields, of course, were firm and simply deflected the magic. Falco was stronger than Harry was. *Strange, that someone small and weak, in terms of Lords and Ladies in the world, could cause such trouble.*

Harry watched him with the simple, uncompromising, piercing stare of a hawk.

Falco sighed again and shook his head, turning for the distant skyline. He would face Harry on Walpurgis, and he suspected he would be facing his own death.

But the Dark flew with him now, a reservoir of untapped power, like a black companion eagle, singing in his ears and whispering promises that things would be different next time. Falco supposed he could do worse than listen.

Fire and song burst back into the world again, so brilliant that Rufus had to cover his eyes, and had the urge to cover his ears. So loud, so shining, so insistent on freedom that for a moment he wanted to jump out his office window—though it was false, enchanted to show any view he wanted but not actually a window—and find his own waterway that would lead to the sea.

When the song faded, he lifted his hand to see that the Thames was free of sirens. There were Muggles halted on the bridge, though, pointing to both the sky and the river. Rufus shook his head. The Obliviators would be busy tonight.

“So that’s Harry saving the world.”

Rufus glanced at Juniper. The Elder had sat back in his chair and looped his hands together around his belly, his frown still directed at the place where the image and the memory of Harry had gleamed.

“One way he does it, yes,” said Rufus. “Granted, this was a bit more public than usual. When he went into the Department of Mysteries, I’m certain that no Muggles saw him.”

“I have never been this close,” said Juniper calmly, as if they were discussing some neutral magical phenomenon. “It was—rather different from what I expected. If what I suspect is true, though, young Harry had just saved us from compulsion by sirens in more places than London.”

Rufus nodded. “I believe so, yes, Elder. If he had been in London, I don’t think the image would have been necessary. He could simply have sung on the bank of the Thames, and that would have worked.”

Juniper half-closed his eyes. “It seems that some form of celebration is in order for our phoenix-voiced young savior.”

Rufus concealed a chuckle. If Juniper thought to use Harry for a political purpose, he would quickly find out how much of a subordinate Harry *refused* to be.

But it might do the magical world good to be reminded of what they owed Harry. Negative articles had started appearing again, as the reporters recovered from the shock of learning what wizards had done to house elves. Most of them charged that Harry had done more stunts than actual, solid moves for the public good. Dionysus Hornblower had decided that he was too powerful this week, and those copies of the *Vox Populi* were selling very well.

“Tell me what kind of festival you had in mind,” he told the Elder.

Harry glared at Falco as the older wizard flew away. He was somewhat disappointed that he hadn’t been able to settle the contest here and now, but he didn’t think he could have. He had thrown more magic than he had thought into that contest with the siren queen and the memory Falco had summoned to torment him. His muscles trembled and ached, and his throat felt as if someone had looped it with bands of hot iron. Magical exhaustion stalked the edges of his vision, making it blur.

He still managed to jump and whirl around when someone touched his shoulder, of course.

Draco stared at him worriedly, before grabbing and crushing him in a hug. Harry braced himself to be scolded. The barriers he had put around the Great Hall must have fallen when he pulled all his strength into himself to fight, but he had put them up in the first place. Draco wouldn’t have liked being separated from him.

“Are you all right?” Draco whispered.

Wary—when would the scolding appear?—Harry nodded against his shoulder. He touched his throat and shook his head when

Draco glanced at him expectantly. Draco smiled. Harry had the impulse to take a step back from him. *Where is the Draco who would yell at me?*

“I’m not surprised, with how much effort you put into the song,” he murmured, and kissed Harry’s forehead. He glanced up as other footsteps sounded outside the Forbidden Forest, then turned back to Harry. “That was the most beautiful music I’ve ever heard,” he whispered.

Harry smiled, uneasily.

Draco’s arms tightened around him, and his head came up like an antelope scenting the wind—or a fox, Harry supposed. “And don’t worry,” he said. “We *are* going to have that chance you talked about showing me if I’d changed enough on the vernal equinox.” His hand caressed the back of Harry’s neck. “It was a holiday, right?”

Harry nodded again.

“Good.” Draco rubbed his cheek against Harry’s before he dragged him around to face the rapidly approaching professors. “We deserve it, you and I, after everything we’ve done in the past week.”

With Draco standing beside him, Harry thought, and sounding like that, he could believe the holiday might actually happen.

Content in the knowledge that he had someone else to fight for him, he leaned his head on Draco’s shoulder and waited for the inevitable crowd who couldn’t accept the idea that this was just something a *vates* did.

Chapter Seventy-Seven: Wound in Song and Crowned in Flowers

Draco felt hostile to the whole world as he stood there with Harry in his arms. Well, at least *potentially* hostile to the whole world. Anyone who would try to take Harry away from him and insist that he make some speech or answer questions counted.

He’d heard the sirens’ song less as music and more as a simple pull towards open sky and open land and open water, at least until Harry had begun singing back to them. Then he’d listened to the conversation swaying back and forth, a thread of silvery argument countered by the golden reason of the phoenix song. He’d not known he would be able to follow it so well, or that the songs would twine around each other in a tight net that tugged him on to the right conclusions. Harry was persuading the sirens to leave, and they were going to leave, at least if he could show them visions that charmed them enough to do so.

Then he’d heard the voices, the voices of Harry and his mother, overlaid on the conversation as though they were standing in front of the lake where the sirens sang.

It had been—a memory Harry hadn’t shared with him. Or he had and Draco had forgotten about it. Either way, it had felt like the shock of hearing it for the first time. It certainly explained some things that Draco had often wondered about, including how Harry could be so bloody reluctant to take a lover.

And it infuriated him that so many people got to hear something so private about Harry, almost as much as it did to look around the Great Hall and realize how many of the expressions were ones of pity.

He’d raced everyone else outside when the wards fell, to insure that he got to Harry first. And now, as Harry leaned his head on his shoulder and briefly succumbed to his nearness, Draco felt it had all been worth it.

The next moment, though, McGonagall appeared in a gap of the trees, and Harry stood straight and pulled away from Draco. Draco had to content himself with running his hands over Harry’s shoulder while the Headmistress asked anxious questions about the presence of the sirens and the safety of the school.

Harry wrote his answer on the air in the same letters of fire that he’d used when he refused to speak to Draco for two days. *The sirens came at Falco’s command. He’s become a Dark Lord, and he was using the same technique that Voldemort did to control them a few years ago. I drove them away, but Falco escaped before I could do anything about him.*

All stripped down, Draco thought, very neat and simple. He wasn’t surprised when the Headmistress frowned and asked, “And what about the voices that we heard, Harry? You and—” She glanced over her shoulder at the curious students and professors appearing behind her. “Your mother.”

Harry's face turned so pale that Draco grabbed his arm, afraid that he would faint on the spot. He must not have realized other people could hear that, Draco thought grimly. He would have wanted to keep it private, and now his privacy was splattered across the air for everyone to see.

It made Draco dream of seeking Falco out and possessing him, then forcing him to flay himself. Surely that was possible. Making someone commit suicide with possession was possible. So this ought to be.

Once again, though, Harry refused to give in to whatever temporary weakness he might be feeling. *That was a weapon Falco used against me, Headmistress. Not intentional.*

"He was trying to make you become distracted and give him the upper hand in the battle?" McGonagall asked, her eyes sympathetic.

Draco thought he was the only one who noticed Harry's slight hesitation before his flesh hand moved to trace the letters in the air. Well, Snape, who hovered at McGonagall's shoulder and stared at Harry as if he were never going to let him go again, and was only prevented by Harry's age from picking him up and carrying him to bed, might have noticed, too.

Yes, Headmistress.

McGonagall sighed. "Such are the ways of Dark Lords." She turned around and nodded to the students behind her. "You are all quite safe, and the *vates* is uninjured," she announced. "Back to your breakfasts, if you please."

Of course, no one pleased. They crowded around Harry, asking questions, staring in fascination at his throat as if they couldn't believe that a song so clean and spontaneous and pure had come welling out of it. Harry endured it all, more polite than Draco could have been. It probably helped that he couldn't speak, and his letters on the air only answered one question at a time, so he could pretend to ignore those he found too uncomfortable.

Snape made his way to Harry's side as soon as possible, his hand falling heavily on Harry's shoulder. Harry nodded to him and cleaved close. What the Headmistress's sternness hadn't been able to accomplish, the Potions Master's scowl did. Snape successfully won Harry free of the crowd and led him inside.

Draco followed slowly, thoughtfully, never letting Harry out of his sight, but thinking a number of thoughts that were quite unusual for him. Harry would be honored for this; even if no one else had seen the struggle or heard the song, the children at Hogwarts would write to their parents.

Now, for the first time, Draco thought he was seeing why Harry didn't want to be. He had not looked triumphant when Draco came to fetch him, but simply exhausted. For a few moments, at least, he had sagged as if he hurt, as if his legs were unable to support him.

Perhaps, no matter how great the achievement, having the celebration right after it isn't a good idea.

Harry wanted to brood.

It wasn't—it didn't hurt *that* much, to have a memory splayed across the ears of those inside Hogwarts—and further away, for all he knew. He could bear it. He could survive it. He had survived having people see worse during the trial.

But he wanted an hour, even just a few minutes, to curl himself up inside a little shell of pain, and wrap the memories around a core that *he* understood, that other people didn't dictate to him. The core wouldn't have self-pity in it. It would have complete understanding. Because he was the only person who completely understood himself, after all.

Just a few minutes alone...

But it appeared he wasn't to have that. First it was Snape remaining beside him as they went back into the Great Hall, hovering until Harry sat down, and then watching until he ate his first bite. Harry ducked his head, a dull flush mantling his cheeks. He could understand the reason Snape wanted to watch him—he had nearly vanished from life, in one way—but surely all the people peering from the other tables and watching him act paternal would embarrass him?

They didn't seem to. Indeed, Snape leaned closer to him and said quietly, "See that you do not forget you have a father here, if you wish to lean on him," before stalking back to the Head Table. And Harry *knew* that Millicent, sitting on one side of him, and

Draco, come to sit on the other side, had heard.

Then it was Connor coming over, to hug him and exclaim about his nearly having lost the battle and how strange it had been, to feel his own limbs deadening and turning inside out with fear and delight as he listened to Harry and the sirens talk to each other. Harry returned the hug one-armed; Draco was holding his other hand in something like a death grip.

Then it was Argutus, come slithering over to demand to know why he'd been left out of all the fun, and then it was a large gray owl, descending magnificently towards the table, carrying an envelope with the official Ministry seal. Harry ripped open the seal with his flesh hand, leaving Draco to hold the silver, and scanned the letter that lay inside somewhat desperately.

Dear Harry:

A great many people saw your struggle with the sirens in the air over London. Though it means that the Obliviators will be busy working amongst the Muggles, it was an important reminder for our world of what we owe you. Will you consent to having a small ceremony held in front of the Ministry of Magic tomorrow, to honor your valiant sacrifice? We would not keep you long, but it is important, we think, to reassure those who watched that you managed to survive the battle without harm, and that you remain in the wizarding world as a deterrent to threats, and the champion of the magical creatures.

*Sincerely,
Rufus Scrimgeour.*

Draco took the letter from him and read it when Harry offered it in silence. His voice was soft and very pleased, thick as cream. "That's good news, Harry, isn't it? You get to remind them of what's actually at stake, and at the same time get a reward for your good behavior." He sniffed. "Time that you actually had something of your own, I think, rather than political concessions that any right-thinking wizard should have granted immediately."

Harry managed to smile. *It wasn't so long ago that you were opposed to some of those political concessions*, he teased. He kept the letters small, so that Draco was the only one who could see all of them. *Does that mean you've changed your mind? Or was Draco Malfoy one of those wizards who miraculously remain right, no matter which side they're on?*

Draco had the grace to look embarrassed. Then he put his nose up and said, "This is the Draco Malfoy who's your lover, Harry, and very proud of you." He leaned closer, so that his nose ruffled Harry's hair, and whispered, "And who's making sure we will still have that holiday."

Harry shot him a grateful look. Draco, occupied in reading the letter over again, didn't notice. Then he sat back and started offering suggestions for what Harry should write in his return letter, only half of which, if any, Harry actually felt compelled to use.

He complained silently to himself in his head, then took a deep breath and started writing. So he wouldn't get time to brood. That didn't matter. The day had to go on, and he was sure that he would be stared at in classes and the corridors. Well, why not? He'd done a great thing, hadn't he?

The notion that he hadn't remained in the middle of him, gnawing. And gnawed, and gnawed, and gnawed, all the way through Potions while Snape's eyes rested on him, through Defense Against the Dark Arts where people craned their necks back to give him awed and excited looks, through Transfiguration where some of the Ravenclaws who'd once made plans to track him with a special spell seemed poised to take notes on which miracles could come out of his hands.

I didn't do it to impress anyone, Harry thought, when he heard someone whisper something about that, snickering. He thought it was one of the seventh-year Slytherins. Of course, they had a right to be less than impressed with him, since they lived in the same common room with him and saw him trip over chair legs and slump asleep on the couches with a train of drool running down his face. But, likewise, they should have known him well enough by now to realize he would never do something like this as a—as a—

As a Gilderoy Lockhart stunt, really.

I just did it because I had to. And that's it. People are heroes all the time because they have to be, and no one gives them festivals for it, or stares at them in the Hogwarts corridors and whispers behind their hands.

I'm sick of it. I wish it would go away.

“Thank you for coming here today, Harry.” Scrimgeour was using a *Sonorus* charm, so that the rest of the crowd who spilled, shoving and pushing, into the narrow little alleyway could hear him. “This festival in your honor is a small thing, the least of what you should have, but we wished to see you honored as close as possible to the day of the actual battle. It would not do for us to forget.”

I wish you had, Harry thought. He simply nodded; it was still hard for him to talk. That appeared to be enough to content the crowd, which applauded and cheered wildly. They were in the same place where Harry had held his press conference last Midwinter, to warn everyone in the wizarding world that the wild Dark was attacking. It was extensively warded against Muggles seeing anything, and an image of them floated above the alley, showing, like the *Sonorus* charm, what happened for those who stood near the back. Harry didn’t think his face had stopped flaming since he arrived.

“A small festival” still meant the Ministry did stupid things. There were reporters everywhere, most of them calling out excitedly for the smallest quote from Harry, and with cameras snapping in his face every time he forgot himself and glanced to one side. Garlands of flowers, magically forced into blooming early—or actually brought from other countries, for all Harry knew—lapped the posts and railings of the small platform Scrimgeour had constructed, and an Auror had come forward with another crown for Harry the moment he joined the Minister. Harry had to restrain the urge to rip it off and throw it into the crowd. They were blue flowers, with long thorns that seemed in danger of poking him in the eye whenever he moved.

Draco stood beside him on the platform, his arms looped together around Harry’s waist, his face deeply content. Snape was just behind him, armed with a scowl that kept most of the reporters from trying to photograph him. Harry had wanted Connor to come with them, too, but his brother had refused, saying he’d had enough of celebrations in his name to last him a lifetime. The only ones he wanted now were the parties that came after he’d won the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor.

Besides Scrimgeour, a few members of the Wizengamot were on the platform: Griselda Marchbanks, looking stiffly proud, and Elder Juniper, a man Harry hadn’t met before. He said little, but from the long and keen looks that he directed at his face, Harry suspected he was a good politician. The Minister had said, with a small shrug when Harry asked him, that the festival had been mostly Juniper’s idea, but he had agreed with it because he thought the wizarding world should be reminded of what they owed Harry.

What they owe me, Harry thought, as he gloomily surveyed the cheering crowd, most of whom probably saw no more than a blurry image, *is an hour to let me rest by myself and just think*.

It hadn’t happened yesterday. Draco hadn’t left him alone all day, including falling asleep in his arms with a smile that seemed to have permanently marked his lips. Harry had thought he would lie awake and do his brooding, but his magical exhaustion—which he refused to go see Madam Pomfrey for, in the only battle he won that day—and the warmth of Draco so close had sent him spiraling into sleep far sooner than he’d meant to go. And then he’d awakened today and had to come to the Ministry for this stupid ceremony.

The Many snake, looped around his throat because Harry had felt like bringing her, stirred, reflecting his agitation. Harry wished he could raise a hand to touch her without attracting instant attention; as it was, he hissed softly to her under the cheering, calming her down. Parseltongue didn’t hurt his throat as much as English still did. He felt her coils slowly shift into a state of relaxation, and the soft flick as her hood and tongue worked to touch his throat.

“Your fame as a *vates*,” Scrimgeour said, when the applause had died down enough that people could hear him, “has justifiably won you the nods of the righteous before now, but the regard of the relatively few.” Harry didn’t miss the glance he sent sideways at Juniper when he said that last, and filed it away for future reference. “And yet, you have freed the southern goblins, freed the northern goblins, freed the centaur herd of the Forbidden Forest, freed the unicorn herd of the Forbidden Forest, released a Many hive from its web, freed the Dementors, survived two flights with dragons, negotiated a settlement for the werewolves so that they might begin to enjoy the same rights as wizards, and freed a house elf who was then able to show the rest of us how we have gone wrong. That is an impressive toll of achievement for a task begun—how long ago now, *vates*?” He turned courteously towards Harry and waited.

Harry held up three fingers. His throat still burned like hot iron when he spoke. Swallowing made it only slightly better. But then, luckily, he wasn’t required to make some sort of speech at this mad ceremony.

He wondered for a moment why Scrimgeour hadn’t just summarized his accomplishments as *vates*, something along the line of “freed many species.” Then he grimaced in resignation. That wouldn’t have fulfilled Scrimgeour’s purpose, which was to remind the people watching and listening, the people who loved him right now, exactly how much he’d done and gone unacknowledged for. But still, Harry thought, nearly rubbing his forehead with one hand before he realized how such a gesture would be interpreted and stopped, he could have lumped a few of them together. The centaurs and the unicorns and the Many hive and the

Runespoors, which not many people knew about, had all lived in the Forbidden Forest. He could have made just one pithy statement about that, and been done with it.

Merlin, his head hurt.

“Three years,” said Scrimgeour, his voice proud and ringing. “How many of us could have done so much in three years, even if we thought to begin respecting the rights of magical creatures in the first place?” More applause, of a kind which made Harry’s teeth ache. “And now you have the sirens to add to that list, Harry. Truly, a most impressive accomplishment. Wizarding Britain would still be much more a country of slaves than it is if not for you.”

He paused for some remark from Harry. And perhaps Harry could even have forced one out. He should have said something about how Britain would still be a country of slaves until Muggleborns were free and enjoyed equal rights, perhaps, or until all house elves were free of their webs, or until someone could walk down the street and not receive sidelong stares—an allusion to Jacinth, and the other children who might be like her, and a way to begin building support for them.

Perhaps it was just as well that he didn’t say that last, he thought, as he met Scrimgeour’s eyes, given the volatile relationship he had with the press, and his dislike of being stared at for becoming Voldemort’s magical heir, never mind everything that had happened since then.

“You have saved my own life several times over,” Scrimgeour said, evidently deciding Harry would not respond. *I love my sore throat*, Harry thought sardonically. *It saves me all the trouble of coming up with an excuse not to say something.* “And the lives of so many here. I do not know how many were on the verge of jumping into the Thames when the sirens sang—“

Embarrassed laughter welled up from the crowd.

“But I can testify that I was in tears when the phoenix song sounded.” Scrimgeour inclined his head to Harry, his face gone grave and respectful. Harry knew he should admire the man’s political instincts that let him travel from a matter of laughter to a matter for sorrow so quickly. He just wished he would stop talking and go away, though. “That is another thing we should not forget, vates, that you saved us from the wild Dark and that a phoenix loved you enough to give up his life for you. We heard your voice once, on the morning when the rebellion ended and we were able to give werewolves something like the rights they needed.” Juniper snorted, and Harry thought he knew which issue the Elder and the Minister parted company over. “To hear it again is a gift for our time, an unearned reward.”

Harry just nodded, while his face flamed so hot that it felt as if he were getting a fever. *Does he have to keep doing this? I don’t want people staring at me. There are other things to stare at, genuine wonders like phoenixes and sirens that share the world with you and which you never look at. And Fawkes didn’t die because he loved me. He died because, without his death, the wild Dark would have taken me and taken the world. That’s heroism. Sacrifice. Not just another part of my story.*

“Given all this, and the other things you have done for us, including your victories in the war against He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, we see fit to present you with a small token of the Ministry’s appreciation.” Scrimgeour smiled slightly. Harry was sure that many would take that smile as ironic. This close, he could see the deep sadness in the Minister’s eyes, and he suspected that his next words were true. “It is all that we can give, other than our hands and our minds, to support the same cause that you have supported, and truly, though the hands and minds come closer to making up our debt, neither is enough.”

Harry closed his eyes. His head was spinning, and he felt nauseated. *Merlin damn you, Scrimgeour, you’ve done more than enough. You’ve used all the power of your office for my sake, and taken risks that you shouldn’t have taken if you wanted to remain a popular Minister. Why do you have to do this, too? It’s not right, and it’s not fair.*

“The Order of Merlin,” Scrimgeour continued. “Elder Juniper has asked to be the one who presents it to you, and I can only agree to his request.”

Harry snapped his eyes open. *No.*

The Order of Merlin was mostly reserved for those who did valiant deeds in war; it had been awarded posthumously to several members of the Order of the Phoenix, including Gideon and Fabian Prewett, after the First War. It could also serve as a reward when an ordinary citizen did something heroic, like capturing a fugitive, in a way that went above and beyond the call of duty.

Harry hadn’t done anything like that. He’d freed the sirens, for *their* sake and not the sake of the wizarding community, and he had suffered through a memory he hadn’t been anxious to relive, since it would remind the entire wizarding world he was an abused child. And he hadn’t managed to defeat or capture Falco, which would have turned yesterday into a real victory.

He made brightly colored letters appear in the air in front of Scrimgeour, shining like lightning. *With all due respect, Minister, I can't accept this.*

Scrimgeour frowned slightly. "Why not, Harry?"

I haven't done enough to merit it.

Draco gave him a little shake, and hissed in his ear, "Harry!" Snape moved a stride forward, but Harry couldn't turn to see his face and didn't know what he was thinking. Griselda and Juniper frowned. But Harry's eyes were locked on the Minister, whose face was thoughtful, but melting into a gentle smile.

"I assure you, Harry," he said, "that you have." And he nodded to Juniper, who moved forward to pin the medal on him.

Harry looked straight into the Elder's eyes. It didn't take Legilimency to read the emotions there. Juniper felt sorry for him, and that, along with the desire to see what kind of political opponent Harry made, was what had caused him to come on the platform and award the Order of Merlin.

It was too much. Harry felt his self-control break and fall in pieces like rotten wood. He drew back with a long hiss, and the Many snake reared around his throat and swayed threateningly towards Elder Juniper. Thanks to the image duplicating them in the sky, many saw that.

"Harry!" Draco gasped.

Juniper stepped back out of harm's reach, but his face had gone guarded, his eyes dark. Harry was viciously glad that he had at least lost the traces of pity he had shown.

"Harry, what is the meaning of this?" Scrimgeour said, and his voice was gentle, disappointed, and far too understanding.

They would not understand his real reasons, none of them. And he'd already disappointed everyone and ruined an important political moment that, Draco would say, could have been used to do other people a world of good. So no one should much mind if he did something even more offensive.

Harry shoved Draco's arms away from him, calmed the Many snake with a tiny hiss, and Disappeared.

Draco didn't have to ask where Harry was. While everyone else on the platform acted as if Harry's disappearance was the work of Voldemort, he knew. When the Minister had, in embarrassment, to cancel the festival and have Elder Juniper take the Order of Merlin away—he had seemed deaf to Draco's promise to hold onto it for Harry—he stood there in silence, feeling his anger build, because he knew. And when Snape took him back to Hogwarts and went to search the dungeons, Draco went directly to the Slytherin common room and climbed the stairs to their bedroom, because he knew.

Disappointment and anger struggled in him, but the anger was steadily winning. *Why couldn't he just accept this? Those feelings of unworthiness and embarrassment could have been suppressed just a little longer. He deserves those honors, and more, and even if he doesn't think he does, then he could let us think he does, and give them to him. And having his Many snake attack a Wizengamot Elder!*

He wasn't sure if Harry had gone a bit mad, or simply couldn't stand the thought of a medal—which would count as a bit mad, in Draco's opinion—but the simple truth of this was that Harry had set back his political relationships. Draco had ears, and he could listen to what the crowd was murmuring behind him before they Apparated, and what Juniper had said to Scrimgeour before they left the platform. A few were shocked at Harry's attitude. Many more were prepared to think him ungrateful, or pitied him because he was an abused child and they supposed the reminder might have been too much for him.

All that Draco could think, as he opened the unlocked, unwarded door and stepped inside, was that Harry had better have a *damn* good explanation for this.

He paused when he entered. A large, dark shape that looked something like a beehive, but hummed with magic, occupied the bed. Draco gave it a sharp glare. At last he worked out it was a layered cocoon of wards, and that Harry was inside it. Probably brooding, he thought, or building himself up to an unreasonable rage.

On the table near the door sat a Pensieve. Draco walked slowly towards it. It was the Pensieve Harry had given him for

Christmas, filled with memories that let him understand Harry's mindset at the time they were happening. Draco hadn't worked through all of them. He always rejoiced when he finally understood something strange Harry had done or said, but too many of the memories made him sick with rage and hatred to view more than two or three an afternoon.

The silver liquid in the Pensieve trembled now above the brim, as though something new had been added. Draco knew the exact usual level of the liquid. He'd stared at it often enough, lying awake in the morning with Harry in his arms, the only time he got to watch Harry sleeping without Harry knowing he was doing it.

He cast one more glance at the beehive, and verified he wasn't getting in without suddenly turning into a Lord-level wizard. He reached out and plunged his head into the liquid of the Pensieve.

The world turned around, and then he was standing on the platform and watching Harry listen to Scrimgeour's speech.

This time, though, he could hear and experience Harry's thoughts.

Draco stared. Harry's thoughts were angry, irritated, and resentful, but almost none of them had to do with feeling himself unworthy of the Order of Merlin. Most of them came from not having had enough time to put his head to rights as regarded the memory Falco had shown the rest of the world. No one had left him alone long enough for him to do it.

Oh, Harry, Draco thought, as he watched Harry's agitation climb and climb, until the moment came when the Order of Merlin was offered and Harry *did* turn into the paths of thinking that common heroism happened all the time and wasn't acknowledged, so he didn't see why his should be. *If you didn't want to go to the festival, you should have said so. Scrimgeour would have accepted it, I'm sure. And if he hadn't, then never mind. Why didn't you say so?*

He knew the answer almost at once, of course, because this memory enveloped him in Harry's point-of-view. Harry knew it was a political bridge-building opportunity, and he didn't feel able to refuse it. And he understood Scrimgeour's purposes, and viewed the Minister as an ally. If it made him uncomfortable and embarrassed, that was a small price to pay for earning visibility and notoriety that might benefit the house elves' cause, or someone else's cause, at some point in the future.

Except that, this time, it had been too high a price. Harry had needed more time to hide and brood alone—though Draco wished he did not think he had to work through his thoughts about the memory alone—and this time his temper had splintered before the demands made on it. He hadn't thought of the fact that he was a Lord-level wizard, and could keep others waiting on his pleasure, if he desired it. No one would object. They might be angry or frustrated, but they would remember Harry's magic and what he had done for them, and calm down.

He does hate disappointing people.

Draco pushed a little further at the memory, wondering if Harry hadn't slept well last night, and that was the cause of his tiredness. He smiled a bit when he realized his own presence had lulled Harry to sleep long before he was ready.

No, he realized a moment later. Falco had used the memory as a web, trying to coax Harry into surrendering to it, and Harry had yearned to do so. And the guilt and the discomfort of that were mixed up with his efforts to find some sort of peace with the fact that now most of the British wizarding world knew about his old determination not to have a family or a spouse.

Shit.

And he hadn't told them about that, of course, because—

Because he was *Harry*.

Draco came slowly out of the memory, shaking his head, two resolves like iron blades in his mind. One was that he couldn't be angry with Harry, because Harry needed him too much for things like watching his back in a political situation. Draco kept priding himself on his perception and his keener instincts for what Harry could do, did he? Then he should have been able to realize Harry's mounting anger was more a result of emotional exhaustion than simple discomfort with the notion of being celebrated, and insisted that everyone wait a day.

The second was that they *both* needed that holiday, and he was going to make sure Harry took it.

He looked over at the bed just as the wards collapsed into each other and Harry came out, shaking his head like a cat rising from water. His expression was calmer than it had been since Draco first saw him after the siren battle. He'd brooded, then, and confronted his pain, and probably tucked it into some private corner.

He faced Draco, and waited. It took Draco a moment to realize he was waiting for a scolding.

How he thinks I could, after having seen that memory—

But perhaps Harry hadn't expected him to check the Pensieve.

He moved forward, wrapping his arms around his boyfriend and kissing him softly. Harry lifted both his arms in self-defense and made a low, confused sound in his throat, which he grimaced about a moment later.

"Your throat still sore?" Draco asked quietly.

Harry, head on one side as if wondering what the trick was, nodded.

"Then you should go to Madam Pomfrey," said Draco, slinging an arm around his shoulder and tugging him to his feet. "And after that, we'll go to the Headmistress. I'll do the talking, if you like."

Harry sighed noiselessly, and the letters appeared on the air. *About the festival I ran away from?*

"About our holiday," said Draco. "Both of us need it, you as much as me, and I won't let it be put off any longer."

Harry actually stumbled for a moment. Then he glanced sideways, a glance that turned into a full-on stare, and new letters appeared, erasing the old. *You're not angry at me?*

"Not when you share like that," Draco said, with a nod to the Pensieve, and caught Harry's eye. "Not when you trust me so much, the way that you would never have trusted me just a year ago."

Harry, still hesitant, still looking as if he believed this new situation would reverse at any moment, put his arms around Draco. They stood there like that for a moment, breathing.

Draco kissed the top of Harry's head, and glared at the wall, imagining any enemy who might try to stop them from vanishing together for a few days. *He needs me just as much as I need him.*

Anyone who tries to get to him this weekend is going to have to pass through not just his wards, but every trick I can put in place.

Interlude: The Liberator's Eighth Letter

March 23rd, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Though you have probably already heard this, Falco Parkinson has Declared for the Dark.

I do not think he has any real idea of what he is doing. My dreams come clearer and clearer to me now, and in them he has the most ridiculous pitying look on his face as he listens to the instruction of the Dark. (I think he would have been happier to be a Light Lord, but he seems hardly likely to listen to me). He believes it will not catch him in the end. He thinks he is smarter than it is because he has fooled it for six hundred years. He does not dream of its delayed vengeance—

My pardons, Minister, for the long scratch of ink across the parchment at this point. My mother came in and grasped my wrist, pulling me to my feet, and stained the letter. Luckily, she did not look down to see what I was writing. I have made sure to write bad poetry on plenty of occasions, so my parents think now that that is what I write all the time.

She called me a fool, hissing it at me, close to my ear. I trembled, for I did not know what I had done wrong. As it turned out, she was angry about something my elder sister had done—or perhaps Harry. The rages burn and blend in her until I cannot tell their source. I can only tell that I am their most frequent target.

She nearly broke my wrist before she let me go.

I need to leave this house.

I still do not (quite) dare tell you where I am or who I am, Minister. My father knows when a letter leaves the house or enters it with his name in it, even anagrams of his name. And I still—perhaps it is unworthy of me, considering all they have done, but I would like to leave my family with an intact reputation if at all possible. They have done a great deal of talking about aiding Falco Parkinson, but they have not actually accomplished anything. They are harmless.

Except to me.

But, to finish with my chatter about Falco Parkinson. He does not dream the Dark might take delayed vengeance. He does plan to attack on Walpurgis, when the power of the wild Dark is at its height. Insofar as that falls out, he is intelligent.

I do not think he can win. But if my warning might make the battle easier for Harry or spare a life, then I will send it.

My growth is diminished and haunted here, and I am a shell of the person I could be, I should be. Harry's visions of freedom have inspired my own. In the end, I think, I must leave this house and take my chances in an outside world where I have no friends, no shelter to call my own—

And I inflict this on you in what is not meant to be a personal letter, Minister. My apologies.

Yours,
The Liberator.

Chapter Seventy-Eight: Three Hours

“Why on earth you didn't come to me immediately, young man, I will never know...”

Harry half-closed his eyes, taking comfort in the way Madam Pomfrey bustled around him, looking up the spells and fetching the potion she would need to soothe his throat. She'd told him bluntly that his magical exhaustion from yesterday had combined with the ache in his throat from singing, and that was the reason he felt as if he were being stabbed with hot wires every time he tried to speak. It would take magical means to heal it, unless Harry wanted to go without speaking for two weeks or more, to give the magical part of his fatigue time to fade.

Harry hadn't thought that would be so bad, but Draco's gaze, even and keen and piercing, had kept him from admitting anything of the kind.

But Draco had ducked out now, with a murmur about using the loo, and Madam Pomfrey talked to Harry exactly as she would have talked to any other student who had taken a reckless risk with his health—half-angry and half-worried, muttering under her breath as she flipped pages and practiced incantations, or uttered a small “Ah!” when she realized she remembered the spell. There was no different, special treatment for him because of who he was. He was simply Harry, a rather stubborn and awkward boy who insisted on making his life more stubborn and awkward.

“Here you are, Harry.”

She held out a vial of green potion to him, soothing in both color and smell. Harry recognized it as the Moly Draught, created to heal internal spell damage. He swallowed obediently, and sighed; though the taste was nothing to brag about, the sheer thickness and coolness of the liquid helped.

“Now lie back and lie still,” Madam Pomfrey directed, and Harry reclined against the pillows. He listened to the incantations she cast, and recognized the purpose of most of them from his mad dash through medical magic last year. Spells for the easing of pain, for the rooting out of magical fatigue, and to break the unfortunate bond between the purely physical ache and the less tangible damage to his magical core, which together could cause more trouble than either on its own.

Slowly, the fire seemed to run back up his throat and spill out his mouth. Harry half-slitted his eyes, thinking he should be able to watch it do so, but of course, other than a faint tracery of magic, there was nothing to see.

Madam Pomfrey murmured the final spell, and gave him a stern look. “As little talking as possible for the next week,” she said. “Absolutely no singing. You used so much magic that your magical core stretched a bit, to accommodate the phoenix song, and imprinted unfortunate patterns in regards to it. Now, if you start singing, it'll think that this exhaustion is what's *supposed* to happen and reach for it. Keep silent on the phoenix front, do you understand?” Her lips twitched, but Harry had no doubt from her eyes that she was serious.

Harry nodded and tried to look penitent. The matron nodded back and held out a vial of the Moly Draught.

“Keep this by you and take three sips every morning and evening until it’s gone,” she said. “No attempts to improve it, either.”

Harry worked to keep the look of resentment off his face—he’d only tried to improve the medicine Madam Pomfrey gave him once, after a Potions lesson on how adding normally volatile ingredients to a thick base could make it taste sweeter—and hopped off the bed. As he made his way to the door of the hospital wing, he could feel Madam Pomfrey’s eyes on his back, both tender and exasperated.

At least she treats me normally. At least she doesn't think the world's ended because I'm the one in pain.

He stuck his head out the doors of the hospital wing and glanced up and down the corridor. *Draco is taking a long time in the loo.*

Draco was not actually in the loo, but he had raced into it to relieve himself before he went to do the rest of his tasks, so he did not consider it lying.

He’d contacted Professor Snape with the phoenix song spell first, and told him, as simply and directly as he could, what had happened to Harry and why he’d run away from the ceremony. Snape had listened in silence, and agreed without pause to Draco’s suggestion that he and Harry take a holiday, and not take too long about it, either, in case someone delayed Harry out of sheer good will—or Harry decided to delay himself because he couldn’t just go away like that.

Then Draco spoke to the Headmistress. She was more reserved, but when Draco related the tale of what had happened at the ceremony to award the Order of Merlin, she sighed.

“I suspect Mr. Pott—that is, our *vates* does need surroundings Hogwarts cannot provide him,” she murmured. “You may leave for the weekend, Mr. Malfoy, with the understanding that you are to make up your schoolwork, and that you are *not* to trade my indulgence for special favors in the future. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Headmistress,” Draco said submissively, and fought to keep from snorting. *Of course it's clear. Does she really think I'm stupid enough to let her find out I'm skiving off, even if I were?*

The next thing he did was settle down with a piece of parchment, ink, and a quill, and compose a letter. He didn’t think Harry would let him send it. It could serve as a model of the one he thought Harry should write, though.

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

This is a formal apology for the scene I made on exiting the award ceremony this afternoon. I beg your indulgence, as I was suddenly overcome by emotions built up from the duel with the sirens, and afraid of causing more harm if I remained. Circumstances similar to the trial of my parents applied, as you yourself were able to see when Falco displayed one of my memories. I will be out of reach for the next few days, but I did wish to send this owl and explain my side of the story.

Draco thought for a moment, then added below that, *I will be happy to accept the Order of Merlin in private, and offer a likewise private apology to Elder Juniper of the Wizengamot.* Harry would hate that, but Draco thought it was necessary after the debacle Harry had made at the ceremony. For one thing, he didn’t want to make a political enemy of Juniper, whom Draco was hearing more and more about lately.

He indulged himself completely by signing the letter *Harry Malfoy*, and then turned it around to admire it.

Harry opened the door of their bedroom just then, at the same moment as red letters sprang to life in front of Draco. *There you are, Draco. What are you doing?*

Draco turned around and fixed a stern eye on Harry. He was, potentially, caught off-guard and doing something he should be ashamed of, writing Harry’s political correspondence for him. But he was only that way if he allowed himself to be. What he *wanted* to be, what he would be, was completely in control of the situation and assuring that Harry got his holiday whether he wanted it right now or not. “Giving you an example to follow,” he said, and held the letter out.

Harry read it. Draco knew the exact moment when he reached the part about the Order of Merlin; his brow, clear until that point, furrowed, and he jerked his head up with a soundless hiss.

“You have to,” Draco said insistently, leaning forward, never relinquishing Harry’s gaze. “I understand your memory, Harry, but part of the reason you reacted so strongly was that you hadn’t had time to let your emotions go. Now you have. And now’s your chance to prove that your thoughts about your unwillingness to take the reward really are just remnants of your training, which you can overcome with some thought. Unless they aren’t, of course,” he added, sharpening his voice to a needle. “And then I think we’ll need to talk, and include Snape and Joseph in the conversation.”

Harry glanced away from him.

“You deserve it,” Draco continued remorselessly. “You *do*, Harry.” He saw Harry’s face start flaming as it had at the ceremony; this time, he hoped, only embarrassment was behind the blush, and not anger. “If you try to convince me you don’t, you’ll have to explain why.”

You know why.

“Temporary feelings of unworthiness, yes. And since they were temporary, they’re gone now,” said Draco. It wasn’t an easy thing, to ignore Harry’s glare, but since it needed to be done, he did it.

I don’t like it.

“Now you sound like you’re whining.”

Writing doesn’t have a sound.

“Splitting hairs, Harry?” It wasn’t so hard to hold his gaze, now. Harry was wrong and he knew it. Draco liked arguing with people in that state. He stood up and took a step forward. “This is unworthy of you, all of it—both blaming your training when we all know it’s just modesty, and then acting like a sulky child. You’re an adult, Harry, and part of being an adult means owning up to your actions. You don’t just get to shoulder all the delicious guilt and leave the praise behind. Accept it, now.”

Harry clenched his flesh hand around the silver one, and a brief wind of magic rippled the bedcurtains. Draco didn’t back down. He knew—had known since the Presence of War, if not before that—that Harry would never hurt him.

At last, Harry’s fingers loosened, letting the parchment drift free. He sighed and glared at Draco. *All right. But I’m going to write the letter. And I’m not signing myself with a last name.*

Draco smirked. He did think he’d manage to change Harry’s mind on that, someday, too, but that was for the future. He’d wanted two victories today. One was making Harry accept the Order of Merlin.

The second was now.

“I’d hurry and write it if I were you,” he told Harry casually. “Since we’re leaving for our holiday three hours from now, and you’ll need to accomplish everything you want to between now and then.”

Harry stepped back from him with a speed that was comic, and his writing turned yellow and acquired several exclamation marks. Then he shook his head, and new letters appeared. *Three hours isn’t enough time, Draco.*

“Make it be.”

Harry frowned.

“You did say that you wanted to spend the holiday with me.” Draco took a step forward, and ideas flashed past him more rapidly, lending him an air of the same kind he’d had when he confronted Lucius. Though he hadn’t thought about it before, he knew where Harry would have taken him; suspicions coalesced too rapidly into certainty for him to trace the path. “At Copley-by-the-Sea.”

How did you know that?

Harry’s eyes were gratifyingly wide, and Draco gave a casual shrug. “Never you mind. The point is, you wanted to go. Are you changing your mind now?”

No. That is. Harry stopped his writing as though he had to consider, hard, what he was about to say. That didn’t bother Draco. It

only ate into Harry's time, after all, and not anything else. He leaned back against the desk, folded his arms, and gave Harry a stare that grew longer as he waited.

I didn't expect such a short length of time, Harry said at last. *The werewolves aren't in Copley-by-the-Sea any more, since they've chosen a new pack leader and gone either to Woodhouse or back into wizarding society—*

"They chose a new pack leader?" Draco hated the surprise dripping from his voice, since this was a situation where he'd wanted to remain completely in control, but he had shown it, and now there was no way of taking it back.

Harry raised his eyebrows at him. *Yes. Camellia finally admitted that they needed more of me than I can give them. She offered to bite me, but I couldn't do that, especially not to Snape. So they chose her as leader, and though they're still welcome in the Black houses for sanctuary if they need them, they're living elsewhere. I think that relieves Regulus,* Harry added, with a slight smile on his face. *He thought constantly of all the treasures and traps in the houses that could stab anyone who's not actually linked to the legacy of his family.*

"You didn't tell me about the pack," Draco said.

I was sure I had. Harry shrugged. *Sorry?*

That was another thing that would have to change, Draco thought determinedly. If he was going to spend as much time and devotion on Harry as he wanted, he would demand equal time and devotion, and push Harry for it, until sharing things Draco wanted to hear became second nature. Certainly the fact that he'd left that memory of this afternoon in the Pensieve was a step in the right direction. Draco could coax Harry further, could make him see that he *wanted* to let Draco in.

This holiday would be the perfect chance to do that.

"So we're going to Copley-by-the-Sea," Draco said. "And no one else is going to disturb us there, so you should tell your brother farewell, and write the letter to Scrimgeour. I'm not sure what else you need to do, but you should do it." He waved his wand, murmuring, "*Pack,*" and his own clothes and treasures began to jump obediently into his trunk.

It's too short, Harry said, sliding the letters like an envelope under Draco's nose so that he couldn't pretend not to see them. *Give me a little more time.*

Draco looked up at him, and smiled pleasantly. "No," he said. "Both Snape and the Headmistress already know, and you have their permission. Besides, you don't have the best record of making decisions today. I want to go on holiday, and I've already arranged matters. So there," he added.

Harry's face darkened. *You're a spoiled brat with no sense of shame.*

"And at a time like this, how fine a thing that is," Draco drawled, while he gathered up their blankets with another wave of his wand. They were probably cleaner and less dusty than anything at Copley-by-the-Sea, and he wanted to sleep in comfort; he had no intention of making himself deliberately uncomfortable on what was supposed to be a holiday. He looked up and raised his eyebrows. "Are you still just standing there and scowling at me? It must be two hours and fifty minutes, by now."

Harry stiffly stuck out a hand, and the air next to him flared and turned into a representation of a clock. Harry glanced at it, sighed, and then gathered up parchment and ink and sat down to write his letter.

Smug, Draco turned back to his packing. He had, of course, no right to indulge himself in a fit of temper if Harry didn't. Harry could have argued that he wanted more time, and if he'd done it strenuously enough, then Draco would have given in.

But then, he could have asked for more time before he attended the ceremony the Ministry held, too.

He'll learn to stick up for himself, even if I have to lie in his path like a log in order for him to do it.

Harry watched as Hedwig flew away with his letter to Scrimgeour, and sighed. He'd made his writing less purely apologetic than he wanted to, and he'd also written in a sentence about accepting the Order of Merlin. The cause of both had been Draco watching over his shoulder, and now and then making a "tch" sound with his tongue between his teeth when Harry seemed about to sign the letter.

He turned around to make his way to Gryffindor Tower, and started. Connor was standing in the doorway of the Owlery, watching him with a faint, fond smile on his face.

“Some fighter you are,” he said. “I followed you all the way up here, and you didn’t even notice.”

Harry frowned a little. If that were true, he would have to work on that. Perhaps he should look for a spell that would increase his sensory alertness. It wouldn’t do to have enemies sneak up on him on the field of battle.

Connor rolled his eyes and came over to hug him. “You’re leaving for holiday, aren’t you?” he murmured into Harry’s neck. “The Headmistress told me. She seemed convinced you were departing right away, and she didn’t want me to worry.”

I wouldn’t go without saying farewell, Harry said, positioning the letters behind his shoulder so Connor could see them. *Unless we were having an argument, or it was a matter of life and death.*

Connor laughed into his neck. “You take everything so seriously, Harry. Maybe a few days alone with Draco will teach you how to laugh once more. You knew how for a while, and it’s slipped again.”

Harry stirred restlessly. *This holiday was supposed to be a reward for him, and it’s turned into—*

“What?”

Harry waved his silver hand vaguely, unable to find the words. He would have been even if he could speak.

“You have a lover who thinks of you and tries his best to make sure that you’re happy, not just indulging him,” Connor mocked, pulling away. “How sad, Harry. I’m sure most people in your situation would be whimpering and begging to escape.”

Since when did Draco become your hero? You didn’t used to think so much of him.

“Since I changed my mind about things in general, and realized I have to be an adult and no one will make it go away.” Connor caught his chin and tilted his head up. “Think of it as a corresponding turn to the one you’ve made, Harry,” he added. “I’ve learned to be more adult, and so has Draco, and so has Snape, if he’d ever admit he wasn’t perfect before. And now you’ve learned how to be a child again. You’ve had the bad effects today, exploding in public like that.” Harry looked at him warily, but Connor didn’t seem inclined to scold. “So now you get to experience the better side of it, which is being taken care of. I ought to be an expert on that, don’t you think?”

It feels like going to the Sanctuary, even if I won’t be gone so long. I just know that things will explode in my absence.

“So let them explode,” said Connor. “We can get some practice picking up the pieces, and I think that will be good for all of us.” He hugged Harry abruptly, and so hard that Harry wheezed when he let him go. “You won’t always be there for every crisis,” he said, gripping Harry’s shoulders nearly as hard as he’d hugged him. “You weren’t there during the First War, even if you did end it, and they survived without you. You have the right to this, Harry. *Go.*” He gave him a little push towards the top of the Owlery stairs.

Harry went, occasionally glancing over his shoulder. Connor, it seemed, hadn’t come to send a letter, but just to play with Godric. At his whistle, the black eagle-owl came down to his arm and landed, careful not to dig his talons in too far, but ducking his head to nuzzle and nip at Connor’s free hand. Harry heard his brother laugh, a sound he hadn’t heard in too long.

I should spend more time with him, too. But not because it’s an obligation, or because I want Parvati to think well of me. Just because I want to, and because I want to hear him laugh again.

The clock floated up against his shoulder, nudging at it. Harry glanced at it, and sighed. He had very little time left in the three hours Draco’d given him; writing the letter had taken longer than he thought.

He hurried off to fetch Argutus, now and then calling his name in Parseltongue. The Omen snake still wandered the castle fairly often, and hadn’t wanted to go to some boring ceremony the way the Many snake had.

Rufus read over Harry’s letter a few times, to make sure he understood all the nuances of tone. Then he firecalled Elder Juniper, sitting back in his chair near the office hearth while he read the letter one more time. Percy had come up and hovered gently near his shoulder until Rufus let him see it. His own face expressed more honest doubt than Rufus felt able to show.

“Do you really think that he’ll keep his promise, sir?” he asked. “After the way he embarrassed you earlier?”

“That wasn’t deliberate, to look at this.” Rufus stroked the parchment. “And yes, I think he will.”

The fire flared, and Juniper strolled into sight. Rufus nodded to him. “I have an apology from Harry *vates* here, if you’d like to see it,” he said, holding it out. “And an offer to accept the Order of Merlin and apologize to you in person.”

Juniper didn’t even look at the letter. “I expected no less of such an honorable young man,” he said. “Tell me, Minister, if the choice came down to supporting Harry or supporting the Ministry, what would you choose?”

Rufus narrowed his eyes. Juniper could intimidate him as few other people could, but that did not mean he was allowed to get away with cowing *this* blatant. “The Ministry, of course,” he said coldly. “I believe I have already demonstrated that sufficiently. I did not support Harry’s rebellion. I took control of the Ministry with the Ritual of Cincinnatus only when I believed that I had no other choice, given the rebellion of my own Department Heads against me.”

Juniper stared at him then, looking him directly in the eye, and nodded. “You are right,” he said. “You are loyal to the Ministry, and always have been. My apologies.”

The fire flared, and he vanished. Rufus sat back and rattled the parchment in his hand, intent eyes on the flames.

“Sir?” Percy asked from behind him.

“Hmmm?” Rufus asked. His mind raced with visions of why Juniper might have been so abrupt with him, when just yesterday they had watched the vision of Harry battling the sirens and shared some of the same emotions. He was coming up with a limited number of allies Juniper could both have and be willing to risk offending the Minister for. He hoped he was wrong on his guesses.

“Why did Harry do what he did? The real, political reason? In your opinion, of course, sir,” Percy added hastily.

“I do believe what he wrote in the letter.” Rufus smoothed the parchment out again and attempted to ignore his speeding heartbeat. “That he had a bad moment, and erupted. That’s all. He has no reason to lie about something like that, and if he could have put a better face on it, he would have.”

“But that’s—“ Percy shook his head and fell silent.

“Worrisome in a political figure, yes.” Rufus was tempted to continue, to remind Percy that Harry had never been a conventional political figure, but he held his tongue. Harry had been effective *because* he could still be so gathered and so calm so young, because he had much to offer his allies that no other single person could duplicate. It was indeed a bad sign if, when the pressure began to increase, their *vates* lost his temper and became slightly more human.

On a personal level, Rufus was relieved Harry was acknowledging his abuse and acting more like a human being. But he didn’t usually deal with Harry on a personal level.

Hold firm and hold fast, Harry, he thought, gaze going to the last few lines of the letter, the ones that talked about a holiday. *If a holiday is what you need, then take it. We require you too badly to let you explode simply because you wish to.*

“You’re sure about this.” Juniper’s eyes were dark, both because that was their natural color and because of the emotions thronging them. They fastened on her; he was leaning against the hearth of his main welcoming room, sipping carefully at the wine his house elves had brought them. Juniper was an old Light traditionalist. While he might listen to the arguments against keeping house elves carefully, he was not going to let them go simply because of a bit of pretty rhetoric and sentimental reasoning.

“Sure.” Aurora Whitestag leaned back in her chair and lifted her chin. She had worn her most formal robes, precisely because of that old Light traditionalism. Once, a host had been able to demand that his guests wear colors indicating their allegiance, though that custom had fallen into disuse long ago. Aurora had chosen pale blue robes, the color of an undeclared witch. Juniper would appreciate the gesture, even as he knew she used it in hopes of manipulating him. But that she was willing to make the gesture at all, no matter what her motivations for making it, showed her as someone he could, potentially, work with.

Juniper nodded several times, slow jerks of his head that Aurora knew had sometimes made his political enemies think him senile.

Those political enemies weren't influential any more. Those weren't drowsy motions, those were the motions of a wading bird spearing fish, or opponents. "He does seem more like a child and less like a young man, in the face of gestures like this," he murmured.

"That is the contradiction of our *vates*." Aurora leaned forward earnestly. "He was too adult at first, but with the revelation of his abuse, the cracks come clear. There are times when he will act as if he had every difficult area of his past mastered, and then he stumbles as he has here. That was one of the main purposes I attempted to accomplish with the monitoring board: giving him advisers who could watch for such stumbles and prevent them from being too catastrophic."

"That is not the way it happened," Juniper murmured, watching her.

Aurora shook her head. "I lost sight of my purpose, and did not recruit the right allies."

"And why should I think that you will have any better success now?" Juniper took a moody gulp of wine.

"Because I am working with you," said Aurora honestly. "Because you can keep me on track, and because you can recruit Light allies who wouldn't listen to me. Understand, I would not be the controlling or guiding force this time. That would be you, Elder."

"You are eager to surrender power, then."

Aurora shrugged. "What is done with power matters more to me than the degree of it I personally possess, Elder. If I am in a position where I can influence the future course of the British wizarding world, but at the same time not expose myself to fighting that I'm not good at, nor open attempts at manipulation I also lack the skill for, then I will be content."

She was silent, awaiting his decision. She had been the one to approach him, after all, not the other way around, moving immediately after the debacle in front of the Ministry. This was the kind of slip she had feared Harry would make, and she was determined that he not drag Britain down with him. Juniper, potentially personally offended by the mistake, would make a good ally.

"Your proposal has merit," Juniper said at last, setting his wineglass down. "The trick will be not to depend too much on the young man's psychology. It is key to understanding him, but even that can fall afoul of his determined protectors and the laws that account for Lord-level wizards." He arched an eyebrow at her. "This time, Mrs. Whitestag, I am determined to have a way to work with our *vates* that is not, in the finer points, illegal."

"Understood," said Aurora, and felt gratitude and relief wash over her. *I may yet hope to help save our world, and this time working with someone who has more political acumen than I do.*

Harry shook his head as they appeared with a bump in Copley-by-the-Sea; Regulus had given them a Portkey, so as not to have to drop the house's wards. Harry had told him he thought they were perfectly safe in Cornwall, let alone in a Black house. Regulus had given him a flat look, and Harry, unsure what had caused his friend's dark mood, had not asked further.

Regulus had sent them to the bedroom they would probably want to use, Harry saw, as he looked around. The bed was large, and already stripped of dusty hangings, so that Draco could spread out the sheets and blankets he'd taken from their bedroom in Slytherin. Regulus had probably come and stripped the bed himself. Harry licked his lips, feeling an uncomfortable frisson of humility.

Argutus nudged him under the chin. "*You are being very silly,*" he informed Harry loftily. "*I am going to explore, and see what has changed since last time we were here.*" He slithered down from Harry's shoulder, and Harry charmed the door open so that he could make his way into the hallway.

"Here we are."

Harry moved out of the way so that Draco could put his trunk against the wall, and watched in amusement as Draco began to unpack it. Draco sometimes seemed incapable of staying anywhere for a single night without making it look as much like a home as possible.

Then Draco glanced at him over his shoulder. "I think the mirror I gave you for Christmas would look nice on that wall, Harry," he said, nodding to the one on Harry's right.

Harry froze for a moment. He kept the mirror tucked away. It made him deeply uncomfortable, and he couldn't see much practical use for it. And if Draco was alone with him here—which was certainly the case; he could feel the wards whispering to him about the absence of other wizards in the house—then the main thing for the glass to show would be their reflections. Harry didn't mind looking at Draco's. He didn't know that he wanted Draco looking at his.

But Draco's eyes held a distinct challenge. They were alone here. Harry didn't need to worry about anyone wandering into the bedroom and exclaiming about what they'd chosen to decorate it with, at least for a few days. And if he was committed to sharing himself with Draco, if this was private time together, hiding secrets Draco mostly already knew about made no sense.

He turned away and began to unpack, taking out most of the gifts he'd received at Christmas and on various other holidays, and which he mostly kept tucked away. Draco's mirror he hung on the right wall, and Draco almost instantly moved a table that sat next to the bed under it and placed on the table the Pensieve Harry had given him. Harry leaned his Firebolt against the wall, next to the wooden carving of many animals Peter had given him for Christmas last year, once he'd unshrunk it. He Transfigured a shelf for their books, while Draco was hanging the Slytherin curtains around their bed and sometimes cursing at the rods under his breath.

They were done in a much shorter time than Harry had expected. Looking around, he gave another little shiver. The room also looked more like home than he had thought it would.

Where is home?

Harry was somewhat disturbed to realize he didn't know the answer to that question. He could think of Malfoy Manor as home in some contexts, and Hogwarts, perhaps most closely. But his mind shied from the thought of applying the word to Lux Aeterna or Godric's Hollow any more, and he still considered the Black houses Regulus's property, to be used if he needed them, but not lived in—not by him. And other places he had stayed in or seen, like the Sanctuary, of course couldn't qualify.

He bit his lip thoughtfully, and then Draco murmured in his ear, "What did you have planned for this holiday, Harry?"

He turned around. Draco was watching him, hands folded beneath his chin as if his head were resting on a desk, but for once making no attempt to touch him.

Harry cleared his throat, then winced as it sent a prompt pulse of burning through his mouth. He'd carefully packed the Moly Draught, and he looked forward to the next dose he could take of it. He turned to his writing, and reminded himself that no one else was here, no one else could see, and that Draco wasn't likely to think he was writing anything particularly ridiculous.

I wanted to show you what I see when I look at you. Everything I see when I look at you. So we would have discussions and debates about the Grand Unified Theory, and I could give you lessons that would help you further along the road to achieving your Animagus form. Except that you did that by yourself, of course. He shot Draco a swift grin, which didn't change Draco's level, calm gaze at all. And I wanted to watch the hippocampi with you, and sleep in during mornings when we didn't have anything else to do, and tell you why and how I appreciate you. And perhaps have arguments about what I didn't appreciate, of course. And, um.

He couldn't write the word. Draco followed his gesture to the bed, though, and gave him a dazzling smile for one moment.

"Well. Not too far from what I planned, then." He stepped forward and lowered his voice. "Listen, Harry. There's no reason that we can't still do that, given how much I like to be spoiled—"

Harry felt his own face brighten.

"Except that it'll work for both of us." Draco cocked his head. "So you tell me things about yourself, too, and I tell you what I appreciate, and, at least once, you lie back in the bed and just let me do whatever I wish with you. You've given me gifts like that several times, after the Rosier attack and after that disastrous meeting with the monitoring board. I've never been able to just give you a gift, though. The closest was Midwinter, but you disobeyed me and moved around."

Harry's face hurt from his blush. He didn't move, though, when Draco caught his eye and held it.

"Will you agree to that?" he asked.

Harry let out a slow breath. *No one else is here. And Draco's hardly about to turn around and use this against me. And if it's a weakness to be petted and spoiled on occasion—well, that's what I wanted to do to Draco. It wouldn't make him weak, would it? So it shouldn't make me weak.*

He gave back a hesitant nod.

Draco's face softened in a way Harry hadn't seen before, though he didn't smile. He reached out and caught Harry's hand.

"Come on," he said, tugging him towards the door of their bedroom. "Let's go watch the hippocampi."

Chapter Seventy-Nine: A Dream of Spring

Harry wondered if they could have achieved this peace and perfection in any other season.

Draco stood beside him as they watched the hippocampi through the transparent rock separating them from the sea, his hands resting flat as though he wanted to brush his fingers against the fins of the water-horses swimming by. Harry had to divide his attention as he leaned with his own shoulder on the rock, his eyes now and then on the darting herd, now and then on Draco's face.

He knew Draco had looked at the tadfoals and the mares before, but he must not have been with him. Or he didn't remember enough about it from those heady days at the end of summer when he'd been trying to negotiate with the pack and the Ministry and learn about Falco's threat for the first time.

Or he simply hadn't seen Draco change enough then to appreciate what a difference this made.

Draco's eyes half-closed now and then, as though the magical light reflected through the rock were too strong for him. His fingers opened and closed in small instinctive motions that imitated the foals' swimming. His face had shadows on it; Harry sometimes decided they were the shadows cast from his nose and mouth, and sometimes believed they were the lines of good and evil that Draco had learned to make real in the intervening months. A strand of blond hair became crushed between him and the rock as he leaned close, blue light filtering over his skin, staring at the ring-game the tadfoals had started.

The herd appeared entirely unconscious of the humans watching them, and Harry saw no reason they should be informed. Their manes floated behind them, uncoiling like whips, then jerked towards their necks again when they made a sudden movement. Their tails lashed harder and faster, columns of smooth muscle beside which even the tails of sirens looked weak and powerless. Their eyes shone like an Antipodean Opaleye's, and their skin was blue, was green, was some changing color in the light of magic and the ocean. Harry watched as a mother hippocampus turned upside-down to better shield a very young foal from a harsh current, and felt an emotion move through him, deep and slow. It took him a moment to recognize contentment.

"And the Blacks really didn't breed them?" Draco whispered.

Harry shook his head. The mother and foal had flipped back over and were swimming in circles now, the mare patiently spreading her tail when necessary to shield, but dropping it more and more, so that her child could feel the full force of the water. Harry watched the foal's webbed hooves open and close like gills, learning the Atlantic carefully, as if he walked on top of jagged stones. *That's what I asked Regulus at first. But he said they came here on their own. Just some magical creatures doing what wizards don't want them to do,* he added, and hoped Draco could read the pride that had slipped into his writing. Not that he'd had anything to do with bringing the hippocampi here, of course, but he thought, as a *vates*, he was allowed to be happy that some magical creatures did not obey the iron wills of his own kind.

"They're beautiful," Draco murmured.

Harry cocked his head, hearing something in his voice, and slid his own shoulder along the glassy rock until he stood next to Draco. This time, he was the one to put his arms around Draco's waist, returning the gesture that was more usual the other way. *More beautiful free than any other way?*

Draco nodded in distraction, and then blinked and glanced at him. "Wait. What do you mean by that?"

Would you find them as beautiful if they were bound by a web?

A click of the tongue, the same "tch" noise that Draco had made when he'd written the letter, and then he turned to face Harry completely. "We came here to enjoy ourselves, not argue," he said.

We can do both at once. Harry regarded Draco as best as he could from so close and with Draco's breath almost fogging up his

glasses. *No one says that all arguments have to be screaming matches. Some of them are spirited intellectual debates.*

Draco snorted and was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "I do hope that you've remembered to have your Hogsmeade owls direct deliveries of food here."

Harry recognized the distraction technique for what it was, but felt more than prepared to accept it. Arguments could be part of this holiday, Draco's conviction notwithstanding, but there was no reason to make them the whole. If Draco wanted to wait to talk about it, they would wait to talk about it. Harry still wanted to spoil him.

Better.

The light from the sea put strange shadows on Draco's face as he turned completely away from the hippocampi. "Better? What do you mean, better? You didn't have that much time to arrange matters when we came to Cobby-by-the-Sea."

Harry chuckled at him, though the first trickle of actual sound from his throat hurt badly, and anyway Draco gripped his arm to make him stop. *I know. But I've been practicing, too. I knew that you probably wouldn't want to eat food from the shops, and of course I won't want to eat food from a house elf.*

"What did you do, Harry?" Draco looked torn between wonder and wariness. Given what else had sometimes happened when he sprang a surprise, Harry really couldn't blame him.

For an answer, he asked, *What sweet would you want to have right now, if you could have anything in the world? Answer honestly.*

He watched Draco's eyes, and caught a slight widening, but none of the darting or flicking off to the side that would have meant he was making up an answer to the question. Instead, Draco simply said, "A Chocolate Implosion."

Harry looked polite incomprehension at him, and Draco's cheeks flushed a faint pink.

"It, um. It's a sweet that the house elves made for me a few times before my mother realized that I'd invented it and forbade them to ever make it again. It starts out as a chocolate cake, but it's scooped out and filled with *just* pure liquid chocolate, not cake. Then the cake top is put back on, and decorated with chocolate-covered cherries. And then another layer of pure chocolate." By now, Draco's cheeks shone like the sunrise. It was the most embarrassed Harry had seen him in months. "My mother made me study magical tooth care, too, for a solid week. She was so angry."

So it's been years since you've had it?

Draco nodded, and looked torn between hope and horror as Harry stretched out his flesh hand, pointing towards a carved stone chair. Harry took a deep breath and unspooled his magic, forcing it not through the narrow channels that a Transfiguration spell would normally have taken, but through an image of pure desire and will backed by Draco's words. Sweat sprang out on his forehead. It was tiring, especially since he had a tendency to think of Transfiguration as the *Animagus* transformation now and start trying to use the techniques that Peter had taught him.

But he persevered, and the chair shimmered and slowly began to collapse inward, turning the brown of rich, life-giving dirt on the way. Harry yanked his imagination away from dirt when the chair began to smell like soil, though. Carefully, he filtered more and more of his magic into physical substance. Now he had to ignore the warnings in his own head about doing so. If he used so much power on this, then he wouldn't be ready to defend himself if battle came—

But battle was not going to come. He and Draco were on holiday, and he had said that he wanted to do this for Draco, so he was doing this for Draco. He spun and forced and imagined. The part he had to expend the most imagination on was the chocolate-covered cherries; he'd never tasted them, so he went mostly with the taste of pure chocolate mingled with what little he could remember of the fruit and hoped for the best.

He was panting, a little, gasping, by the time it was done, but he'd finished it. He stepped back and surveyed his creation.

The Transfigured chair resembled nothing so much as a chocolate cake in several layers, with those layers trembling precariously on top of the rest. Small cherries, some showing smears of red under the chocolate, peeked here and there like eyes. Harry could smell it, too, so overwhelmingly sweet that he wasn't surprised Narcissa had discovered what the house elves were up to and made Draco stop.

He turned to look at Draco, only to find Draco staring at him.

“How could you do that?” he demanded.

Harry’s first impulse was to see the demand as anger and worry that he’d done something wrong, somehow ruined Draco’s childhood memory. Then he reminded himself sternly that the mere *existence* of a cake like the one Draco described couldn’t ruin anyone’s memory, and it was far more likely that he was just surprised.

I’ve been working hard on Transfiguration, he said simply.

Draco stared at him a moment more. Then Harry saw his whole body trembling, apparently with the suppression of the impulse to run over to the Chocolate Implosion and start eating it right away. He suppressed a smile of his own.

Draco seized his face and kissed him as if he couldn’t get enough, opening Harry’s mouth in moments with his tongue, holding him still as he ferociously licked and bit. Harry returned as good as he received, and Draco broke away from him in a moment, looking half-dazed and deliriously happy.

“I am so much in your debt, Harry,” he said. “I don’t suppose you could Summon plates and knives?”

Harry did so from the kitchen’s cupboards, more amused than anything else. He did make sure to write on the air, *Not in my debt, Draco. I wanted to do this for you. Spoiling you, remember?*

Draco only looked happier. Once the knives and plates had arrived, he approached the Chocolate Implosion with the air of a hunter stalking a savage beast. Harry muffled his laughter and followed.

“You won’t believe how good this is until you taste it, Harry,” Draco whispered, half-reverently. “You *really* won’t.” And then he stared at the cake as if he were trying to figure out where to start first.

Harry watched the light gleam off his creation, and hoped it didn’t taste like sawdust, and drank down Draco’s smile like fine wine.

Draco decided the best time to do it was in the early morning, before Harry was properly awake, and therefore before he could decide that something was wrong and get nervous or irritated.

Only, it turned out to be mid-morning, nearly ten-o’clock, because he had to sleep off the massive feast of the Chocolate Implosion the night before.

No one’s perfect.

But he would like to make Harry feel he was, Draco thought, propping himself up on his elbow and staring down at Harry, who was still wound in the sheets of their bed and deeply asleep. His mouth was open, and he breathed through that and not his nose, with a little whistling sound. Now and then he turned over, though he usually turned back immediately. As it was, he made a tiny amount of progress towards the left side of the bed each time, and might eventually roll over if it weren’t for the fact that he’d be waking up before then, and Draco’s guarding eye.

Draco leaned over and gently pressed his lips to Harry’s, waking him. Harry blinked and returned the kiss with interest, then hissed something in Parseltongue. Argutus, asleep on one of their trunks, hissed back, and he and Harry conducted what sounded like a casual conversation and not an argument to Draco. Of course, he could be mistaken. Sometimes half the hissing sounded angry.

He waited until it was done, then murmured, “What did he say?” into Harry’s ear.

Harry started to answer, but a yawn interrupted. Draco found himself smiling a phenomenally silly smile as he watched Harry wrinkle his nose and curl his lips, before he brought one hand up to politely hide it.

“He said—“ Harry shook his head in annoyance, and resorted to writing, though he strung the letters in a row above his chest and face so that Draco didn’t need to turn his head. *I asked where he’d been. He told me about the sweetness of the insects and rats he caught in the walls, and said that I couldn’t have had something as sweet for dinner. I told him about the cake, but he latched on to the name I gave it—it sounds different in Parseltongue, implosion, you know, like shedding skin?—and won’t believe that it was good.*

“Just a lazy, silly, early-morning argument,” Draco murmured.

“Hmmm.” Harry stretched his arms and arched his back, unselfconscious in a way Draco had barely seen him act in their bedroom. Draco’s eyes slid greedily up and down his body, but were stopped by the sheets. Well. They’d had sex last night, and right now he wanted to offer Harry something else.

“I have something not as silly to show you,” he told him, and planted a kiss behind Harry’s ear. “Share it with me?”

Something in his voice must have warned Harry. He paused in the middle of his stretch, and rolled his head over until his gaze locked with Draco’s. *Draco Malfoy, what are you doing?* his writing demanded.

“Something wonderful,” said Draco, and used his most enigmatic smile and brightest eyes until Harry gave in.

All right.

“Good, Harry,” Draco breathed, emboldened by the trust on his face, and rose to fetch the mirror from the wall.

He brought it back half-concealed in his hand, but Harry saw it, or knew it from the feeling of the magic, and sat up almost at once. Draco stopped and held it out, making Harry look, and not moving forward when Harry’s eyes widened.

I’m not sure what you want to do, Harry wrote at last, the letters growing thorns and snaps and flourishes over his head, the thorns pointing at his heart. *But you’re slightly mad if you believe that I’ll think this is wonderful.*

“It is, though, Harry.” Draco made sure to remove all blame from his voice, and wondered if Harry knew that he responded to that croon by slightly rolling his head to the side, baring his throat. “I promise. I won’t force you to accept this. I simply want us to look at you together so that I can tell you what I see.”

You could do that without the mirror. I know what you think I look like.

Draco wondered where he had acquired the patience to coax Harry into this instead of rushing him. “And yet that’s been easy enough to avoid in the months since Christmas, hasn’t it? This is a holiday, where I want to spoil you. This would count as spoiling you.”

Harry was silent, watching him, brow furrowed.

I know how to do this now. And he did. Draco pitched his voice low, the way he would speak to a wild unicorn, assuming that one ever approached him. “Harry, I believe that you have the courage to do this. I saw that in your face when you went up into the Midwinter storm.” Harry shivered, but wasn’t inclined to break the spell of his voice for the mere mention of Fawkes, and that encouraged Draco. He had to take some chances, risk making some mistakes. “I know how strong you are, how far you’ve come. I know that you don’t need to face your reflection in the mirror in the same way or for the same reasons that you had to face your parents. You’ll survive without considering yourself beautiful. But I want you to live, not just survive. And I really think this will make your life better, not just content me. Will you let me show you the glass and tell you what I want to tell you? Please?”

He could only wait, then, because Harry’s face had gone smooth and blank and he had no idea which way the balance would tilt. He had to wait while Harry’s right hand opened and closed on the blankets beside him. The silver hand flexed a little, too. The heel of the palm had turned almost flesh-colored now, and Draco didn’t think the movements were all born of magic. The hand was starting to connect with Harry’s body.

He waited.

At last, Harry ducked his head and gave a kind of nervous nod.

“You’re sure?” Draco demanded.

Again, a nod, and this time it was accompanied by a glare and one of the lynx-like hisses.

Happily, Draco clambered onto the bed beside Harry and picked up his right hand, clasping it around the mirror. He leaned towards the glass, and watched as the ordinary appearance of Harry’s face flashed, rippled, and grew more beautiful. Harry, as expected, stiffened, because he wasn’t used to seeing himself Transfigured like that, as if he were a stained glass-window with the sun shining through it.

Draco leaned over his shoulder and kissed his cheek, and began to talk in a low, gentle tone.

“You grew into your magic, Harry, in a way that I don’t think anyone else could have. You fascinated me from our very first meeting on the Hogwarts Express, when I knew that you would be in Slytherin, but if it had only been a matter of magic, I think I would have grown bored and gone on eventually, the way you were always waiting for me to do. It was more than that. I think I sensed, even then, that you had potential to become a great wizard.”

Liar. Harry’s words wrote themselves over the glass, somewhat obscuring his reflection. Draco didn’t think that was an accident. *You cared about power then, mostly.*

“Not just power,” Draco corrected, mildly surprised. *He doesn’t think Lucius taught me better than that?* “I had seen people who had power. My father sometimes had friends over to the Manor, and my mother, too. Some of them were magically powerful wizards who made my father look small. And there was Professor Snape; I knew he was stronger than Father. But though Father respected them, and taught me to respect them, that wasn’t the only quality you could judge someone on. And he had something, and Mother had something, that none of them did. You have it, though.” Draco rubbed his cheek against Harry’s hair, delighted to feel him relaxing a little against him.

What is that?

“Strength. The ability to go on surviving, enduring, and making the best of what you had. People who can only function in one particular environment—the dueling room, say—don’t do very well. You have to be able to change quickly on the battlefield, survive.”

I refuse to believe you knew I could do that. I didn’t know I could do that.

Draco raised his eyebrows, and leaned nearer, breathing on the letters that covered the mirror, scattering them. “You did. Didn’t Lily teach you to use whatever weapons you could find against an enemy? You did that a few months after I met you, on the Quidditch Pitch against the Lestranges. You used some spells, but you also used the Bludger, and you used the Slytherin team to protect your brother in a way you couldn’t have if you’d refused the position as Seeker.”

Harry was silent, and wordless. Draco licked his lips. He was, essentially, repeating a lesson Lucius had taught him the summer before he left for Hogwarts, but he had to put it in his own words. And he wasn’t good with those. Someone could be listening, and he didn’t want to reveal weakness.

He reminded himself sharply that no one could overhear them here, and that many of Harry’s allies already considered him weak. That was one thing that he was here to change.

“There are wizards in the world who are powerful, Harry,” he whispered. “You respect them, but you can avoid them. Professor Snape is one of those people. And there are people who are both powerful and strong. You respect them, and you endeavor to be one of them, and you follow them if you can’t.

“And then there are people who are powerful, and strong, and *mighty*. That means they have this kind of wild beauty—“ Draco could feel his own blush steadily climbing “—that unites the other qualities and sends them flowing above their heads, flapping like a banner, calling other people to notice them. My father didn’t think might was something you could be born with, or even decide to develop. You had to climb to meet it, and it’s so tiring to live life at that level that most people never make it.”

Draco’s hand clamped down on his shoulder. “You’ve waved that banner for me, Harry. What’s more, you’ve taught me that it is possible to try to climb. If you fall on the way, you’ve still done more, tasted more of life, then all the people who are content to remain on flat ground their whole lives long. That’s one reason I love you, Harry. Because you’re wonderful, yes, but you’ve taught me to recognize the wonderful in myself.” He leaned his head alongside Harry’s neck and nodded at the beautiful reflection in the mirror. “And there’s the man who does that.”

Harry twisted around and kissed him almost desperately. Draco held himself back only long enough to insure that the mirror was safe on the bedside table, and then returned the kiss.

Harry’s eyes had a light in the back of them now, where there had been only shadows before. Draco had reached him. He might not believe it completely yet, but he believed something like it. That was good enough for right now.

Draco closed his eyes and let Harry bear him away.

Harry stepped back and surveyed the table narrowly, then nodded. He hadn't had a chance to look at the book that described this ritual in a few weeks, since he'd first decided on the idea of a holiday with Draco and timing it to coincide with the spring equinox. But he thought it was still right. Those intense memorization skills Lily had trained into him had not faded completely.

He stepped back and looked at the door of the study with a faint smile. He'd sneaked away from the bedroom while Draco took a nap, more than slightly worn out from their activities earlier. And he'd managed to arrange the necessary components for the ritual before Draco awakened. From the sound of the hasty steps outside the study, though, his sleeping beauty was asleep no longer.

"Harry, what—"

Draco took a step into the room, and then his voice died. He stared blankly. Harry met his eyes and smiled more broadly. He held out a hand.

Draco descended the small flight of stairs into the study, eyes staring, face blazing.

Harry had decorated the walls with branches. A few of them were tapestries or paintings that he'd moved from other rooms, but more were conjured or illusions. All wrapped around each other to enclose the study in an endless wall of green. The sweet smell of pine needles filled the room, and laurel leaves, and here and there the scent of newly budded greenery that wouldn't open for a month or more without magic. Harry had used illusions for that part. They had learned to Transfigure food so it smelled good, but not other objects as yet.

Rushes carpeted the floor. Harry *had* learned how to Transfigure those, once he realized what a part of the ritual they were. Rushes had covered the floors of the places where Dark and Light wizards came together on the once-a-year meetings of reconciliation and trade that had, long ago, been common on the equinox. Harry was going to have rushes, even if it was a few days past the first day of spring.

The table had a soft glow enveloping it, shaped like a double-sided cone that narrowed from both ends as it neared the wood. One side was dark green, the other gold. They mingled into pale blue on the table itself. The colors of Dark and Light and the undeclared wizards; the book had made it plain that he must incorporate them somehow, and Harry had chosen this way.

And lining the table were sixteen candles, all alight, surrounding a seventeenth, mostly-built, candle in the center.

"Harry, what is this?" Draco asked, when he'd reached the bottom of the stairs and stood staring at the dark green cone of light, not knowing what to do.

This is an equinox ritual, Harry wrote, stepping towards him. I read up on it and adapted it. He nodded towards the candles. Those are for you. You're not quite seventeen, so the final one isn't lit yet. He smiled at Draco. We can light it on your birthday, if you'd like.

Draco tilted back his head to look at the branches. "And these?"

Greenery. New life. Harry kissed him. And a container, of sorts, for this spell. He stretched out his silver hand, and tested his voice. "Accio crystal ball!"

Draco looked as if he might laugh when the crystal ball rose from beside the table, where Harry had put it, and skidded across the floor to land in his hand. "Really, Harry, I know that you got an O at Divination, but—"

I told you I adapted the ritual, scribbled Harry, smiling at him. Once, it was used to arrange marriages between feuding families, and to predict the future of the marriage. This time, I'm going to use the crystal ball to show you what I hope for in your future. He breathed on the crystal ball, and held it up, letting Draco see within it. He was using a modified version of the spell Draco had invented to put memories with one's mindset into a Pensieve. It had pleased Harry to work his own magic on his partner's magic, as much as it pleased him to come up with a ritual of their own in between the major joining rituals.

Draco stared as the magic formed into distinct images. The first was of the man they had both seen before, in a room at Hogwarts that foretold a possible future for both of them. This Draco was an adult, more relaxed, and they'd last seen him kissing Harry under some kind of a green canopy.

This one stood in front of a garden of red flowers, looking at them with quiet satisfaction. A jeweled fly buzzed over one of the

flowers, and it lashed up and ate it. The Draco in the image chuckled. The real one looked startled.

I don't think you could ever invent something beautiful that wasn't also deadly, Harry told him.

“Harry—“

Draco wanted to say something, but the next image showed him entwined in a bed with Harry, and his eyebrows rose to his hairline. Harry flushed. He'd deliberately been more daring and more detailed than he usually allowed himself to be, and he was afraid it didn't look quite right as a result.

He shook his head. Draco was looking anything but disappointed. In fact, he made a low, pleased sound in his throat as he watched the figures in the bed shift.

Then the bed was gone, and Draco grimly dragged a wounded Harry off a battlefield of yellow sand, back into the shelter of red rock hills. He knelt over him briefly, received the imagined Harry's nod of reassurance, and then leaned around the cliff and cast a curse at their enemies. The green light of *Avada Kedavra* made him look even older, but also more dangerous, more determined, more decisive. All traces of softness and childishness had gone from his face; he was a man grown.

No matter what we come to, I know that you'll protect me, Harry told him.

Draco flew on a broom that might have been a Firebolt over a Pitch crowded with struggling players. He swerved above them all, and then let out a yelp of triumph as the Snitch smacked into his palm.

I think you could be a fine Seeker, if you wanted to, said Harry. *But, of course, there were never fair tryouts.*

Draco enchanted a clock to keep time and sing in a phoenix's voice, and was showered with money by a grateful witch who'd always wanted just that. He walked among the powerful, and they respected him in his own right, and not just for his family name or for being Harry's lover. He stood in Malfoy Manor and swore to uphold the ideals of his family while making them his *own*, so that he was not a copy of Lucius Malfoy, and the ancestors in the portraits stiffly nodded their approval.

Image after image after image, and Harry filled them with all the love and faith of which he was capable.

At last, they faded, and Draco said in a kind of choked voice, “They can't all be true.”

Harry studied him, and smiled. Draco said that, but he wanted to believe they could all be true. He was so greedy of many different kinds of recognition and achievement that he would take them all and more.

I believe you have the capacity to achieve them, Harry wrote. *Whether you do? Is a different question. There will be some you aren't interested in, and some that you would rather fulfill in different ways.* He stepped forward and laid a hand on Draco's cheek, letting the crystal ball drift away. *But I believe that you can do it.*

And Draco kissed him.

Harry gasped. That was not part of what he'd had planned, not that he was complaining. He had planned a quiet meal and a long conversation to be held while he and Draco watched the hippocampi. But Draco was clasping the back of his neck, tilting his head back, and whispering into his ear.

“I want you, Harry. Want you so badly right now. The gift of you. So that you'll lie still and let me do whatever I want, spoil you however I like. Will you let me do that?”

And Harry could only close his eyes and whisper an acceptance.

Draco took Harry back to their bedchamber. He'd felt a different succession of emotions in the last fifteen minutes: irritation and concern when he woke up without Harry, startlement at the state of the study, and then astonishment and shock and delight when Harry showed him that series of images he could become.

Now, he felt determination to make Harry share that delight, to shake with pleasure in the one realm he'd always seemed reluctant to take pleasure in.

He eased Harry back on the bed, kissing him deeply enough that Harry made a startled little sound against his lips, but didn't try to pull away. He didn't try to remove his own clothes, either, and Draco nodded approval as he took up his wand and murmured a spell to take them away. Harry really was surrendering, letting Draco do what he wanted.

And what Draco wanted to do right now was study Harry.

Harry opened and closed his hands in nervousness as Draco looked at him, but made no attempt to cover himself. Draco gave him another small nod. Just a few months ago, Harry had been too nervous when naked—and underwater, no less, so that Draco couldn't get a good look at him—to stop shaking. Now, he looked torn between embarrassment and desire that Draco get on with it.

And Draco did.

But slowly.

He avoided the place on Harry's neck he already knew about, since he wanted to learn what other places would make Harry shake as if he were drunk, or gasp, or squirm with repressed longing to curl up, or thrust his hips. He ran his hands gently through Harry's hair, arranging it in different shapes and making Harry tilt his head back and forth and raise his shoulders, half-helplessly. He kissed his scar, which brought the strongest defensive reaction; Harry had to fight to hold still on the pillows. His magic jerked and tumbled about him when Draco located a spot on his shoulder blade that made his toes curl, and he gasped and gulped several times when Draco leaned in to play with his nipples as if they were toys.

He also blushed. Violently. Draco could feel the slight added heat to the skin as he let his hands glide over it, and smiled, amused. Well, he would see if he could make Harry forget all about his embarrassment in a moment.

He lay down gently next to Harry, arranging himself so that he could stroke Harry's shoulder and that tempting spot with one hand while he trailed the other lower and lower. He let it hover over Harry's groin until Harry made a tiny impatient noise, and then he slowly, slowly, clasped his cock.

Harry made a gasping sound and tried to hide his face in Draco's shirt.

“Harry?”

He felt the rasp of Harry's hair against his chin, and barely heard the whisper. “I just—it's too much—Draco, you've never—“

“I know. But you have.” Draco kissed the back of his neck, and felt his skin jumping and shuddering with his heartbeat. “Hush, Harry. It's all right. You can take without giving, sometimes. And this is just as much spoiling for me as you. It's what I want.” He stroked gently, one time, and Harry seemed undecided whether to breathe or moan. Another stroke, and his body made that decision for him; Draco thought it sounded as if the noise had begun in his feet.

He shifted himself, keeping Harry distracted with the steady and slow motion of his hand, and picked up his wand with the hand that until that point had rested on Harry's shoulder. He cast a spell Harry didn't notice, then added a time-delaying charm to it. That done, he moved down yet again, and very gently took Harry in his mouth.

Gasps and soft cries came from above him. Draco thought that only half of them were from pleasure. The other half came from Harry fighting himself, trying, as hard as he could, not to sit up and demand that Draco take something for himself, too. Sacrificial instincts, training against pleasure, Harry's constant worry that he would be too selfish—Draco knew it had many names.

He also didn't care about its source, not right now.

As slowly as he could bear, he licked at and around Harry, and kept one hand in place, stroking his hips and his balls and now and then his arse, building the level of pleasure slowly but steadily. Then he let the time-delayed charm go with a whispered word, at the same moment as he sucked and sucked hard.

Sudden pressure closed on the spot on Harry's neck that always made him tremble, the spot on his shoulder blade that had caused his toes to curl, his nipples, his scalp, and all the other sensitive places Draco had found. Some would feel like mouths, some like hard pinches, some like the mere touch of trailing fingers. But all of them were working at once to give Harry as much pleasure as he could feel.

Draco felt Harry lose the battle against what he would probably call his better self. He felt it with all five senses: the sight of Harry writhing in abandonment, for the first time, without a ritual of some kind to coax him into the right mood; the sound of him

practically howling; the feel of sweetened skin tightening under his hands; the smell of steadily increasing musk; the taste in his mouth, not the most *wonderful* taste in the world, but making him feel smug and triumphant and loving.

He crawled back up Harry's side and kissed his forehead, slowly waking him from his daze. Harry blinked at him, and Draco rejoiced in the sight of his eyes.

All barriers down, finally, and it wasn't because of a damn ritual, or because he was so emotionally exhausted that he couldn't maintain them after a day of shrieking and crying and witnessing death and despair. Simply down because he was sated, and because he trusted Draco.

Harry said, with a tone in his voice that Draco had never heard, "Thank you."

If he had to give a name to the tone, Draco thought, kissing Harry's lips this time, he would call it dawning self-discovery, even wonder that something so simple and physical could feel so good. And no, it hadn't been a matter of life and death that Harry got over this bit of his training.

It had just been something Draco wanted to do.

He was so smugly pleased that he could ignore his own arousal for a few moments, at least until Harry suddenly shook himself like a seal rising from the ocean and wrote, *My turn*.

And his magic blazed around him, and his smile shone, and Draco felt joy break open in him like a spring of water, like a springing bound, like the rising season of spring.

This may be no more than a dream, he thought, as he lay back and let Harry kiss him senseless. *Just a fleeting glimpse of what we can't ever have permanently. But dreams were meant to be enjoyed.*

And we've sure as fuck earned this one.

Chapter Eighty: Realm of Night

Harry awoke slowly. He found his hand trembling as he reached out to pick up his glasses from the bedside table, and frowned. He and Draco had made it back safely to Hogwarts, and a week had passed since the vernal equinox that brought no crises, and he had had no nightmares. Why should he shake now?

Then he realized the room was cold, flowing and filled with a temperature more appropriate to winter than spring. Harry shivered and fought the urge to duck beneath the blankets. He had to find out what was happening.

He shifted, keeping Draco behind him so that his warmth would at least partly shield his partner from the chill, and then sat up. He saw the problem almost immediately, but he didn't recognize what it was until it shifted away from the glow of the silver strands of fog strung throughout the room and came towards him, with an eerie silence given the size of its hooves.

A cold tongue shot out to touch the scar on his forehead. The thestral bowed its head and rubbed its neck against him. Harry took a deep breath and ran his hands through the mane, which flowed over his fingers like twigs.

"What is it?" he murmured. The thestrals were the guardians of the Forbidden Forest. He supposed they might have come to alert him of a problem in the forest, but it seemed likelier they would have gone to Hagrid.

The horse stepped away from him, large wings flexing. It bowed its head, and Harry followed the gesture; so sleek and slim were the thestrals that he wasn't sure what it was pointing at at first. Then he saw that something other than silver fog coiled around its hoof, glowing blue.

Harry slid out of bed and knelt beside the thestral with a scowl he knew was grim. This web was solid and thicker than the others, a chain that grew more present as Harry gave it his full attention. When he sat back, he could see that it was tangled around the thestral's wings and neck, over the eyes and the mane.

"You want to be free of the web?" he asked, his voice still a croak.

He wasn't sure how much English the thestrals could understand; Hagrid had trained them to pull the carriages, but that didn't

necessarily mean they knew words beyond the simple commands that let them do so. And this thestral simply stood and looked at him expectantly, mane falling like a dark curlicue into its pale eyes.

I'll have to do it. Humans couldn't talk to any magical species they wanted, but phoenixes could. Or, at least, the only phoenix Harry had ever known had been able to, and that was the one whose voice he bore.

He sang softly, using as little magic as he could. For one thing, it would wake Draco up. For another, he really didn't want to exhaust his voice again just as it had recovered. He focused his attention on creating a vision of the web snapping within the thestral's mind; Fawkes had spoken to him in images, not words.

The thestral danced in excitement, and bobbed its head up and down like any ordinary horse, cold breath shivering from its nostrils. Harry blinked, and nodded, and stood. No magical species had approached him like this before, asking for freedom now, as opposed to entering negotiations, but there was a first time for everything, Harry thought. At one time, he would have thought it impossible that a karkadann would come from Africa to find him, too.

He laid one hand on the thestral's neck, and swung onto its back. The creature let out a tiny snort of satisfaction, and then turned and trotted towards the door of their bedroom. Harry frowned. *How did it get in?*

With magic, apparently. The thestral looked at the door, and Harry caught a faint glimpse of a shiny, slimy mind rolling over next to him, demanding that the barrier cease to exist because the thestral wanted it so. The door opened, and the thestral went out, its long, thin legs negotiating the steps down to the common room better than Harry thought a centaur could have done. Now and then it hunched its shoulders to pass through a narrow gap; Harry ducked when it did.

The common room door opened the same way. In the wide dungeon corridors, the thestral began to trot, wings flagging up and down as if to hurry it forward. Harry could hear the click of its hooves now, from a distance, like dice made of bone. But no one opened the doors they hurried past, and then they were up the stairs into the entrance hall, and through the open doors and into the courtyard, and the thestral spread its wings.

Harry had only ridden one of the great horses once, in his fourth year soon after his freeing of Dobby, and he had forgotten how different the sensation was from sitting a broom. Glory thrilled through his muscles as they soared upward, and he could hear the wild Dark singing in the distance. Of course it was singing, it was near Walpurgis and it always sang then, but Harry thought sitting on a thestral's back made him peculiarly suited to hear it.

Something sparked in the air next to him, and then a black wolf paced the skies there, green eyes shining at him over the fur, a brilliant silver lightning bolt scar on its head. Harry nodded in wary greeting to the wild Dark. This was the form it had worn when it had tried to corrupt and seduce him after Bellatrix had cut off his hand.

The wolf only threw back its head and howled joyously, though, and Harry heard the howl as he had once heard Fawkes's voice, bringing him an image of what was to come. *Many things change this night. We welcome a new comrade, and the Bony People go home.*

"Bony People?" Harry asked, but the wolf turned and sped away, losing coherence in the dark spaces among the stars. Harry shook his head and faced forward again.

The thestral was circling over the Forbidden Forest now, which swarmed with strands of silvery fog like reflected moonlight. Harry could see the blue chains, too, which he knew connected the thestrals in long slave coffles. They all seemed to be moving towards a certain place in the center of the Forest, and he wasn't surprised when the thestral he rode slanted down towards it, wings beating only every now and then as needed, to propel it forward.

They came down on a wide space of dead grass, fenced with black, bare trees. Just by looking at them, Harry doubted they would ever grow leaves, no matter how late the season got. The thestral's hooves clicked again as they landed; there must be stone not very far under the surface of the grass.

They stood on a mound in the center of the clearing, and the thestrals, visible by the glow of fog and their chains and their white eyes, stood in a circle around them. Every single one of them appeared to be staring at Harry.

Harry warbled out a low song, and grimaced as the notes stabbed him in the center of his throat. He just hoped the thestrals wouldn't think from his expression that he was unwilling to free them. He shaped a vision of them free, and then of a curious thestral sniffing at something dead to see if it was still bloody. It was the closest approximation he could think of to asking them why they wanted to be free now.

The thestral beneath him shifted and danced, but didn't reply. A stallion stepped forward from the rest of the herd, wings so wide that he blotted out several of the trees. He fixed Harry with an implacable eye, and snorted.

The image that snort gave in return was of a mare with a foal, and a pair of wings spreading, and the moon rising. There were natural times for things to happen, Harry supposed. The herd would not try to oppose those, and it would not try to oppose its own desire for freedom. They had come and fetched him because they wanted to be free now. Anything could have caused it, even the other species' changing status in the wizarding world or the fact that his vates powers apparently encouraged webs to melt.

Harry nodded, and then slid from the thestral's back to the mound. He bent down to examine the blue chain that curled around its hoof. He knew already that this wasn't a chain restricting movement; his mother had told him about Dumbledore sometimes riding thestrals to important meetings during the War when it was too far to Apparate, or too dangerous to make multiple Apparitions in safety. So whoever had wound this web had not done it to bind them to the Forest.

He raised an eyebrow when he realized that the chain was two chains, like the two webs put on the house elves. *Is one supposed to make them more docile?*

No, he saw, as he touched the chain and turned it slowly over in his hand. One set of links was the web itself, a glowing tingle of pure magic he could barely feel. The other manifested a bone-deep chill that lingered in his flesh long after he drew it back, and which affected even his silver hand when he used that instead. And, briefly, Harry saw the cold chain pass through the light of the blue-glowing one, and saw that its shadow took on the shape of a Grim.

They are bound to Death. Or they are bound to keep them away from Death. A prickle like rat's claws raced down Harry's spine. That would explain something about why only those who've seen death can see them.

He looked up and sang to convey an image of a broken-winged thestral trying to fly. He did not yet know how to undo the chains, and he was afraid of what would happen if he launched himself off the cliff and tried.

The stallion stepped forward and shoved his nose into Harry's shoulder with a poke that made it feel like the sharp edge of a shovel. The implication was clear from that, no vision needed. The thestrals would give Harry time to learn what he had to, but they wanted him to study it.

Harry nodded, and stood. His mind was already whirling with possibilities. Why would ancient wizards have wanted thestrals bound? He had never heard that they were especially dangerous; other herds lived wild in the world and barely interacted with wizards, other than coming to battlefields after wars, attracted by the smell of blood. Was it simply because this particular herd was useful? Or did it have to do with the nature of webs in the Forbidden Forest, which tried to insure that every creature born there was also bound there?

But he had to put that idea aside when he studied the chains again. This was *careful* work. Whoever had done this had left nothing to chance. The web transferred itself generation by generation, as it did with house elves, but the sheer intricacy of the damn thing said it was also adapted to each individual. Harry might be able to unbind the whole herd if he could find the common element that guided the chains. Otherwise, he would be reduced to tediously undoing every link from every stallion, mare, and foal.

He shrugged the thought of boredom away. He had done much more boring things that still fulfilled his role as *vates*. He looked up and composed a short song of human parchment—surely the thestrals had seen writing before, if only by peering from the edges of the Forest at students doing their homework on the grounds—and a puzzling maze that would end with the herd flying free. He would have to study, and he wasn't entirely sure what he would have to study as yet, but he would ask Regulus.

The stallion poked him again, and this time it felt like the blunt edge of a shovel. The herd was grateful. Harry nodded and touched his silver hand to the stallion's neck in thanks, then turned away to find the path back through the Forbidden Forest.

The thestral who'd borne him thus far wheeled in front of him with a sharp turn and a snort. Harry accepted the invitation and rode back, musing all the while.

They're bound to Death. Why? Would that be to keep them from going back to her, or for some other reason?

He would have to talk to Hagrid, Harry realized suddenly. The half-giant had trained the thestrals to pull the carriages, and so a substitute would have to be found. But, more than that, he loved the herd. Harry wasn't entirely sure if the thestrals would remain in the Forest once they were free, but he would have to prepare Hagrid for the possibility that they wouldn't. Their wishes would still be honored, of course; as *vates*, Harry could do nothing less. But he hoped that he wouldn't have to infringe on Hagrid's free will to do this.

And he would have to have another conversation he wasn't looking forward to having, with Regulus.

Harry winced at the thought of the questions he would ask. *I don't want to do this, but at the moment, Regulus is the only person I know who's spoken to Death directly, and even has her notice. Any tiny detail he knows might advance my attempts to undo the chains further than a dozen books would.*

Hagrid sniffled, and yet another large tear rolled down his nose and got itself lost in his deep, bushy beard.

"I'll miss 'em," he whimpered.

Harry patted his shoulder, feeling awkward, less for the depth of Hagrid's emotion than for the form it took. "I know you will, Hagrid," he said. "But they've got to fly free, don't they? I know that you wanted that for Norbert." It had taken him a short while to remember the name of the dragon Hagrid had rescued and tried to raise in his first year. "Don't you want that for the thestrals, too?"

"Do yeh think—" Hagrid mopped at his face with a large red handkerchief, and finished. "Do yeh think they'd let me visit 'em?" He turned a hopeful eye on Harry.

"I don't know where they'll go once they're free," said Harry, compelled to honesty. "It could be to another place in Britain, or they might stay here, but they could also fly back across the oceans to the places where the completely wild herds live. You know that, don't you, Hagrid?"

"Don' want to—ter let 'em go!" Hagrid said, and burst out in a fit of wailing. Harry hugged him this time, but his arms could barely fit around a quarter of his waist.

"What is the meaning of this, Harry?"

Somewhat guiltily, Harry glanced up to see Snape standing in front of him. It was Saturday, and he still hadn't visited his guardian that morning. "I have to free the thestrals, Professor," he said. He still preferred the title in front of members of the Hogwarts staff. "I just told Professor Hagrid so."

One of Snape's eyebrows rose, and he stood that way, looking down on them both, though Hagrid didn't appear to notice. "I see," he said, voice clipped. "And you are not releasing the thestrals without proper research into why they were bound in the first place, I hope?"

"Of course not," said Harry, a bit stung. He knew that Snape was upset he hadn't called him "Severus," but, well, he hadn't wanted to. It made him uncomfortable. The implication that he would simply dash ahead and break webs and laugh and wave his arms around, not caring for the consequences, was a bigger offense, in Harry's eyes. "I do know already that they're bound to Death, and that I'll need to talk to Regulus about his—acquaintance with some of that magic." Though Hagrid appeared lost in his sobs, Harry wasn't quite ready to mention Regulus's journey into the portrait in front of him. "So I'll look into books on necromancy and the history of the herds. Possibly another tame herd was once bound in the same way, and that could show me why this one was."

Snape's eyes held warning in them now. "Necromantic magic is dangerous, Harry."

"I know that," Harry said, thinking of Dragonsbane, thinking of Pansy. "But I need to learn whatever I must to defeat Voldemort and to free the magical creatures."

"Have a book on thestrals," Hagrid unexpectedly volunteered, still mopping at his chin and nose. "It might help. Don't know if it w-will." He sobbed once more, then stood and went into the hut to look for it. Harry looked sadly after him. Hagrid was one of the few people he knew who might appreciate magical creatures as intensely as he did. Unfortunately, he appreciated them as pets to be tamed, and that meant he was inevitably going to have trouble with the idea of freeing them to travel to a place and context where no humans would ever try to tame them again.

"Harry."

He faced Snape again, and saw that his guardian had knelt in the dirt, and extended one hand towards him.

"Be careful how you approach Regulus," he said, and hesitated for long enough that Harry felt alarm rising in his chest. At last he

said, "He has asked me to brew Dreamless Sleep Potion for him, to ease the nightmares of Death's country."

Harry swallowed and nodded. "I'll only ask him to tell me what he wants to." Pain was stuck like a broken breastbone in the center of his chest, as he thought of what Regulus had given up for the information on the Horcruxes, and the Mark that he now carried on his arm.

Snape swiftly rose again as he heard Hagrid coming back, his lip curling slightly. "Why the Headmaster puts up with him, I shall never know," he murmured. "He does nothing but nearly burn his house down around his ears with dragonfire and tame animals to hand that would be better left to roam the Forest."

"Headmistress," said Harry.

Snape looked at him with his eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Headmistress," said Harry, and smiled a bit, prepared to tease. "You said Headmaster, Severus."

Snape's eyebrows rose, and he stood stiffly for a moment. Then he nodded, and murmured, "So I did," and turned for the school. Harry shook his head at his back. *So like him not to admit when he was caught in a mistake.*

"'Ere you are, Harry," Hagrid said, thumping back out and handing him a book which was dwarfed in his hand, but which made Harry's arms sag with the weight. "*All You Need To Know About Thestrals*. I added some notes about Tenebrous." He sniffled again. "Let me know when yeh do it, so I can—I come and say g-goodbye—" He trailed off into bawling again.

Harry patted his shoulder once more, and then cast a subtle lightening charm on the book and went back to the castle.

Harry shrugged away the memory of the strange letter he'd received that morning as he appeared inside the wards at Grimmauld Place. If Elder Juniper wanted to put off receiving the apology Harry fully intended to give him, that was his right. Harry was a bit surprised that this was the *second* meeting that had fallen through, but at least it left him free to meet with Regulus.

He knocked on the house's door for a moment, and listened. "Regulus?" he called, when no one answered.

The voice of Capella Black, Regulus and Sirius's mother, whose picture hung in the main hall, answered at once. "Is that you, Dark Child? Come in, and let me smell you."

Harry rolled his eyes as he opened the door and stepped inside. At least the portrait didn't tend to shriek at him the way it had whenever someone who wasn't perfectly pureblood brushed by it. But she insisted on calling him by a term Harry had looked up and not been impressed by. Of course, the stories Harry had heard about Capella Black hadn't made her sound *that* intelligent.

"Where's Regulus?" he asked, stopping in front of the portrait. The curtains that usually covered it were drawn back. Harry wondered if Regulus had been talking to her.

"Upstairs, dear." The woman in the picture sniffed rapturously, and then purred in approval. "Necromancy, Dark Child? A tricky magic, but if you can learn enough of its tricks without falling prey to its sacrifices, it will make you very powerful."

Harry rolled his eyes again, not caring if she saw it. The Dark Child was a prophetic name for the Dark Lord who would rise to dominate not only Britain but the entire wizarding world, so powerful that the wild Dark itself would claim to have sired and borne him. Regulus had told him that his mother had been waiting for a Dark Child most of her life, and had for a time sincerely believed Voldemort was him. Now she appeared to have transferred her convictions to Harry. Harry was uncertain why. It might have to do with his *absorbere* gift, and his ability to become more powerful if that was what he wanted. But he had spoken to Capella often enough that he would have thought she'd understand he didn't desire power.

"Upstairs, dear, dreaming of death," Capella continued in a melancholy tone. "Whereas you blaze with life." Another sniff. "And stink of death." She nodded. "I do think that you are him. You will bring a reign of night upon us all, and free us from the tyranny of Muddblood filth and blood traitors."

"Spare me," Harry muttered, and then turned as he heard Regulus's footsteps on the stairs.

"Sorry about that, Harry," he said. "I needed to—fortify myself with something."

The “something” appeared to be a glass of wine, considering what he carried in his hand. Harry stared at him in silence for a moment. Regulus flushed, looked away, muttered, and then drew the curtains closed over Capella’s portrait with a suddenness that made Harry blink. He heard one more chuckle from the picture, and then she was silent, other than a faint hum that was probably the song of the Dark Child again. She had been happy to explain, when Harry asked, that the prophecy of the Dark Child was the ultimate shifting one, moving on from generation to generation and making new choices when its champion failed to appear. Harry had tried to point out that this was more likely to mean it would never come true. Capella had winked when he said that, as if he’d penetrated to the heart of some grand mystery.

“Come, Harry,” Regulus said, from the stairs, and Harry shook his head and hurried up after him.

Regulus had fixed up one of the upper bedrooms as his own. Harry glanced around curiously from the doorway. The dominant color appeared to be silver—not from any Slytherin remnants, Harry thought, as much as because it was a bright color that went well with the dominant black of the house. Regulus’s chest and bed and table were all sleek dark wood gleaming with inlaid traces of silver. His bedcurtains were unexpectedly thin pieces of cloth, swaying at the touch of the slight breeze Harry made as he slipped inside. The two chairs near the door were made of a white-gold wood that Harry had only seen rivaled in the Seers’ Sanctuary.

Regulus sat in one of them. He took a final sip from the wineglass, then put it down and faced Harry.

“So. You want me to talk about Lady Death. How beautiful she is, maybe, since you’re always rushing out to embrace her.” Regulus was trying, but trying too hard; Harry could hear the crackling strain behind the usual playful, flippant tone.

“No,” said Harry.

Regulus stared at him.

Harry leaned forward, staring directly into Regulus’s eyes. He hadn’t sat down yet, and was glad, because it let him get closer. “I want you to talk about what you’re comfortable with,” he said. “I want to know what I can do to free the thestrals, but I would never want to make you uncomfortable or violate your free will simply to do that. So tell me what you can. And if that’s not enough to figure it out, then I’ll continue reading. Merlin knows that both the Black library and the Hogwarts library have enough books to let me figure this out.”

He took a step back and sat in his chair, folding his arms and staring at Regulus some more. Regulus glanced away, glanced back, then picked up the glass and took an expressive drink of wine.

“Bloody *vates*,” he muttered.

Harry inclined his head.

Regulus sighed. “All right. I—

“You should know that I didn’t really know what to expect from the picture, Harry. The descriptions given by the Black patriarchs have all varied so much that it’s impossible to know what you’ll find there.

“I found a desert. Its sand was brown-black, and I entered it just as the sun was going down. I’ve never seen light so dim, this kind of smoldering twilight. I think it was mainly the effect of the sand, but I can’t be sure.

“I heard a voice hail me, calling me by name—not my first name, you understand, I don’t think the creatures in the portrait know anything about time passing in our world, any more than we know about its passing in theirs. This was a raven, or so I thought. Then it moved, and I realized it was a skeleton with a coat of rotting flesh and feathers on it. They regrew every time it landed, and then fell off again in this mess of dust and maggots every time it took flight.

“It hailed me, and asked me if I would come with it. I said that I would, and then I began following it.

“It led me into traps, Harry. It led me into pits that sucked at my feet and swallowed me and consumed me alive.” Regulus traced his elbow with one hand, and Harry wondered if he was remembering it being broken. “Through forests hung with bones, where one movement made them all tinkle and gasp together, and the skulls laughed at me. Over a road where I walked on what I thought were stones, until I came to the end, and then I looked down and realized that every single one of them had the imprint of Sirius’s face. He was screaming, screaming forever, trapped there.” Regulus shuddered and put his hands over his mouth, as though afraid he would vomit. “I’m still afraid that he’s trapped there,” he whispered. “In Death’s country, that he’s trapped there and can never get out.”

“He’s not,” said Harry at once, thinking of the strange touch on his hand he’d felt after the Midsummer battle. “I think—I think Pansy summoned him, and he was in the fight at Hogwarts when Voldemort tried to take the castle. There were things that people talked about later which could be explained only by the presence of a ghost among them. And I think he licked my hand before he went home. I can’t believe that he only came forth to aid us and then went back to that horrible place.”

Slowly, Regulus’s hands lowered. “Thank you, Harry,” he whispered. “Well, that’s one nightmare conquered.

“I don’t know how long we walked. At one point, I asked the raven why Death chose to live here. Why in such a place, instead of the way that the Greeks imagined Hades, for example? I don’t know why I thought that would be more fitting, but that was the way I imagined it at the time.

“The raven laughed at me. It told me that every soul is consumed in the same endless journey, trying to find Death, and that it amuses her to put traps in front of them so that the journey continues forever. Imagine, Harry, that after we die we’re doomed to walk that desolate country forever. It’s no wonder that some of the dead are eager to come back as ghosts.”

“But I don’t think we are,” said Harry, surprised. “I’ve read some books on necromantic magic in the last little while, you know that, researching on how to free the thestrals. They describe a dark in-between country that necromancers can access; most of the books just call it the Realm of Night. And unless the ghost or spirit is vengeful or otherwise has an interest in the living world, they have to be *summoned*. Most of the people who die just seem to go to sleep. Endless rest, Regulus, which isn’t that different from Hades when you think of it.”

Regulus shuddered restlessly, and then went on with his story without responding to what Harry had said. “I stood before Death at last. I can’t describe her, Harry. She was decaying, and still beautiful. Tell me how that exists, if you can.”

Harry thought of Lily and the decay of her mind and the bright frenzy of her sacrificial passion, but this time it was his turn to keep silent. Regulus was rambling on, anyway.

“She told me that she had a use for servants, that she enjoyed interfering in the world. She is patient, of course, and takes everyone when they come to her, but if she can make a bargain, then she does. She’s also unique in the world, and proud of it, and the same stern, sad reaper of lives that half a hundred religions perceive her to be. I don’t know if she looks the same to any two people. But none of that’s what you came to hear.

“She said that I would be her hand in our world, since her hands in it were chained. I think now she meant the British wizarding world, and not just our world in general. Of course she’s not chained here, and of course thestrals are free in other places.” Regulus looked up. “Does that help?”

“It does, actually,” Harry said slowly, thinking of a picture he’d seen in Hagrid’s book. It showed a thestral prancing with outstretched neck and spread wings on a bronze seal found in an ancient necromancer’s tomb. The book had said that the thestral might be considered a kind of patron saint of necromancers. It had insisted that that only came from the association of thestrals with death, but it could, Harry thought, have come because thestrals were associated with Death. “They were bound because they’re her creatures.”

“And freeing them would—“

Harry let out a breath. “I don’t know. I’ll free one and see what happens. It’s looking more and more like I’ll have to free them one by one anyway.”

Regulus nodded. He sat there with his eyes closed and his breathing quick and faint and his forehead covered with a light sheen of sweat, and Harry didn’t question the impulse that made him stand and move closer.

Regulus started a bit when his arms enveloped him, but didn’t hesitate to hug him back. Harry felt him shaking, and leaned forward to whisper into his ear.

“Nothing I can say will ever repay the debts that lie between us, for what you did for me during the year when you lived in my head, and for what you did when you went into that portrait, and for sharing information that terrified you or made you think I would reject you. So I’ll simply say *thank you*, and that I love you, and that I hope you enjoy the sunlight as much as you’re frightened right now by the darkness.”

For a moment, Regulus embraced him so desperately that Harry lost most of his breath, but he had held his breath for longer periods of time, and simply waited. When Regulus began to cry, he was there, as silent and as supportive as he could be, offering

silence or soothing words as Regulus seemed to want them. Regulus's shadow rippled, dog-shaped, watching them.

Harry licked his lips and shifted his weight forward. In the end, he had come to the Forbidden Forest alone to free a thestral, despite telling Snape that he wouldn't, because no one else thought he was ready, but the stallion—who might be Hagrid's beloved Tenebrous—had come to him last night and looked at him. A week of studying, and Hagrid's teary agreement, and Harry's growing sense that the thestrals had not killed or destroyed anyone, but had acted as heralds of Death and her power, rather like banshees. That would lead to the idea that it was unlucky to see one. Once, it had been.

Now, it might be again.

He had found the dead clearing after some minor searching; now that he knew what to look for, he found a path of withered grass and leaves crushed to black mold which led directly there. He entered to the accompaniment of many pairs of bright eyes. In short order, the gaps in the circle filled in as the rest of the herd sensed him and came to see what was happening. They moved in absolute silence now, even when they had to ease their wings past the trees or a pair came with necks entwined. Harry didn't know why. He could probably have found out if he kept reading.

But it was wrong to keep them here, when he suspected it was only fear that had kept them tied.

The stallion advanced to meet him when the circle was complete, and Harry stepped around the mound of grass and stone to kneel in front of him. He felt the cold breath spreading frost along the back of his neck. It was a reminder of how different the thestral was from any ordinary horse, but he turned and lifted a hoof like any horse letting a blacksmith examine him when Harry held out his silver hand.

He examined the chain closely, studying, one more time, the dog-shaped shadow. The purely magical chain he could absorb, but the cold one, forged in despite of Death herself, could be broken only one way.

This was the other reason he hadn't let Snape come with him, other than Snape's disagreement about him ever being ready. Snape would not appreciate what was required to break that chain.

Harry turned and laid his arm along the chain, ignoring the immediate numbness that followed, and the creeping pain. He reached into his robe pocket, thinking fleetingly how much easier this was with a left hand, even one he had to dip and scoop things up with instead of using his fingers on, and pulled out the series of small thorns he'd plucked as he walked.

Then he drove them into his arm with all his strength, shedding his blood on the chain.

The links he touched hissed and steamed and broke apart, puffing away like snow attacked by sunlight. Harry promptly began moving his arm up the chain, driving the thorns down over and over again, teeth clenched to keep from screaming. Freely given blood—not such a huge sacrifice, except that the chain was long, and there were so many chains, one tying each individual thestral, and the person who freed them would have to use thorns and not a knife.

And, of course, most of the time no one would think to free thestrals.

Harry traveled in a crouch, stabbing the thorns to open new flesh whenever it seemed that the cut would clot, and growing weaker and weaker, more and more dizzy, as his blood left him. At last, though, he had marked and dissolved the whole chain from the stallion's hoof to the end, which floated in a tangled ball of ghostly metal somewhere in the center of the herd. Then he lay back, panting, and drank the magic of the other chain down his gullet.

His vision blurring, he saw the moment the last bond parted.

The stallion reared, his body becoming longer and thinner and more elongated, but also bigger, as though he were a piece of cloth spreading on the wind. Harry soon thought he looked like a mass of bones on a dark cape.

The Bony People, he thought. *That was what the Dark meant.*

The stallion's bones *separated*. They drifted around each other like a constellation, now and then orbiting, bound within the general confines of the unfolded skin. When the spine went below the hooves, Harry blinked in dazed confusion, and thought he should close his eyes.

He heard soft paws striking the ground beside him. He managed to open his eyes and turn his head, thinking another thestral had

chosen to come near him in hopes that he could free it, or in attraction to the blood.

Instead, he saw a slim gray dog, her head positively aristocratic, her body as thin as the stallion's spine. She dipped her head, black eyes fixed on him, and such perfect cold surrounded him that, for a moment, Harry thought she had frozen him inside a black crystal.

Her tongue swept across his silver hand. Harry screamed in pain as he felt the vicious tingling pain of it, as though he was waking a limb he'd been sleeping on for hours. Then the tongue returned for another scrape, and the pain was worse, and on the third worse again. Harry heard his voice crack as the cries strained his throat again, but he really could not have stopped.

At last it ended, and Harry pulled his hands limply to him, cradling his face, uncomfortably aware of how light and clumsy they felt when he'd given up so much blood—

Wait.

Harry pulled his hands back and stared. His left hand was flesh now, its healing process and acclimation to his body seemingly sped up, and it flexed and responded as the other did. There remained only one patch of silver, right in the middle of it.

It might have resembled a dog's head, if Harry could have squinted enough.

He shivered, and then rolled his head over to see the gray dog standing next to the unfurled thestral, who was putting himself back together again, in—indescribable ways. When he'd more or less wrapped himself in a lump of skin, they both turned to look at Harry. He heard a faint, high, chilling cry.

And then both were gone, and Harry felt another thestral grip his hair, while yet another rolled him gently over. He clung to consciousness long enough to see them pick him up and begin transporting him towards Hogwarts. He also managed to summon enough magic, with the power he'd just swallowed, to set up a flare of green sparks about the color of the Killing Curse. That would attract attention, and insure that he saw Madam Pomfrey to get a Blood-Replenishing Potion.

The night around him seemed deeper, wilder. He wasn't surprised when the black wolf came and paced at the flying pair's side again.

The Bony People are going slowly home. And Death knows you. The wolf laughed, a deeper and more disturbing sound than Harry had ever heard one of his pack make. *An uncomfortable life you have, little cousin.*

And it turned and broke apart into blackness again. Harry closed his eyes and tried to determine what would get him into more trouble: going into the Forbidden Forest alone, or the long, ragged wound that ran the length of his right arm.

Somewhere in the wondering, he passed into darkness.

Intermission: Come Home to Your Heart

Severus held himself still. The madness of his rage might have something to do with that. If he moved, if he spoke, he would explode.

He knew he should have suspected this would happen sooner or later. But he had not foreseen it happening so soon. He had thought he'd managed to keep the Headmaster's trust better than that, that Albus would accept his story of being there in the graveyard *just* out of time to rescue Harry, and that he stood a chance of completing the mission the Dark Lord had set him: to find out a way to get past the wards into the hidden house where Connor Potter was being trained.

And now Albus had told him this.

"I am sorry, Severus," Albus said gently, his face drawn. But there was a light in the back of his eyes, a great light, where there had been none before, and Severus knew that things truly had changed. "But I cannot tell you the truth right now. It's not solely my decision. Lily had to give her permission, too, and she chose not to." He hesitated for a moment. "Harry's loss very nearly broke her. She is not so eager to risk the safety of her sole remaining child."

Severus hid his sneer. *Harry's loss broke her because she believed that they had no hope of defeating my Lord without him. I know very well how she treated the boy. It was not a child but a weapon she lost.* "And so I, who have done more than any other

single person but you for the cause, Headmaster, am exiled from your inner counsels,” he snarled.

“That is the matter as it stands right now, Severus.” Albus’s eyes were mild, but implacable. “If it makes you feel better, neither James nor Minerva know, either. Lily is dead-set against telling anyone but me until she is sure that what we suspect is true, and we have truly found a new way to reassert the prophecy.”

Severus inclined his head. “May I be dismissed, Headmaster?”

Albus sighed. “I wish you would not go away angry, my boy. This exclusion is not targeted at you alone.”

“May I be dismissed, sir?” Severus fastened his eyes on the wall over Albus’s shoulder and spoke the way a schoolboy would.

“You may, Severus.”

He turned his back, not wanting to see the condescending kindness in those blue eyes, and walked away.

So. They have someone else who loves Connor Potter, someone who can stand at his back and provide power when he faces my Lord. And due to the nature of prophecy, it may even work. They cannot have found another Harry—

Except that, Severus reminded himself sharply, he knew so little about Connor Potter’s training in recent months that *anything* was possible. He had failed in his mission. He had gained control of Connor’s father, but questioning his old enemy would win him nothing when Lily refused to tell the secret even to her husband.

Severus played with the possibility that Lily might not be able to resist the temptation or the stress and would give in, but he knew that the hope was a faint one. *She kept Harry’s training from him for a decade and more. She isn’t going to risk the secret she thinks the safety of the whole world rests on.*

He strode into the solitude of his dungeons. His Lord had commanded him to begin work on a new potion. This one was to be a seemingly harmless variant on Veritaserum; it would make the drinker tell lies instead of truths. Severus could easily pass it off as a potion done to keep his hand in if anyone asked.

The effects of the potion when they remained in the drinker’s system for a time would be—quite different.

Severus shut the dungeon door behind him and began to brew the potion, which he had already decided should be a deep green, only a few shades short of the color of the Killing Curse. That meant he couldn’t use half the ingredients that would ordinarily have gone into a Veritaserum variant. Concentrating deeply on such a challenge would keep him from lashing out with magic, the sole intent of which was to destroy Albus Dumbledore.

“Here he is,” Albus’s voice said, and the members of the Order of the Phoenix turned their heads as he ushered Connor Potter into the room.

They were all there, including Moody, who had finally managed to kill Evan Rosier last night, and Nymphadora Tonks, who was their best spy in an increasingly hostile Ministry since Scrimgeour had been cast out by a vote of no confidence. His Lord had laughed when he heard about that, Severus remembered. It seemed only proper that the Minister Harry had elevated into power should fall with him.

Such thoughts boiled into less than steam in Severus’s mind when he saw Connor Potter.

Nine months, from June to March, hiding in isolation and training, had changed the boy. There were deep shadows beneath his eyes that would have been more usual beneath Harry’s. He was as thin as Lupin, and walked with as steady a gait as the werewolf after a full moon. But he radiated more controlled power. Severus could sense the irritating traces of a formal Declaration, too, if he pushed himself. The boy had given himself to the Light.

But none of that would have been enough to defeat the Dark Lord. Severus would have been more amused than anything, if not for the look in the boy’s eyes, and in Albus’s, and in Lily’s. She walked behind her son, one hand balanced lightly on his shoulder, the other hovering near his head, as if she wanted to flick back the fringe and show the heart-shaped scar for all to see.

Albus was the confident man he had not been since the First War. Connor Potter might have been carved of marble, both his face and the resolve in that face.

And Lily Evans Potter shone from within as though filled with flame.

They have found a hope they believe in, Severus thought, narrowing his eyes further. And the boy might be deceived, and even his mother, though she would not give her belief to something less than absolutely Light. But Albus would not make a mistake that could lose him the war, not now, not after all the effort he put into the training of Harry and the Potter brat.

“Wizards and witches of the Order of the Phoenix,” Albus Dumbledore announced, in a voice that had none of the strain he had shown for the last few meetings, “meet your champion, the Boy-Who-Lived, Connor Potter.”

Several people stood up to applaud as Connor bowed. Severus thought he was the only one who watched Albus in that moment, who saw the soft and kindly look he darted towards the boy.

The world froze, and filled with light.

Albus. Albus is the one who loves the boy. Albus is the one who will stand at his right shoulder when the moment comes.

And given the prophecy and Albus’s immense power and the strange connection forged between the Potter brats and his Lord on that fateful Halloween night—even now, Severus knew Voldemort had not chosen to trust him with *all* the secrets of that connection—there was at least a chance the Order of the Phoenix would win the war.

Severus joined the applause, but his mind rang with exultation, like a struck bell, for an entirely different reason. He knew the news he would carry to his Lord. He knew the permission he would ask.

If all went as he expected it would, that permission should be granted, and he could at last have his revenge on Albus Dumbledore for not expelling Sirius Black and the others all those years ago.

Severus opened his eyes with a gasp. A surge of some powerful emotion had awakened him, but he could not grasp what it was. The dream was already breaking up, scurrying madly to the corners of his mind as they always did now.

He vaguely remembered Dumbledore, and the Potter brat, and shuddered. Likely he had had a nightmare of dueling the boy while the Headmaster stood in the corner and encouraged him to be *kinder*. He was glad that he could not remember it.

He swung out of his bed, and examined his potions. Lately, he awoke as if by Muggle clockwork with enough time in the morning to do some brewing before he went to teach his classes. Perhaps he could even finish his newest potion this morning; it was very nearly done.

He gave it a nod of approval, the thick green potion shimmering in the cauldron next to the purple poison and the silver healing draught. Yes, it was very nearly done. Strange, to think it had started as a commission from the twin Weasleys. Severus had bottled and sent the sample they’d paid for on to them, but had retained most of it for himself, fascinated by the harmless but intricate properties the potion displayed.

He bottled it, a procedure that took most of the time he had remaining, and then hurried to put on his formal robes and go to the Great Hall for breakfast.

On the way there, Snape shook his head. Very strange, how refreshed he felt during these mornings, when his intense dreams—whatever they were about—and early awakenings seemed to argue that he should feel tired. Very strange.

But then, the human body and mind had their vagaries. Few wizards knew that better than he.

And the matter went out of his head, entirely, when McGonagall caught him on his way to the Great Hall, explained briefly that they hadn’t been able to get through the wards on his quarters, and *then* explained what Harry had been doing in the Forbidden Forest last night.

Chapter Eighty-One: Our Own Voices

“You should have known better.”

Harry opened his eyes to those words, and realized almost at once that he would not have an easy time persuading Snape that he was fine. He rolled his head over on the pillows, much as he had rolled it to look at the gray dog who had come to represent Death, and grimaced. His head was still light and faintly fuzzy from loss of blood. It wasn't the ideal position to be arguing from.

But he could see by the light coming through the windows of the hospital wing that it was morning, and he bore no wounds that he could feel save the long, jagged one in his right arm and the many light scrapes and bruises that he would have from falling on the stones in the Forest. He had survived and come back mostly whole. And he had had numerous hours to sleep and recover. Madam Pomfrey must have given him a Blood-Replenishing Potion. That meant he should be ready to face Snape.

He heaved himself up on his left elbow, as he knew his right arm would simply go watery and drop him in a moment. He held Snape's eyes calmly. "I knew that you wouldn't have let me do what I needed to do," he said. "You'd told me as much. When I mentioned spilling blood on the chain, even in the most casual way, you forbade me to do so. So I had to go alone in order to make sure the thestrals were freed by the only thing that would dissolve that cold chain. That's all."

Snape's face looked like dark stone in its rage. He leaned nearer. "It will not be happening again," he said.

"Yes, it will," said Harry. He could feel his insides squirming in discomfort. He had felt bad slipping alone into the Forest without even leaving a note, though someone could have found the note before he reached the grounds and come after him. But it would have been a hundred times worse had he not been doing this as part of his *vates* duties. Yes, as a child he had run away and done things on his own for stupid reasons, or to satisfy his training to protect Connor. But he had made sure in his reading. Blood was the only way to free the thestrals. The blood *had* to be drawn by thorns, not a knife and not a spell. Something about thornbushes growing in the native territory thestrals were from. Harry had not made up the requirements of the procedure. He had merely decided to answer them.

"It *will not*."

Harry blinked and leaned a little away from Snape, using his right hand to wipe carefully at the fleck of spittle that had landed on his face. He hadn't seen his guardian this passionate in a long, long time. He had lowered his voice instead of raising it, and Harry *did* have the impulse to cast down his eyes. But how could he? He had done what he needed to do. If he promised not to do it again, then he would be betraying the most important path he walked.

"I have to use thorns," he said. "I have to use blood. If you wish, you can come with me next time, but I really didn't trust you not to Stun me and take me back to Hogwarts the moment I opened my arm, sir."

"And you were right to doubt that I would have let you do this mad thing." Snape's voice just got colder and colder, harder and harder. "There *must* be some other way to free them, Harry. Find it."

"There isn't," Harry pointed out patiently. "I *have* been trying to find some other method that would work for most of a week. And it's blood, and it's thorns. I'm sorry. But just like a Calming Draught won't change its base for all that I worked on it, this won't change for all that you protest, sir."

Snape closed his eyes and murmured something violent, his wandless magic leaping and crackling like lightning around him. Harry watched him in concern. He wasn't going to change his mind about this, no matter how much guilt he felt or what arguments Snape used. He wished he *did* know a way to ease Snape's fear, though.

"Let me, sir. I think I can handle him."

Harry's head jerked up. Draco stood in the doorway to the hospital wing, leaning against it. Now he stalked inside, and came straight up to Harry's bed. Harry swallowed back a surge of nervousness. He hadn't seen Draco this truly angry in months. Petulant sulks over not getting his way were one thing. This Draco had a manner that reminded him partly of Narcissa and partly of Snape.

Draco touched Harry's right arm just above his wound, eyes never leaving his face. "You would say that this was an acceptable price, correct, Harry? You would say that, if your *vates* path leads you in that direction, it's simply the one you have to go?"

Harry nodded, mesmerized by the way that Draco's eyes speared him.

"And what happens if you meet a magical species whom you have to free by sacrificing the person dearest to you?" Draco asked quietly. "Or by giving up your ability to love? Would you accept that bargain?"

“There doesn’t exist such a species,” said Harry, feeling his back half-arch.

“There could.” Draco watched him thoughtfully, mercilessly, his face showing no signs of yielding. “You don’t know everything about the magical species of the world yet, Harry, and especially not the webs that bind them. There could be something wonderful or terrible out there that would demand its freedom from you at that cost.” He leaned close, until Harry could feel his breath on his cheek. “Or there could be one you would die to free. You nearly died to free one thestral last night. *One*, Harry. And you will have to nearly die again and again to free the rest.”

“I didn’t think my life was in danger,” Harry said, trying to pull away. Draco’s hand clamped on the back of his neck, and that, combined with the weakness in his muscles from the blood loss, wouldn’t let him move. “I knew my magic would work to save my life.”

“Then what’s this?” Draco seized his left hand and turned it over.

“A gray dog came and licked it back into flesh,” Harry said stolidly, but winced when Draco’s nails clanged off the small patch of silver that remained in the middle of the palm. Yes, it was shaped like a dog’s head.

“You didn’t know that would happen,” Draco said. “You didn’t know *anything* about the cost of freeing the thestrals, Harry, not really. You only knew how it had to be done. Tell me, why couldn’t you have used the blood from an animal to do this? Is there something in the books that forbids it?”

“The animal wouldn’t have given the blood of its free will,” Harry reminded him tightly. “I did.”

“And the books say that the chain has to be broken with the blood of a willing sacrifice?”

Harry knew he’d hesitated a moment too long.

Draco reached out and took his chin in an almost crushing grip. “I knew it,” he breathed. “That was all you, that decision to use your own blood. If you do it again, Harry, I am going to break off the joining ritual.”

Fear froze his insides more than the guilt ever could have. Harry stared into Draco’s face and finally whispered, “You wouldn’t—don’t do that. Don’t even threaten that.”

“And why not?” Draco’s eyes were bright, scornful. “You say that you wouldn’t give up someone dear to you or the ability to love, Harry. And yet you would give up what *permits* you to be dear to other people and to love them, your life. You’ve never valued it enough. You’ve treated it like some counter on a game board. I did think you were mostly healed of that tendency, but this proves you aren’t. It will *end*. Remember what I said, Harry.” His hand caressed Harry’s cheek, and he leaned in and kissed him hard enough to hurt, to steal breath. “With this one action,” he murmured, breath puffing against Harry’s lips, “you’ve said that you don’t value the rituals we’ve gone through so far, the possibility of what we could be when the joining’s done in about two years, or my presence in your life.”

“I didn’t say that!” Harry yelled, feeling his hold on his temper slip. “I didn’t think I would die!”

“But you put your life in enormous danger, and you did it without telling anyone where you were going, and you ignored an easily available choice that wouldn’t have put you in danger at all,” Draco said smoothly, and stepped away from the bed. “And you knew we would worry, Professor Snape and I and your brother and all the others who love you, and you did it anyway. You put one magical species ahead of all the others you need to fight for and free. What would have happened to the house elves if you died in the Forbidden Forest, Harry?”

“Dobby spoke better for them than I ever could have—“

“Which doesn’t mean they *don’t* need you,” said Draco tightly. “Idiot. Look me in the eye and tell me that you value your life, Harry.”

“I do,” said Harry, glaring at him. There was guilt ripping through him *now*, shredding him with bloody claws when he tried to think about this from Draco’s or Snape’s point of view.

“And tell me that you value the people in your life.”

“You *know* I do. I shouldn’t have to prove that.”

“But you do,” said Draco, “because you seem to have given up all notion of keeping them and loving them last night. Prove to me that you do, Harry. Voluntarily protect your life for at least the next month, until the Walpurgis ritual. And never do something like this again.”

He turned and left before Harry had a chance to reply.

Snape said, “He executes the punishment of a partner. I am going to execute the punishment of a parent, Harry. Detention every night for a month. Yes,” he added, when Harry opened his mouth. “That includes weekends.”

“But sir—“

Snape looked at him.

“Severus,” Harry corrected himself with a groan. “I—how can it be moral to use an animal’s blood like that, put it through extreme pain in order to do something I want to do?”

“As well ask how it can be moral to make those who love you worry so much,” Snape said, and turned away. “I will await you in my office tonight, Harry. Do not worry, it will be light labor, in deference to your healing arm.”

He left. Harry lay back on his bed and stared at the ceiling, feeling his cheeks burn with humiliation and rage.

The rage was small, though, buried beneath the guilt for the most part.

I just—I just thought they would be angry at me, but because I lied to them. I never thought they would believe I didn’t value my life. I do. It’s just—

And at the wording of his next thought, Harry nearly swallowed his tongue.

It’s just less important than other things.

Harry curled up in confusion, tucking his pillow beneath his cheek. He hadn’t realized the implications that thought would have to Draco and Snape, what they would think and feel if they could hear him say it.

Perhaps it was time he did.

It took labor for Draco to eat silently beside Harry instead of simply giving in, wrapping his arms around him, and taking him back to their bedroom for a round of sex that would knock most of the arguments between them away.

But it was labor he had committed himself to, and now he had to do it.

He shot a narrow-eyed look at Harry, who was picking miserably at his breakfast. Two days of rest, other than attending detentions with Snape, had improved Harry’s health considerably. But his mood hadn’t followed that. He had been quiet and downcast the first time Draco saw him after their argument, and he’d remained quiet and downcast since.

He slopped orange juice instead of milk into his cornflakes as Draco watched. Draco shivered a little. Now the desire to reach over and comfort Harry was so strong that it felt like a wave of the sea, running through him and slapping his body from side to side.

And still he refrained. He and Harry had a philosophical difference between them in this area at least as deep as the one that had lain between his parents about his disownment. Narcissa could not have yielded to Lucius without loss of face and proving that she didn’t really care what he did to their family. Draco knew the same thing applied to him now. Yield, and Harry would not take him seriously. He would risk his life again, knowing he would have, at most, a few days of discomfort afterwards—a small price to pay for a freed thestral.

Draco wanted the lesson to go home once and for all. And it would. He could endure days in misery. It made his food taste bad and left his hands itching for a touch of Harry’s skin, but that was better than endless nights for the rest of his life lying awake and wondering where Harry was this time and whether he would come home alive.

Draco had thought once that he refused to be a suffering little wife, left behind while Harry went on adventures. Well, he refused

to be the hapless partner either, left lying asleep while Harry risked his life, especially when there were less risky choices to accomplish the same goal. Harry would learn to value his life if only because Draco valued it.

Otherwise...

Draco took a deep breath, and scraped at his plate with unnecessary violence, since his food was already gone and there was nothing left to move around.

Otherwise he would break the joining ritual. He had said he would, and he meant it. He *refused* to be left behind, to be considered less than an equal, while in the midst of a binding that was supposed to make them exactly that. He deserved better than that.

Snape watched from the corner of his eye as Harry came in and headed straight for the thick pile of books he'd been reading for the last three nights. His shoulders still tightened when he opened them, but he no longer looked as if he would like to murder someone, Snape had noticed. He supposed that was progress.

The books were wizarding fey tales, Muggle fairy tales, and more ordinary children's stories all mixed together. Harry was supposed to read them and take notes. The one thing they had in common was their theme. All revolved around the theme of a parent or child in danger, and the other coming to rescue them.

Harry had snapped his head up and stared at him in betrayal when he first figured out what they were, that night when he came down after being wounded. Snape had looked at him calmly until he turned away and took the notes he was supposed to on them. The notes would say "what he learned."

The notes grew more and more coherent each night; the first time, they had been little more than erratic jottings, so badly-written that Snape couldn't read them. Now, though, they contained comparisons between the different kinds of stories, wonderings about the themes of the more obscure ones, and, more and more often, the admission that the parents loved their children and vice versa.

Snape went back to marking his own essays while the soft scratch of Harry's quill sounded behind him.

Draco had one lesson to teach Harry, one about valuing him and considering him an equal. With Snape, Harry's lapse was different; Snape did not want Harry to have to consider himself in the relationship of a friend or guardian or colleague to his own father. He wanted Harry to realize that he could be a son, and that it was not always wrong when someone wanted to stop him from doing something harmful to his own safety.

Add to that the fact that, while he was in Snape's office writing about the stories, he couldn't be outside, running about in the Forbidden Forest and ripping his arms open with thorns, and Snape thought the trade was more than fair. Harry would learn something. He would have Harry under his eye. A month of detentions ought to press the lesson home through even a skull as thick as his son's.

Snape marked the essay in front of him 'T' with a flourish.

Connor waited patiently around the corner. He could hear soft voices from ahead of him, one a voice he'd known since childhood and the other one he'd grown resigned to hearing for the rest of his life. They were conducting a whispered, private conversation that he didn't try to listen to. It was no one's business but their own what they said.

But between him and them, standing unnoticed in this short side-corridor, was another person.

One who had been following Harry around lately, though his brother had been so sunk in abstracted misery he hadn't noticed.

One who had decided to intrude where he wasn't wanted, and whom Connor had finally decided to put a stop to.

He heard a faint smacking sound, and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. *You better appreciate what I'm doing for your sake, Harry, he complained inwardly. It's bad enough that I know you and Draco kiss, I don't need confirmation of it.*

A moment later, he heard a soft and whirring *click*, and his hand shot around the corner, grabbed the collar of the person waiting just ahead, and dragged him back around the corner. He squeaked as Connor turned him sideways and slammed him into the wall. Thanks to the bubble of the Silencing Charm Connor stood in, and which now included his captive as well, neither Harry nor

Draco heard. Connor glanced warily around the corner and saw them standing close together, so absorbed in each other it was a bit sickening.

Luckily, he had a diversion.

“Colin,” he said, and produced his best predatory smile, the one that Parvati, impressed, had said made him look like a mad murderer escaped from Tullianum. “Hullo.” Then he waited.

Colin Creevey looked in several directions for a moment, eyes darting as if he thought Connor must be referring to some other Colin. Then he sagged, and said, staring at the floor, “Um, hullo, Connor.”

“That’s a nice camera,” said Connor, indicating the one that Colin still held in his hand. “I’d reckon it helps you take pictures of things—oh, all sorts of things that no one else is ever going to notice.”

The boy perked up, the way he usually did when someone was talking about photography with him. “It *does*,” he said. “I took a picture of a flower the other day that grows on the edge of the Forbidden Forest and isn’t in any of the Herbology books. Even Neville said he hadn’t seen anything like it. Do you want to see it?” He started fumbling and patting at the pockets of his robes.

“Not now, Colin,” said Connor pleasantly. “I’m much more interested in the picture that you *just* took.”

Colin fixed him with wide, innocent eyes, and laughed a little. “Just took? Oh, there aren’t any like that, Connor.”

“*Now*,” Connor said, and snapped his teeth hard enough that Colin jumped and tried to get away from him. Thanks to the hand on his collar, he naturally couldn’t. “The one of my brother and Draco Malfoy kissing, Colin. Merlin knows I don’t want to see it, but I’ve made worse sacrifices for him.”

“It’s not what you think,” said Colin sulkily, as he unhooked the camera from its strap and handed it over to Connor. “I mean—I didn’t take the picture because I’m going to sell it to the *Daily Prophet* or anything like that. I took it because I noticed something strange about Harry’s right arm.”

“What about it?” Connor stared at the camera for a moment, but he was satisfied that he’d tackled Colin too quickly for Colin to tamper with it. He put it in his own robe pocket and smiled at Colin. “You’ll get it back after the evidence has been destroyed.”

“I thought he might have the Dark Mark,” Colin said earnestly. “That bandage on his arm, when he wasn’t in a fight?”

Connor rolled his eyes, not bothering to hide it. The world disappointed him with its stupidity, sometimes. But he could still have a bit of fun, and that would make up for the fact that he’d have to see, and destroy, a picture of his brother kissing his boyfriend.

“Death Eaters wear the Dark Mark on their *left* forearms,” he said.

“Oh.” Colin deflated.

Connor paused as though thinking, then leaned closer. “Listen,” he said. “I’ll promise to tell you what he did if you’ll promise to stop following him. And not tell anyone else, either.”

“You *would*?” Colin’s whole face shone with a disturbing mixture of greed and hero-worship. “Oh, thank you, Connor! I promise, no one else will hear about this, I promise, I promise, I *promise*—“

“Once was enough,” Connor muttered, and then started speaking softly, Silencing Charm or not. “He went into the Forbidden Forest to free thestrals. To do that, he had to use thorns on his arm.”

“Really?” Colin breathed, eyes wide.

“Yes.” Connor lowered his voice further, as though he were afraid of Harry walking around the corner and discovering them. Colin, who probably hadn’t realized they stood in a Silencing Charm, leaned nearer in fascination. “He had to bleed from the hole cut by the thorns, and spread it along the chain. And of course, he had to keep opening the wound again when it was about to clot.”

Colin swayed a little closer as Connor lowered his voice to a whisper. “And then the chain was gone, and the thestral free, and do you know what it did?”

“What?” Colin asked.

“It—“

Connor raised his voice abruptly, yelling right into Colin’s face. “*Hurt him!*”

Colin scrambled away from him with a shriek, and took off down the corridor in the direction of Gryffindor Tower.

Connor laughed as long and loudly as he wanted, and then went on his way, now and then patting the camera in his pocket, whistling. It seemed as though his brother and his brother-in-law had made up, and so things were swinging back towards equilibrium in their small corner of the world.

“It was actually the Horcruxes that made me think the most about what you said, you know.”

Draco lifted his head from Harry’s shoulder and blinked at him. He’d been half-dozing his way through the afternoon; since Harry had come up to him, apologized, and said that he’d thought about what Draco had said and believed it to be mostly true, he’d been so overwhelmed with emotions that sleep felt like the best thing. Granted, he was half-thinking this peace would splinter at any moment and Harry would shout at him—they’d never had an argument conclude so quietly, without emotional collapses and yelling and breakdowns—but perhaps this was a sign of how they had both grown up.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Harry stroked his hair. His hands hadn’t quite stopped touching Draco ever since they came back to their bedroom. Draco could not say that he minded. “I’m researching Horcruxes to find a way to get around the requirement of sacrifice,” he said. “Why shouldn’t I research the thestrals to find some way to get around the requirement of shedding my own blood on the chains?”

Draco tensed a bit. This was the part where their “mostly” agreement mostly ran out. “You *can* use the blood of an animal,” he told Harry. “That’s not immoral. You don’t owe anything to ordinary animals as you do to the magical creatures.”

Harry ignored him. “Both involve sacrifice,” he said. “But the one was unthinkable to me. Why not the other?” His hand curled around a lock of Draco’s hair and tugged. “Because it was me, and not other people, who was in danger of losing my life in the Forbidden Forest? What a stupid reason that would have been to refuse to research this further.” He snorted and tucked his head into Draco’s shoulder, his words muffled. “So I thought about it, and thought about it, and yes, you were mostly right. I don’t like the threat you made, and I don’t think that you were right about killing animals to shatter the chains, but you were right about the rest. It’s simply stupid to propose exceptions between me and other people when I know that we both inhabit the same plane of importance now.”

Draco wondered which part of that to respond to, and in the end chose the most innocuous. He doubted that Harry would want to hear arguments for bleeding animals but not killing them right now, or to hear that his life was *more* important than the lives of the vast majority of wizards in Britain. “It wasn’t just a threat. I would have broken the joining ritual, Harry. I don’t deserve to be in a relationship where I’m treated as less than your equal.”

Harry rolled over and squinted thoughtfully up at him. “I didn’t know if you would be able to go through with it,” he said. “That was why I called it a threat, instead of a promise.”

Draco stared at him, and then looked away. He’d come to regret saying that more and more often as April and their argument both wore on, and if matters had gone down to that point, he didn’t know if he could have turned away from Harry, either. It wasn’t something he liked to spend a lot of time contemplating. It had just felt like something that needed to be said, to show how serious he was.

“Just don’t put me in a situation like that, and we won’t ever have to find out how much I meant it,” he said, striving to keep his voice light.

Harry’s hand cupped his ear, and he tipped it to the side so that he could kiss the skin behind it. “I don’t want to,” he whispered. “Hopefully, I’ll know better than to do something that brings it up.”

Draco closed his eyes and gave in to the light touches, the pleasure sweeping through him as Harry gently bit and blew on his ears. Yes, he didn’t want to think about it. This argument was done with, and hopefully it would never arise again, if Harry really had thought about what it meant that he’d put his life in such danger. He would much rather think about other things.

Including the fact that in just a few more weeks, it would be the end of April, and the time for their second Walpurgis ritual, the fifth out of thirteen, taking place on the anniversary of the first.

Harry *had* been thinking a lot. The week when he'd barely spoken to Draco and spent his detentions reading stories that barely took up his attention had left him with time to do that.

And he was beginning to think that, if his life was equal in importance to others'—

And if he distressed people this much when he put it in danger, the same way that he would have been distressed if Snape was the one in danger, or Connor, and let's not even talk about the heart-freezing fear he'd felt when Rosier had cast the Lung Domination Curse on Draco—

And if he would become indignant on the behalf of someone who was put off constantly by the Ministry in the way that he had been—

Then perhaps that meant that, when the third letter arrived saying that Elder Juniper could not meet with him to accept his apology yet, and would Harry try again next weekend, he had no obligation to write a reply accepting the new proposed meeting date.

Instead, he wrote one with his Transfiguration book braced on his knee to support the parchment, now and then using a Levitation Charm to hold on to the parchment, and sometimes remembering to use his new left hand. Really, it had been a wonderful thing that Death did for him, when she turned the silver hand to flesh.

Though it would not have been worth the price of your life.

He shook the thought away and bent over the letter again. He highly doubted that Elder Juniper needed to know about his exploits in the Forbidden Forest. What he seemed most interested in so far was the performance Harry had given at the festival after freeing the sirens, and refusing to accept an apology and put the matter behind them once and for all.

Harry answered in the cool tone that he would have advised someone else to show with an offended acquaintance who was being this difficult about settling something important.

April 8th, 1997

Dear Elder Juniper:

I am writing again to offer you an apology for my behavior at the festival that the Minister tried to hold in my honor directly after the vernal equinox. I have done so twice before, wishing to apologize in person, and each time the meetings have fallen through. Now I have received another letter asking me to wait, but specifying no reason that I should have to do so.

I wish to make amends with you, sir, but if we cannot do it face-to-face, the medium of parchment is surely ancient and honorable enough to do so. I hereby say I am sorry yet again, and if you wish to meet with me on the third weekend of the month, then I am available to you.

Sincerely,

Harry vates, Heir of Black.

He felt a bit odd adding that last, but reminding Juniper that he had some claim to an ancient pureblood line—albeit a Dark one, and not a Light one, which Juniper would have respected more—could not hurt.

Draco read it over his shoulder, and pressed his hand down once in approval. Harry sealed it with the Black crest and went to send it by owl. Perhaps this would content Juniper. If nothing else, Harry could not continually make plans for meetings that had to be abandoned, because that meant he didn't have mornings and afternoons free for doing the necessary study to find another way to defeat the Horcruxes or free the thestrals.

“He may know something.”

Aurora frowned at Juniper's head in the fireplace and went on twisting the braid of hair she'd assembled into an Egyptian pattern she'd learned. "And why do you think that?"

Juniper silently held up a letter. Aurora stooped closer to the hearth so she could read it. She frowned more as she did, and sighed at the end. *Suspicion isn't impossible, and I suppose that we couldn't put Harry off forever.*

"And what are you going to do, Elder?" she asked, carefully moving away as the braid threatened to slip out of her hands and trail into the flames.

"Give him his meeting," said Juniper. "It should not harm anything. We are debarred from immediate action, anyway. If I allow him to see my face when he apologizes and see, in turn, the Order of Merlin pinned to his shirt, then I daresay nothing evil will happen."

Aurora bit her lip thoughtfully. "You don't think the Order of Merlin will give him political influence sufficient to counteract what we're planning?"

"Unlikely," said Juniper. "Most of the witnesses to the festival remember his vanishing more than they do the reward. If it's a private meeting and Harry does not announce it again to the newspapers—and why would he, since he is so reserved about claiming such honors for himself?—then the fuss should die naturally. Until we choose to stir it up again, of course."

Aurora caught her breath. Juniper was being more open in his contempt of Harry than he had been when she had seen him last. "Does that mean that you think we must move against him, sir?" Even as she negotiated with Juniper, she had never been sure that he wouldn't announce one day that acting against Harry was impossible and they might as well make the best of a bad situation.

"I think we must," Juniper murmured. "I have studied his political activities over the last several years, Madam Whitestag, and not merely the information that you gave me." Aurora felt a stab of pride, that she had an ally who could take the initiative that way. It was not something that would have occurred to Lisa Addlington or Marvin Gildgrace. "And I see consistent patterns. A fuss emerges, either from one of Harry's mistakes or one of his heroics. He acts embarrassed in the wake of it, and speaks to the newspapers like one who does not know how to make the best of either his notoriety or his fame. Some aspects of his psychology—he desire to hide, for example—became clearer when I studied the records of his parents' trial. His relationship with Albus Dumbledore was hardly something to boast of, either." For a moment, Juniper's face darkened with anger. Aurora knew he was thinking about the disgrace Albus Dumbledore had been to the Light. She kept silent. She was undeclared, so it wasn't her place to comment on Juniper's allegiance. "But it is, in context, good news for us. He was reluctant to strike until the very last moment, even given what the man had done to him. The reports of how he killed Dumbledore are consistent as well. Self-defense."

"And what are the implications that you see for our long-term strategy?" Aurora asked. She knew what ones *she* would draw, but she had been wrong before. She wished to see what Juniper would say.

"He will be reluctant to fight us," said Juniper. "He will be equally reluctant to oppose legal measures directed specifically at *him*. It was the laws against werewolves, including that ill-advised hunting season, that stirred him into anger enough to rebel. He thinks he can weather attacks on himself, and he has little regard for his honor or his pride." He brandished the letter again. "Even with this, which is the first touch of pride I've seen from him, I think it was the multiple refusals that nettled him, not the fact that I refused to meet."

Aurora nodded. Juniper seemed to understand Harry well, and the extra time provided by the missed meetings hadn't revealed any secret legal weapon they could use against Harry—only that they would need the support of either more of the Wizengamot or more of the Light wizards than they currently possessed. "Then I suppose that the apology and the Order of Merlin could do no harm, and might even reassure him that you bear him no ill-will, sir."

Juniper laughed softly. "As indeed I do not. This insult is merely a convenient excuse." He pulled his head back from the fire. "Until our meeting a few days hence, Madam Whitestag."

Aurora bowed to him, and waited until the fire died before she knelt down. The braid she Levitated across the room. It had taken a long time, and included the hair of many people she couldn't get a strand from again, including her own dead children. It would never do to have it burned.

She cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames, and waited patiently until the flames sparked green and cleared, revealing a room paneled in white wood that was really just opulent enough. If Aurora had been a Light witch, she thought she would have wanted her home to look like that.

A house elf at once hurried into the room, and stopped, squeaking and bowing, when it saw her.

Aurora smiled at it. “Would you fetch Madam Apollonis for me, please? Tell her Aurora Whitestag would like to speak with her.”

The letter that arrived back from Elder Juniper, confirming their meeting for the third weekend in April, pleased Harry, but not as much as the letter that arrived a few days later. It was at lunch when the Augurey flew through the window of the Great Hall, squawking awkwardly, and landed on the Slytherin table by planting its head in the mashed potatoes. There was more than one burst of laughter. Harry had to admit that the Irish phoenix was hardly the most graceful bird. This one, hopping back to its feet only to half-tilt and almost step on its own feathered tail, rather reminded him of Tonks.

It at last managed to arrange itself and hold out its leg, and Harry took the envelope and opened it. He was already relearning how to use a living left hand again. So much easier than some of the magic that he’d used to open envelopes and perform other simple tasks before, he thought. He’d even noticed that he felt slightly more alert, as though the permanent Levitation Charm had been a grand drain on his magic and he’d never noticed it.

The letter was in a hand he didn’t recognize, and saluted him by every title the writer could think of. Harry didn’t mind that nearly as much as he thought he would, not when he read the rest of the contents.

My name is Periwinkle Lyrebird. You probably haven’t heard of my family before; we are purebloods, but we fell on hard times several generations ago, and our name was never honored as much as some of the older and more native families’. We have had little but our name and our honor for those several generations—and our house elves. There are several other Irish wizarding families in the same situation.

We had one other thing in common, until recently. That was faith in the patronage and leadership of Cupressus Apollonis. Even if we had found some other powerful wizard willing to lead us, he would have found it difficult to make headway in Ireland against Apollonis. They are simply too powerful, that house. Even when we heard of you, you didn’t seem very interested in Light purebloods as allies unless they could offer you fighters, so we followed Cupressus in silence.

That changed with the alliance meeting that you held last spring, and the news of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. And now we have heard that Cupressus lost control of his daughter. You faced him that day, and yet you walked out alive, and so did the Lady Ignifer. That once would not have happened, when Apollonis was at the height of his strength. He is afraid of you, and you can defy him successfully.

The other poor Light Irish families have appointed me their spokeswitch. What I am prepared to offer you, vates, is our allegiance and the freedom of our house elves in exchange for protection from Cupressus and certain financial considerations for our house elves. We can survive without them. We have been reluctant to give them up because of what they said about our status, but this is a new world, and the concept of status is changing. If you can provide what we ask for, we are yours.

*Sincerely,
Periwinkle Lyrebird.*

Harry could not stop grinning. Millicent read over his shoulder, and then let out a low, impressed whistle. Harry glanced at her. Sometimes—in fact, since the day her father had been captured and taken into the Department of Mysteries—she had acted as if she would prefer to avoid his company, but now she peered at him with bright, challenging eyes.

“And you’ll be accepting their offer, I suppose, Harry?” she drawled.

“Of course.” Harry gave Draco the letter. “I have money that can repay them for their house elves. And that’s a sacrifice I would much rather make, Galleons to avoid infringing on anyone’s free will, rather than—others.” His left hand flickered towards the slowly closing wound on his right arm, rather than outright referring to it.

Millicent raised her eyebrows and nodded. “Did you think you would achieve this many victories in so short a time?” she asked softly.

Harry shook his head, still feeling dazed and happy. If nothing else, this proved that Cupressus’s attempts to intimidate his allies in Ireland and slow Harry’s vates work there would only backlash on him. “No. I hoped that a few house elves *might* be free on their present owners’ conviction by next year. And even if these are still the house elves of my allies, as opposed to people who hear about what the webs have cost and make the decision from their own conscience, it’s more than I expected.” He felt, for a moment, as if a green path were opening in front of him, leading into sunlight, and into a country of no trouble.

It was only a dream, of course, and a moment later he rescued the Augurey from the marmalade and started composing his reply. But things were moving. In spite of setbacks and mistakes, some of which he'd put in his own path, things were moving. They would stumble forward, and they would make it, in the end.

Henrietta often went outside the school grounds to practice the Darkest magic she knew. For one thing, it relieved Minerva of the troubled mind she would have if she had to confront the fact that her Transfiguration professor had—well, certain proclivities for boiled and flayed skin.

For another, the dampening effect of the wards often made her feel like her skin was crawling. The Founders, other than Slytherin, had not wanted Dark Arts practiced in Hogwarts, and Slytherin's influence had long since been purged from most official rooms. Henrietta knew it wasn't true, but she could feel disapproving eyes on her back every time she performed a few mild pain curses. And from what she knew of the Founders' shades Minerva worked with, those disapproving eyes might be literal after all.

There was a third reason as well, but that had been only a hope until today, when Henrietta went into the Forbidden Forest, and thus further from Hogwarts's main grounds than she had been since she arrived. She drew her wand through the air, practicing slashing curses, pain curses, boiling curses, flaying curses, curses that attacked the mind and made it tear out of the skull. She had captured a number of small animals to use as test subjects. When they ran out, she cast a spell that let her feel the pain of plants and continued.

She caught a glimpse of a robe whisking behind a tree as she cast a spell that she'd heard Death Eaters used on raids, one which made the victim sure he was being raped. Of course, it didn't work nearly as well on a tree, but it translated itself into the equivalent pain of violation—boring by grubs, Henrietta thought—and the mere sound of the incantation was revealing. She smiled faintly. She was glad that Harry trusted her enough now to have granted her license, under the Unbreakable Vow she wore, to cast most Dark magic. The Unforgivables were still forbidden her unless she was using them in self-defense, but that wasn't so bad.

She cast another spell. She caught another glimpse of the robe, and then one of dark eyes she knew well.

"You might as well come out, Evan," she called, as the oak's leaves withered and shrank, and faint, keen wails of pain broke across the surface of her mind like lightning bolts across a livid sky.

A long pause, and he came out. He leaned against the tree he'd been hiding behind, his gaze fixed on her face. Henrietta turned to face him, spinning her wand around in one hand.

Evan Rosier. He wasn't as handsome as the Death Eater she'd raped when he came with two others to convert her to Voldemort's service, and to kill her if they could not convert her. He was thinner, for one thing; more than a decade in Azkaban had done him no good there. His skin was gray, and sagged on his face, though that wasn't as noticeable next to the brightness of his eyes and teeth. He looked half-haunted by shadows, the legacy of Dark magic that slowly closed in and made the user's features run and blur. His dark hair was unkempt and shaggy and straggled down his back like a werewolf's ruff.

"Why did you come to me?" he asked her at last, voice softer than she'd heard it.

At least he's smart enough to know that I was seeking him out, and allowed him to stay, instead of simply running into him by accident. Henrietta spun her wand again and smiled. "I believe in fate, Evan," she said. "Don't you? Certain things happen, and they can't be denied. We've faced each other multiple times, and it's never come to a conclusion. It will have to, you know, in the end. One of us will have to kill the other. We're Dark wizards—well, a Dark wizard and a Dark witch. It's what we *do*."

"Or we might kill each other," said Evan. He came a step forward. Henrietta could see the madness smoldering in the backs of his eyes, but for now it was banked, like a well-tended fire. He was interested enough in what she was saying to focus on her, not on the scraps of poetry chattering in his mind.

Henrietta laughed. "That's true. That might happen." She studied him for a moment, eyes narrowed. "Have you been eating, Evan?" she asked critically. "I wouldn't want to think you'd lose to me because of poor nutrition. There's no grace in defeating an opponent who can't fight."

"I don't remember."

“The madness is advancing in you, isn’t it?” Henrietta asked. She had never been sure whether Evan’s insanity came from a specific incident in his life or from using too much Dark magic or from genetic predisposition, but it did seem to have got worse in the last few years. Azkaban would not have helped that, either, though Severus said Evan had wanted to go to the prison and experience the touch of the Dementors.

“It is.” Evan leaned on the tree again, and studied her. “I dream about the night you raped me. When I’m not dreaming of my Lord and what he did to me, or of Harry and what he did to me.”

“What did Harry do to you?” Henrietta could feel her eyebrows crawling up her forehead.

“Set me free,” said Evan. “Cage me, kill me, succumb to me, but do not set me free. I am wild, and wild creatures *bite*.”

Henrietta could hear the madness growing in his voice again. She suspected she would get neither her final duel nor useful information from him today. His brief lucid interval was over. “You dream about the night I raped you?” she asked, in the final hopes of getting *something* useful.

“Yes. In the words of the poet, ‘Being so caught up, so mastered by the brute blood of the air, did she put on his knowledge with his power, before the indifferent beak could let her drop?’” Evan shook his head. “I received only one piece of knowledge from you, Henrietta, and it was how to hate.”

“I thought you hated before that.”

Evan threw his head back and howled his laughter, and Henrietta winced. His voice was cracking. He really had been living in the wild like a werewolf, eating nuts and leaves, probably, and little else. “I hated,” he said. “Everything. But the world was a game. After that, I hated *you*, and I had opponents.” He twisted his head to the side and watched her like an owl for a moment. “I can accept your view of fate. We shall meet and kill each other someday. But not today.”

“Not today,” Henrietta agreed softly, and then felt in her robe pocket. Evan was back around the tree in a moment, but Henrietta finished lifting out the thing she held anyway: a raspberry pie she’d had the house elves at Hogwarts make for her. It was no longer hot, but still warm. She set it carefully on the forest floor. “This is for you, Evan, and it has no poison in it.”

He put his head around the tree and watched her. Henrietta held his eyes for a moment. So much madness in them—burned to a low ember right now, but it would rear back up and blaze like a wildfire in the end. She would have what she wanted.

She Apparated back to Hogwarts, but she saw him come forward, slowly, step by step, boots slipping in the mud, to accept the pie.

“Thank you for coming, Narcissa.”

His wife raised her eyebrows as she sat down in the chair opposite his. Lucius knew just how she would cross her legs, how she would fold her hands on top of them, how her blonde hair would coil around her neck when she turned her head. Mannerisms like that did not change in a few months apart. “I wish I knew why I had agreed to come, Lucius. What is this momentous news you have for me?” Her voice was cool and hard, like frost on stone, and Lucius knew that it was right to say this to her, if only for the pleasure of melting that frost for a moment.

“I am revoking the disownment,” he said casually. “Draco is once more a Malfoy, and the legal and blood heir to the family’s assets.”

Narcissa’s face drained of color, and she actually let out a sharp, “What?” before she regained control of herself. Then she said, “I will believe this when I see it, Lucius. You would never yield up your pride like this, unless Draco had given you a similar concession or a greater one, and I know that he has not.”

“Why not?” Lucius asked, to see if she would say what he thought she would say.

Sure enough, she did. “He would have consulted with me before he took such a drastic step.”

Lucius nodded. “Yes, he would have. But circumstances have changed, Narcissa. I made the decision to disown Draco because I believed that Harry’s rebellion was doomed, and that Draco was not strong enough to be the Malfoy heir I wanted him to be. Now I believe that Harry has succeeded in most of his goals—the most important ones—and Draco has proven himself strong enough.”

Narcissa snorted at him. “And it only took you until four months after Draco’s Declaration to realize this?” It was the sixteenth of April, and thus slightly less than four months since the Declaration at Midwinter, but Lucius decided that he would be kind and refrain from pointing out her error.

“I wished to be sure it would last, and not be a simple slip into error again,” said Lucius. “Instead, I find that Draco grows stronger and more worthy of being my heir every day since.” And that was so, if what he heard from his contacts in the Ministry and in Hogwarts was true. Lucius could admit he felt pride, if pride like a mountaintop, pride like Narcissa’s voice.

“I wish to see the papers confirming this,” Narcissa said, her eyes glimmering frozen lakes.

Lucius had just received the documents from his solicitor that morning, in fact. He fetched them from the study, amused but not surprised to see that Narcissa was keeping her wand, hidden in her sleeve, trained on him the entire time, and gave them into her hands. She also cast spells to check them for contact poison before she actually grasped and looked them over, he noted.

Narcissa shuffled through them, and then sat back and stared at him, as if trying to grasp his purpose.

“What is the matter?” Lucius asked, deciding it was at least worth asking the question. He could not predict every nuance of Narcissa’s behavior. He had given up on doing that. He *did* think that this move was transparent enough that she should accept it for what it was: his attempt to make sure he had an heir who could take over the Malfoy properties and monies. That she did not know why he would want one now was not a problem. No one would know.

“Why, Lucius?” she asked quietly. “Why the disownment in the first place, if you are doing this now? Why reverse it, when you did it in the first place?”

“That is information I might share with you if you were to agree to return to your proper place,” said Lucius, grasping and holding her gaze. “At my table, in the chair beside mine, in my bed.”

Narcissa’s lip curled. Very slightly, of course, but it was answer enough.

Lucius nodded. “Then I shall not tell you, Narcissa. I *will*, if you wish, swear under Veritaserum that the Malfoy legacy is not a poisoned apple. I leave Draco no deadly bargains, no crippling debts. He shall have the fortune and the majority of the houses as whole as I can transfer them.”

“Why?” Narcissa asked, but she whispered it this time.

He looked her in the eye, and ached with the desire to reveal the truth to her. But that would be foolishness. She was not of him, not now. She was a proud and independent and beautiful creature, light and pale as a white leopard in the winter sunlight. She was loyal to Draco, and not to him, and it was his own fault that had made her so.

At long last, Lucius thought, he was at peace with himself and his mistakes. He had scorned the emotion before, but it was possible that Light wizards and other proponents of conscience were clever when they spoke of it.

“Farewell, Narcissa,” he said, and pressed the documents into her hands. “You may take these with you, if you like. Show them to Draco. Discuss them with your own solicitor, to make sure they are genuine.”

She rose from her chair, still staring at him, and retreated out of the room in a slow, baffled way. Lucius waited until he heard the whoosh of the Floo that told him she had gone.

Then he turned back to his study, to resume his reading.

The simple fact of the matter was that he knew he would fall, now, soon. The truth of his crimes would come out. When it did, Lucius could see only three possible outcomes.

Harry would drain his magic for Lucius’s crimes against his parents and for violating the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow.

Hawthorn Parkinson would kill him for his part in betraying her to the Unspeakables as a werewolf.

He would flee, and survive.

The last path was the one he was working to make come true. Yes, it was humiliating, but he would rather be alive and humiliated, as he had been immediately after the Dark Lord's fall, than dead or infected. He had built up what he would need to escape. A small part of the Malfoy fortune was invested in a separate account at Gringotts, enough to sustain him. And the only Malfoy property not going to Draco was a small warded house that only a member of the oldest living generation of Malfoys could enter. Lucius had no siblings. Draco would be able to enter it only if and when he died.

Harry could, of course, potentially track him to that house and try to drain the wards, but Lucius did not think such an action would be beneficial for his son-in-law. The Malfoys and the Blacks had intermarried before he and Narcissa had, several generations back. Finvarra Black, whose mother was a Malfoy, had gone into one of the pictures hanging in Silver-Mirror and come out with something small and fierce and intelligent and irascible from another world. She had buried it beneath the house Lucius had chosen, where it had slept since. Waking it would be—uncomfortable for Harry.

He remembered what his father had taught him, however. Family was *always* more important than the individual. He had to have someone to take care of the properties and fortune he would leave behind.

And he had only one blood child.

Draco it was.

Lucius nodded once, then sat down and picked up the book that he thought might be his salvation, should Hawthorn come hunting him. *Surviving The Teeth of Destruction: What To Do When You've Killed a Werewolf's Mate or Child.*

Indigena snorted as she watched Falco fly away. She didn't know the whole of what he'd come to talk to her Lord about this time, since they had, as usual, sent her away during the meat of the conversation, but she knew the majority of his plan. He would attack on Walpurgis, with the wild Dark behind him, and he imagined this would be enough to win the battle with Harry. Or perhaps he imagined it would be enough to make Harry Declare for Light. Indigena didn't think that *Falco* knew what he truly wanted any more. He had simply come far enough along the road, and felt responsible enough for the British wizarding world, that he couldn't fathom abandoning his supposed plan. Indigena wondered idly who would actually get hurt on Walpurgis. Perhaps both Falco and Harry would survive it, though she hoped not.

"Indigena."

She descended the stairs into her Lord's lair, and paused when she realized that he was sitting up, the flesh-snake wound around his waist, its eyes fixed on her. "My lord?" she asked tentatively. He looked more lively than usual, but that could be deceiving. Sometimes he looked the wildest right before he collapsed and had to retreat into his own mind due to the hole in his magical core.

"We will be moving tonight, Indigena," said her Lord, and his tongue flickered across his lipless mouth, "to the sanctuary that Parkinson prepared for us."

Indigena knew she couldn't hide her surprise, so she didn't try. "May I ask why?" she said. "My Lord?" she added hastily.

"It soon will not matter that he knows where we are," said Voldemort, and chuckled, a sound like scales rasping on stone. "He will not survive Walpurgis Night. My heir will destroy him. And this burrow is a potential danger to us now, after the attack on the ring's house. Harry may return and think to look for us near my *father's* house." There was a depth of hatred in *father* that nearly matched his hatred for Harry, Indigena thought; it would not surprise her if he had used Tom Riddle's death to split part of his soul into the Slytherin ring Horcrux. "As well, the accumulated magical energies in this burrow are making my meditation difficult. My hand will soon be ready to move, my Thorn Bitch, and I wish to be in a place more special and symbolic to me than this when that happens. I was conceived here, but my mortal birth was in London, and my truest birth in the place we go. I wish to sojourn there."

"Yes, my Lord," said Indigena, thinking, for a moment, of the difficulties of transporting Voldemort to his new home more than anything else. Then his words crashed home into her ears, and she looked up sharply. "My Lord? Does this mean that we are almost *ready*?"

"We are, my Indigena." His snake hissed to echo the Dark Lord's laughter. "My spy has given me much interesting information on the state of Hogwarts in the last few days, as much as he ever gave me about Woodhouse. No one thinks of poor Lord Voldemort any more, no one thinks him a threat. And Harry's politics are becoming much too settled as things are. And my control of my hands and feet grows stronger every day. When I strike, when I take the first of those he has loved, it will be little

more than a month and a half hence.”

Early June, Indigena translated, and trembled a bit. “And I shall have the part in the strike that you promised me, my Lord?” she whispered.

“Of course, my dear one. It was your plan.” He smiled at her.

Indigena closed her eyes, and tried not to feel overwhelmed. Her only weapon for so long—she thought of the books she had read over and over—had been parchment. Now she would finally take up her wand in her Lord’s cause.

She was a bit sorry she would cast the wizarding world into screaming chaos when she did, but it came not from any personal animosity, but an honor debt. There were few wizards alive who would not understand that, if they truly thought about it.

“Go, Indigena,” Voldemort said, obviously knowing from her face what she needed. “Walk in your garden. Say farewell to the flowers there.”

Out she went, from the dense, dark burrow into the open air and the declining sunlight. It was nearly sunset on the third weekend in April, and she stood there, just breathing, watching as the day, slightly longer than yesterday, depended and then dropped. The scent of the tame soil, the living soil, the strong soil, came in at her nose, and birds chirped somewhere far away.

She had seen in the *Daily Prophet* that morning, when she went in disguise to a small wizarding village, that Harry had met with Elder Juniper of the Wizengamot and received the Order of Merlin. She had smiled then, because she was fond of Harry. She had thought it would be the best news she received all day.

Now it was not, and the endless waiting was nearly done at last.

She breathed, and thrilled to the sense of being alive.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Two: Day of Glory

Harry studied the ring closely, then nodded and put it in his pocket. It would do. If he had done what he was supposed to do in the first place, and studied the joining rituals individually, as Draco had done, then he probably could have found something even better, but at least he’d been paying attention this time. “Thank you, Connor.”

His brother hesitated for a moment, staring at him. That made Harry, in turn, hesitate to leave the sixth-year boys’ bedroom in Gryffindor Tower. “What’s wrong?”

Connor swallowed, then said, “Are you ready for this? Both tomorrow and—what the night will bring?”

Harry smiled reassuringly. He’d told Connor about the message he’d received from Scrimgeour a month ago now, warning him that his nameless source of information on Falco believed he would attack on Walpurgis Night. Since Harry also believed that, and he didn’t think he could have kept battle preparations concealed from Connor anyway, he’d shared the information with his brother. Connor normally wouldn’t attend Walpurgis Night given his Declaration and the fact that Harry was sure the prophecy meant for Draco to stand beside him and fend off Falco’s attack, but he had offered to come with them, now, several times. “I’m ready, Connor. A year ago? No, I don’t think I would have been.” It made him smile more widely, to think how nervous he’d been about that Walpurgis ritual, his and Draco’s first. “I’ve had time to get used to it now.”

“If you’re sure you don’t need me,” said Connor, with a tiny nod.

“I would like you along,” said Harry. “But this celebration is supposed to be a private time for Dark wizards, and the ritual—well, it will be shared, but Draco and I need to be in the center of it.”

Connor cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “I’m not *entirely* looking forward to the sharing part.”

“I hope you will,” said Harry vaguely, and then waved his hand and departed from the Tower. Connor watched him with intent eyes all the way to the door, but made no other effort to keep him there.

Harry stopped walking once he was a few floors down from the Tower and examined the ring in his hand. This ritual, the Giving of Gifts, said that Harry needed to return the gesture Draco had made for him the year before, and give Draco some sign or signal

of their partnership—ideally, an heirloom from his family line. Given that Harry had rejected the Potter name and his mother was Muggleborn, he was not entirely sure what to do about it. Regulus had offered him Black artifacts, of course, but given that Draco was half-Black himself, it had seemed vaguely incestuous. This part of the dance was about the joining of different facets of the partners' selves, not the same ones.

In the end, he had asked Connor if he could look at some rings inherent to the Potter line, and had chosen a golden one etched with lions and set with a topaz. What he planned to do with it would, he hoped, alter it enough to fulfill the confines of the ritual.

He ducked into an alcove as a prefect's footsteps scraped by, waited until she'd moved away, and then snapped the topaz out of its setting. He put it on a windowsill, spent a few moments composing and deepening himself, and opened his eyes to focus his gaze on the ring.

The gold began to soften and sag as he watched, turning slowly molten, but not hot. Just—soft. Harry held up his hands and parted them, and the ring spun in the middle of them, losing its shape, dripping in strands of metal that floated up to touch his fingers like the silk of a spiderweb. He moved his hands over each other, and thought of what he wanted to do.

He was becoming more comfortable working with his magic this way, the way that Lord-level magic was supposed to work. Jing-Xi had confirmed as much when he asked her. He could act through traditional spells, but they sometimes made inadequate casings for his power or wouldn't let him achieve the effect he wanted. Outside those spells, he had to use the hammer of his will to drive himself forward, rather as someone did when completing the Animagus transformation. It was tiring, but it was also more likely to result in what he wished.

Now he wished to use the gold of the Potter ring as a base to create something that would be unique to him, still an artifact of his family line, but, more to the point, an artifact of *him*. He could see the general shape of the ring in his mind, but deciding the symbols to put on it was harder.

Then he smiled, and presented the image of the ring in his mind's eye, and pushed towards it.

His magic surrounded him, not spreading out around his body like a pool, but thrumming through his veins. Harry could feel it building as pressure behind his eyeballs, in fact, a steady impress of song and blood and violent motion. He was climbing a mountain. It could be done, but it made his breath come short and the urge to vomit increase. And all through the contrary sensations, he had to keep seeing the ring, imagining, thinking of it.

Press, and suddenly the overwhelming urge came to him to clasp his hands together, so he did.

A blaze of white light gathered all the golden strands up, and Harry, squinting, thought he could see a small, hollow sphere forming in the middle of them. Threads clasped each other and interwove. If he was right, the new ring would not be a solid band, as the other had been, but a twined one, a braided one. That was all right, if he could still have what he wanted.

His magic surged up beneath and carried him. Harry felt a moment's thrill. He worked in partnership with his power, not commanded it, when it was like this—the way that Jing-Xi had told him it should be. His power carried him like a horse, and while he could direct it with reins and halter, there was still a great deal of strength and speed under him that might decide to do something else at any moment.

Kick, and soar, and descend, and then they were in a new realm, so that Harry felt as if small pieces of himself were being woven into the ring. He accepted the feeling. He didn't know if it were literal, but if it was, it just meant that the gift would be even more part of himself, and even more fit for Draco. The gold had been held by Potters, but reforged by him, who had no last name.

The strands shimmered and shook and grew slimmer. Harry felt tiny points sprouting from them, tiny indentations pressed into them, tiny parts of them extend and wrap with other tiny parts. The sensation increased until he didn't know if he had his own body any more, or if he were part of this ring, made for the fourth finger on Draco's right hand.

And then he was back in his body, spun out, dizzy, staring down at the new ring that lay in his left palm. Every single braided strand was a lynx, slim body twisted around, reaching ahead with outstretched paws to grasp the one in front and trailing a tail behind for the next to hold, heads lifted and wise ears pricked. The setting for the topaz still waited at the top.

Harry solemnly snapped the stone back into place, and then slid it into his pocket. He knew what he was supposed to do in the Giving of Gifts from having actually studied the ritual this time. Unfortunately, Draco also did, and would be angling for an early glimpse of his gift if at all possible. Harry didn't intend to give him one.

Try as he might, Draco had not seen Harry's gift for him before they went to bed, which meant that he awakened on the morning of the Giving of Gifts not knowing what it would be.

He had lain awake last night debating what it could be, when he wasn't worried about the battle with Falco that Harry believed would come after nightfall and how they were going to accomplish it. There was so little that could count as an artifact of Harry's family. Had he chosen something Black? Something Snape? Well, come to that, Professor Snape probably didn't have any heirlooms, either, since his father had been a Muggle—Draco felt his lip curl, but it was mostly habit—and his mother had probably sold anything she had to help herself survive.

He lay next to Harry, and fought to keep from stirring. The moment he made any strong movement, the ritual would begin, and he wanted he and Harry to begin that motion together.

Harry opened his eyes at last, and smiled agreeably, sleepily, at him. "Good morning," he whispered, and grasped and kissed the back of Draco's hand. Draco gave him a smile that he hoped was coy, but Harry laughed, even though, without his glasses, Draco knew he couldn't see it well.

"You'll receive your gift in a short time, Draco," he said.

"You won't actually wait until noon, will you?" Draco hated how disappointed his voice sounded, but the requirement of waiting until noon to present this gift wasn't a major part of the ritual—more advice, like the terms that said the betrothed couple should wait until the end of the dance to share a bed. He had assumed Harry would disobey the rule.

"In this case, I want to." Harry considered him solemnly. "You don't really mind, do you?"

Draco swallowed an objection and shook his head. Harry was supposed to be the one guiding and leading in this ritual, since Draco had guided and led in the one last year, and had been the one to actually propose the three-year dance. He had shown an inclination to read up on it in the last few weeks and actually research what he was supposed to do, which had made Draco satisfied in a way that nothing else so far in their courtship had.

And he had kept his life safe for a month, as he had promised. Harry really had made an attempt to learn his lesson this time.

"Good." Harry's face relaxed, and he kissed Draco one more time, on the cheek. "Ready?"

Draco nodded slowly. His brain felt larger than normal, like liquid sloshing around in his skull. He and Harry inched away from each other, and then stood up and climbed out of bed at the same moment.

Draco felt the Giving of Gifts begin. His mind went leaping out from what seemed to be the sides of his head, through his ears, curling like pearly liquid across their bedroom and into the Slytherin common room. He caught blurred glimpses of familiar faces, the fire, the dungeon walls, and then his perceptions flattened and streamed upward, lashing viciously into place.

Draco heard Harry give a slight moan, and guessed that his mind had stretched further, since none of Draco's family were actually in the school. He put out a blind hand, and Harry caught and squeezed it. Draco leaned against him, gasping a little, his brain reeling as he tried to adjust to being mostly in his own body but also *there*, in someone else's head, with random flashes of their reality intruding at random times.

This part of the ritual was designed to link the joined partners to their in-laws, and smooth out any problems between them by letting them share each other's mindset for a day. Both Connor and Draco's parents had accepted that this would happen, Draco reminded himself dimly.

He had not known how *intense* it would be. In the back of his mind, he supposed he had thought it would be like his own possession, where he could control what was happening. But he retained awareness of his own body and position. And he couldn't control it when a pair of eyes opened and stared at a canopy of red and gold.

Connor rolled over and sat up. Draco gasped a little at the feeling of an alien body, but more at the content of his thoughts.

He was—

It was so simple, his world. It was much like Draco's world, before he had changed his mind about certain fundamental parts of it, like the innate superiority of purebloods. Connor knew whom he liked and whom he disliked, and now that he was not playing the part of the Boy-Who-Lived, he saw little need to extend his sympathies unless he had to. At the same time, it was fringed with

soft and moving shadows, what he called the noticing, which meant he picked up on other people's moods and preoccupations and started seeing them as more important, because they existed in the world, too, even as he did.

It wasn't something Connor was comfortable with, since he suspected it meant he was becoming an adult, and he tried to hide from it whenever possible.

The perceptions ended for the moment, and Draco staggered, leaning hard on Harry. A moment later, he opened his eyes and peered at his partner.

Harry had his eyes open already, and gave him a strained smile. "Ready?" he asked, holding out his arm. They'd both showered last night, so as to be able not to waste time this morning, or risk falling over in the loo from a sudden and dizzying burst of another person's thoughts.

"I'm going to be appreciating your brother before the day is out," Draco said in a faint tone, resting his hand on Harry's arm. "I'm not sure that I could ever be ready for that."

Harry laughed, and something in the laugh made Draco turn to look at him. "Are *you* all right?" he asked.

"Seeing through your father's eyes right now," Harry murmured, striding across the bedroom and managing to open the door more, Draco thought, by memory than anything else. "It's very strange. I never realized how much we do think alike, or at least how much we thought alike before I changed my mind and rejected my training."

"He's a Dark pureblood," said Draco simply. "Your parents largely raised you like one, Harry, whether or not they meant to. That's why we got along so well at first."

"No, that was your doing."

Draco started to respond, but stopped at the dazzling smile Harry was giving him. It was a sidelong thing, from the corner of his mouth, and Harry's eyes were still filled with whatever he was seeing of Lucius and Narcissa, and it was absent, and it was loving, and it was the most beautiful expression Harry had ever shown him. It accepted Draco's place in his past, even, instead of blaming him for the persistent sticking to Harry's side he'd done in their first two years.

Draco decided he could wait until noon and endure the perceptions of Connor Potter after all.

Connor chewed a crust of toast thoughtfully, and wondered if Draco could feel it when he did that.

He was feeling some effects from the ritual, too, but they were smaller than what Draco would be experiencing. Now and then the memory of a pureblood dance he had never known would return to him, and it was like something he had only temporarily forgotten. Once or twice he had had the dizzying feeling of sitting at the wrong table, and there was flashes of excitement that he refused to look at much further.

If this helped Draco, it was all to the good, as far as Connor was concerned. He had done more to accept his brother-in-law so far than Draco had done to accept him. The Giving of Gifts might help Draco learn to live with him.

He ate another piece of toast and sneaked a glance at his brother. Harry had said he would be fine, both with the ring and the fight with Falco tonight. Connor was not sure. He would have liked to have been there to help.

Except...

Well, he couldn't. He was Declared Light, and he could feel the hovering Dark of Walpurgis as a faint, indistinct threat when he felt it at all. He wouldn't be welcome at whatever celebration Draco and Harry would attend, and which Falco planned to attack. This ritual, the Giving of Gifts, was the only thing he had ever known in detail about what Harry did on this night.

An elbow poked him in the side. Connor turned to Hermione and blinked intelligently, especially when he saw that Hermione was still buried in her book and had no reason for poking him.

"Ginny's asked you to pass the marmalade twice now, Connor," Hermione pointed out.

"Sorry." Connor handed the jar down the table, and Ginny nodded at him before smearing it over her toast. His gaze went straight

back to Harry and Draco as if nailed there, though, and he knew why.

He knew why Harry concerned himself with Walpurgis so much. He might not have been a Dark wizard, but he had a commitment to celebrating with them because he hung between both Dark and Light. That should mean that he could come to Light celebrations as well, though.

Now Connor just had to think of a holiday he'd like to share with his brother. Their birthday wouldn't work, even though it *was* near the old celebration of Lammas, because that was the day of a joining ritual between Harry and Draco.

Midsummer might do, he decided slowly. He had read a little about Midsummer traditions last year, before Peter had decided it was more important that he study other things. And Merlin knew that Harry could use better memories of that day. Losing his hand on it one year and fighting a battle the next was not guaranteed to make him like it.

Connor hummed under his breath, pleased with himself. He hoped that Draco could feel the pleasure, and knew the cause of it. Just because he liked Draco now, and had accepted that the other boy would play a phenomenally large part in Harry's life, didn't mean he had to stop teasing him.

Harry ran a hand through his hair and shook his head as he and Draco headed towards the outer courtyard.

He had learned more from Lucius's mind than he would ever have suspected. The man really *was* going to make Draco his heir again, something Harry and Draco had both assumed was only a joke when Narcissa told them about it, papers notwithstanding. Harry had not tried to find out why—Lucius had only agreed to participate in the ritual if Harry did not probe too deeply into his mind and his secrets, so he was floating on the surface, away from anything Lucius did not want him to know—but it was real.

He had changed.

And his world was colder and dimmer than Harry had ever suspected it was, or, where bright, was lit only by the kind of light that gleamed on and through icebergs. Harry could not help feeling a bit sorry for him. Family and pride and power were everything, tinted, a little, by love for that family and the respect for power that Draco had told him about, or warmed to sea-blue or soft green by some unexpectedly philosophical thoughts like the difference between power, strength, and might. Harry had a much better idea now of what it had done to Lucius when Narcissa left him, and when Draco turned his back on him to follow Harry.

Not that that made those things any less Lucius's own fault, of course.

He and Draco stopped in the middle of the courtyard, and turned to face each other. Harry looked around. Though he knew the wild Dark was hunting behind the stars, humming in readiness for its descent and the Walpurgis celebration tonight, the overwhelming impression he received was one of sunlight. The clouds were trotting swiftly as chariots towards the west after an early rain, and the sun's weak flower in the midst of that was the stronger for its setting, not at all diminished.

It was right, Harry knew, turning back to Draco. The Giving of Gifts opened a new year and turned the old year back on itself. It insisted that the partner who had been more passive last Walpurgis take the lead this time, and if Dark had been worshipped, now was the time of Light.

They were wise, those ancient wizards, Harry thought, as he pulled the golden, lynx-made ring out of his robe pocket. *They knew that both Light and Dark have a place in our lives, even if they were Dark themselves. I wish the people now alive had one tenth as much wisdom.*

Draco frankly gaped on seeing the ring. "Where did you get that?" he whispered.

Harry merely smiled at him. The words he was about to speak, adapted from a set of ritual phrases he'd found in one of Draco's books, would give him the answer.

"The gold comes from my family," he said. "The family of blood and birth, the Potter line. But I made the ring." He paused a moment to let Draco imagine the magic that must have gone into that, then held it up, so that if Draco had missed the lynxes that made them up, he could see them now. "The lynx is associated with keen sight, and with guardianship," he said. "May I never lack in either duty towards you."

He leaned forward and slipped the ring around the fourth finger of Draco's right hand. His own silver ring, a Black heirloom, shimmered brightly. Draco stood looking down at the gift for a moment, in a daze.

Then he looked up swiftly and reached out for Harry, grasping his shoulders and pulling him into a kiss. Harry resisted, until he could guide it for himself, and choose exactly how hard their tongues and lips should meet.

He felt a tender protectiveness, less frantic than the fear he'd felt for Draco's life in Rosier's hands but nearly as strong, surge up in him. He could guard Draco, then, and it didn't have to be a matter of preventing him from doing what he wanted to do, or exercising tyranny over him. What he did was not compulsion. If Harry took the dominant position at times, that did not mean that he was ruling others inappropriately, or that he had become a Lord. Sometimes, he was the stronger one and better-suited to protect and defend, that was all.

His wonder at the realization was such that he almost missed Draco saying hoarsely, "Tease."

Harry raised a brow, and then realized Draco was panting, flushed, more affected by the simple kiss than Harry was. Harry smiled. *Well. He should be, since I'm the guide right now.*

"No tease," he said brightly. "Just thinking about myself right now, as well as you." He'd done that last weekend, too, when he'd met with Elder Juniper and said he would be making his acceptance of the Order of Merlin public, which he thought had taken the older wizard by surprise. And that hadn't damaged him, or made him evil. The feeling that filled him right then was such that he had to keep from bouncing on his toes as he reminded Draco, "When nightfall comes, then you can choose to go to bed with me if you really want to."

To his surprise, Draco immediately shook his head. "No," he murmured. "We have a battle to fight, you and I. I helped you face Dumbledore, and I'm going to face Falco with you. But I'll think of some other gift to give you before we go, Harry."

Harry gently touched his cheek. "Good."

They turned and went back into the school. Draco kept studying the ring on his finger. Harry continued to expect some comment along the lines of gold being a Gryffindor color, but apparently the gold was also rich enough—or the craftsmanship of Harry's magic was beautiful enough—to impress him.

Narcissa stood gazing thoughtfully into the fire. She had come to stay with Regulus in Number Twelve Grimmauld Place for the nonce, which translated to "until her cousin was able to sleep without potions." Regulus had sulkily insisted he was fine. Harry's quiet talk with Narcissa had said otherwise, and Narcissa was inclined to believe Harry, on the balance of the evidence.

Right now, though, Regulus had been napping for an hour, with nary a nightmare to his name, and that left Narcissa free to think and reason through the many things that this day meant to her.

In a few short hours, she would be going to a Walpurgis celebration—but not a normal one, for they all expected Falco Parkinson to interrupt halfway through. Harry would have his allies there to defend him, but none knew if they could, given the presence of the prophecy.

In a few short hours, she might be facing battle with a Dark Lord, a man she could have been swearing allegiance to under other circumstances.

In a few short hours, her son's fifth joining ritual would be done, binding him and Harry together virtually for life. Someone else could still interfere, in the sense of proposing marriage or joining to one of the partners, until the Halloween ritual—as the seventh of the thirteen, it was the fulcrum on which the others swung—but Narcissa considered Harry her son-in-law already.

In a few short hours, she would lose her sense of what went on behind Harry's eyes, which the Giving of Gifts had currently inspired.

She leaned her head on the mantle and closed her eyes. When she did, then she could catch odd pulses of Harry's thoughts, fragments of his consciousness whirring through her own like startled birds. She doubted that Harry had looked as deeply into her own head, or wanted to look. He had no problems with her as he did with Lucius. He would think he understood her already.

Narcissa at least hoped that he had seen she loved him.

But she used her lesser access to his thoughts to probe while she could, to understand.

Broken webs and burned bridges and a mind rebuilt from scratch several times were her dominant impressions so far. And so was a sense of self-worth that pranced on the edge of an abyss. Narcissa wondered if the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, or the werewolves, or others who depended on Harry for strength and guidance, realized how very fragile their *vates* was at times.

She had been grateful before, passionately grateful, that Draco had Harry. He was what Draco had wanted, the boy, and then the man, for whom Narcissa had taken risks, and the cause and the person for whom Draco had pushed himself to become more than a small seed growing in his father's shadow. Draco was grander and finer than he ever would have been if he had not met Harry. So Narcissa believed.

And now she was just as passionately grateful that Harry had Draco. Neither of them was necessarily strong on their own; her son, her beloved son, could collapse into a spoiled brat, and Harry into a pile of shards. But together, at least, they supported each other like a pair of entwined trees.

Not that the battle, and Harry's existence in general, and thus Draco's existence, did not still seem like dancing on a volcano.

"Dark, keep them safe," Narcissa whispered, and would have liked to believe that somewhere she heard a great wolf howl in answer.

Draco had decided on his gift for Harry a few hours before nightfall, and it was torture to wait patiently until they had finished dinner in the Great Hall and were on their way back to the Slytherin common room to give it to him. He tugged gently at Harry's hand, drawing him towards a sheltered alcove, and Harry went without question. Draco hid his eye-roll. For the most part, Harry had handled the demands of the Giving of Gifts well. He should know better than to simply give in when someone else hauled on him, though—or at least, when Draco hauled on him.

"What is it?" Harry asked, as he turned and faced Draco across the small expanse of stone floor between them.

"There's something you should know," said Draco, and wished he had his wand out to hold and make himself feel better. The consciousness that they were going to battle in a few hours, accentuated by the uneasiness that all Dark wizards felt on this day of the wild Dark, put him on edge. Of course, he would probably have simply twirled the wand in his hand and revealed his own nervousness. "Something I certainly never guessed before today, so I couldn't have told it to you."

By now, Harry's eyebrows had risen all the way, and his mouth had tightened with concern. "Draco," he whispered. "What is it?"

Draco met his eyes, and realized Harry thought he was about to say something awful. Of course, he wouldn't stain the day of their glory in such a way, but Harry didn't know that; awful gifts, home truths, were just as legitimate a gift as any other kind in this ritual.

He leaned forward and kissed Harry gently, then pulled back before it could be seen as violating the constraints of the ritual. "It's nothing bad," he said. "Just—unexpected."

Harry motioned for him to go on.

"I think your brother's all right," Draco muttered.

Harry responded with a great peal of laughter richer than any Draco had heard from him in months. Draco managed to pout, the way Harry would think he had to in the wake of being laughed at, although he wanted to smile, or perhaps stare in fascination. Harry leaned forward again and kissed him on the nose, then enveloped him in a hug.

"Connor caught me after Charms to say something of the same kind," he said. "I'm very happy that you can both get along, Draco."

In the simple statement, Draco heard an ocean's worth of relief, and he sighed himself, resting his face gently against Harry's neck. Harry would get to have what he should always have had: a loving family. And Draco and Connor would make some effort to get along, since they were both part of it.

Harry might not be able to express that in words. It was all right. Draco knew how he felt.

They stood there a moment longer, and then heard Snape's quick, hurried footsteps. They broke apart just as he came around the corner and stopped on seeing them with a jerk that made his robes swirl behind him.

“Do you both have your wands?” he asked them.

“Yes, Severus,” Harry said, though Draco knew for a fact that he mostly preferred to work without a wand now. “Are you ready?”

Snape inclined his head. He would not have let Harry go to battle alone, Draco thought, no matter how much he might hate the uncontrolled nature of the Walpurgis celebrations.

“Then we go,” said Harry, and started towards the common room again. Draco followed just behind him. Not really noticing what he was doing any more than he had noticed the smile this afternoon, Harry reached out and put an arm around his shoulders, tugging him towards him.

Draco could feel Snape’s stare. He put his head up and ignored it. He was quite happy to walk within Harry’s protection for a short time before fighting beside him, if only because of what it promised for the end of their ritual and their future.

And we will have a future. I say so.

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Chapter Eighty-Three: Night of Terror

Falco came from the sky, with the Dark running behind him.

It had taken the form of a huge black wolf, which Falco supposed was as acceptable as any other. He was a Dark Lord now, and Dark Lords should find pleasure in ravaging beasts—and this wolf resembled a werewolf more than a wild, natural creature—and the color black. That he could not take much pleasure from them was a failing in him. But he fully intended to die tonight anyway. The plan was that he would not die until he had forced Harry to Declare for Light.

And that plan, itself, was simple. Falco would inflict a wound on Harry that he needed more than his own magic to heal. To draw on such a source of power, he would have to reach for either Light or Dark, and the Dark would be fully occupied helping Falco. The Light would have to enter the world, and for it to do so on Walpurgis Night would require either a sacrifice, such as Harry had offered of his phoenix last Midwinter, or a Declaration. He knew which one Harry was more likely to choose.

There were several things that could go wrong. Falco did not intend to let them go wrong. If nothing else, the Dark would help him, such as destroying those spells of lesser power that Harry might try to use. It had taken the form of not just a wolf, but one with his own green eyes, showing him that it honored him.

Falco glanced at the wolf one more time, and then turned swiftly back to stare.

For a moment, just a moment, he had thought there was a silver lightning bolt cutting the intense black fur of the wolf’s forehead. The mark resembled the scar on Harry’s brow too much for Falco’s comfort.

Then he realized the mark came from a shroud of silver light the wolf was pulling with it, drawing strength from the stars and the dark spaces between them where their beams wandered. Falco shook his head and faced the ground again, telling himself not to be ridiculous.

The Dark snarled eagerly beside him. Falco reached out and put one hand on its neck, feeling the incredible power surging beneath the soft mockery of fur.

And feeling that—well. It would have been inhuman for him not to feel a bit excited, not to look forward to the expression on Harry’s face when they both curved down.

On they traveled, towards the point where the immense, mysterious backroads of the Dark opened into the mortal night of the British wizarding world.

Harry was already looking around when Millicent landed them at the Walpurgis celebration, the largest concentration of Dark magic in Britain. He relaxed when he saw no sign of Falco yet, and then gave a second, longer look around, because what he *did* see was bizarre enough, he had to admit.

The magic always chose silver-and-green destinations for them—most of the time, Harry thought, entirely created of the magic, or perhaps modified from their normal appearances. He had been in a smooth green hollow where a silver fire burned, and in a field of lilies and grass, and in a forest last year, when he chased the wild Dark in the form of a white stag. This one was stranger than the others.

It looked to be a desert, with slick, dark green rocks twisting in every direction, forming shapes that maddeningly remained on the edge of recognition, very much the way that clouds did. Gleams of silver struck from the top of the rocks, gleamed from crannies under them, danced on the occasional flat surface as if the dark green were not stone at all but polished metal. No matter where Harry looked, there was silver light, and his eyes finally made out a ring of stars, low and clustered around the horizon, taking every opportunity to shine between the stones. It was—well, it was eerie.

He waited for some sense of the wild Dark to overcome him, since it usually changed the celebrants' moods, but nothing happened. He felt the same mixture of fear and anger and quiet confidence that he had when he walked out of the magic of the stone Millicent had used to bring them.

It was impossible to think he wasn't affected. Easier, perhaps, to believe that the wild Dark's mood and his coincided.

Harry nibbled his lip. *I don't know if I dare believe that, though. I have no idea if we're going to get that much help from the wild Dark.*

“Harry!”

He looked up, and felt the sweat of relief prickling around his body. Someone had lit a fire, and many wizards and witches stood around it, warming their hands against the intense chill air of the desert. As Harry hurried towards them, snow began to drift down around them—shattered flakes of pure silver, of course. When they landed on his skin, Harry shivered and cast a warming charm. It didn't seem to help.

He had the impression that the stars were staring at him through the gaps in the rock, awaiting some recognition, some challenge, some conclusion. The dark spaces between them rippled when he watched. Harry hissed between his teeth. *Falco will come from the sky. I'm certain of it.*

Draco and Snape were a few steps behind him, no more, when he arrived at the fire. Many of the faces there were unfamiliar, but a small contingent of wizards and witches who had drawn off by themselves came forward to meet him. Harry recognized most of his Dark-Declared allies, and exchanged nods with them. Honoria's eyes were shining with excitement, and Thomas seemed more interested in sifting the sand beneath his feet to find out what it was made of than in paying attention to an upcoming battle, but the others were grim.

“Do you think we'll be able to help you?” Ignifer asked softly, so that the strangers could not overhear.

Harry shrugged. “I don't know. The prophecy might not tolerate interference at all, or it might accept a low level.” As if speaking of it had called his attention to it, he could feel the prophecy now, a sweet charged thunder, prowling around the distant ring of stars like a living thing in a cage. *Well, it is a living thing, almost, with the way it shifts.* “On the other hand, it let Dumbledore do almost what he wanted last year, until the moment when Draco arrived and the actual prophecy began to work. There'll have to be a different sequence of events this time, since I'm ready and waiting for Falco.”

He kept to himself his fear that the prophecy *would* allow Falco to hurt someone dear to him before it looped him and Draco in to begin the destruction of the second Dark Lord. If it had happened one time, it might happen the next time. He would have forbidden his allies to come if this had been any other time but Walpurgis, he thought—and then he pictured what would have happened if he'd tried that, and sighed. No, he wouldn't have been able to do it, not when they had their free wills.

“The attack will be from above, I think,” he said, reaching back and feeling the reassuring weight of Draco's shoulder beneath his hand. “Do you see the way the sky is rippling beneath the stars?”

“More than that,” said Hawthorn suddenly. “Can you smell the scent of the wolf approaching closer and closer?”

Harry glanced at her in startlement. She'd risen until she stood on her toes, her head back, her nose working. It was only a few days past the full moon, so Harry supposed he wasn't surprised that she could still use a werewolf's sense of smell to good effect, but—

A wolf? Like the one that greeted me the night when I freed the thestrals? Like the one that tried to take me into the Dark the night I lost my hand?

What is the wild Dark playing at?

He probably wouldn't know until it was too late, Harry had to concede, and mentally, he forced himself to live with that. "I can't smell the wolf, no," he told Hawthorn. "Does it resemble a werewolf pack or an ordinary wolf?"

Two more sniffs, and Hawthorn settled back on her heels, looking frustrated. "The scent's turned," she said. "I have no idea where it went. It's as though it ducked into a strong-running stream or a wind coming straight towards me."

Harry touched her elbow. "That's all right. You've been more than helpful. Just knowing that the wild Dark is coming in the form of a wolf might give me more of a clue to help defeat it." He doubted it, since everything he knew about the wild Dark was both advantage and disadvantage. It had behaved that way in the past, but it was so chaotic that it might never do so again, or it might turn back and use a mixture of traits that had helped it before. He faced Adalrico. "Did you bring the wards that I asked you for, sir?"

Adalrico nodded and held them out. Harry gathered them up. They were not, precisely, wards, but half-bracelets of wood and leather that grasped a forearm and sheltered those who wore them from most powerful spells. It also limited the wearer's ability to perform defensive magic, but most Dark magic didn't fall under that category, making Harry hope it was all right to use them on Walpurgis. He had known Adalrico was clever at making things, and had asked him if he could manage something like this for everyone who would be at the celebration. If nothing else, it would keep Adalrico's mind off Pharos Starrise, whom, Millicent had told him in confidence, he was spending far too much time thinking about.

"Good," Harry murmured, passing them out one by one. He hesitated when he came to Draco, though. He wasn't sure if Draco's part in the prophecy meant that he couldn't wear one of the bracelets.

Draco met his eyes and shook his head. "No, Harry," he said quietly. "In this, we're equal, and if you have to cast a spell that defends me, I should be able to do the same for you."

Narcissa sucked in a breath, but when Harry glanced at her, she was silent, eyes even shining with something that might have been pride. Harry turned away and went on passing the bracelets out. He heard the sound of them going home around wrists, and then someone tapped him on the shoulder.

He glanced up. One of the strange wizards who had huddled around the fire stood there. He coughed. "Might—might we know what will happen?" he asked.

Harry smiled grimly and nodded to the sky. "You know that a Dark Lord is coming?"

The wizard's hand tightened around his wand. "We could feel as much, yes," he murmured.

"And a prophecy," Harry said quietly, "claims that I'm the one who will defeat that Dark Lord. To stay *absolutely* out of danger, you probably should have stayed home. You can still Apparate there." He held out the small remaining number of bracelets. "Some of you can wear these. Otherwise, get yourselves under the strongest shield you can find, and hope the battle doesn't touch you."

"This is somewhat outrageous, you know," the wizard said stiffly, even as he took the bracelets from Harry. "Walpurgis is a celebration for all Dark wizards. It should not be interrupted by struggles from a few, and it certainly should not mean danger for those who attend it."

Harry raised an eyebrow, the odd combination of his own mood and the mood the Dark seemed to have planned for him raising his confidence. "It's *always* dangerous," he said. "Given the magic running around on this night and the doorway that appears. As for not taking place here, tell that to the prophecy prowling the sky." He could feel it drawing nearer now, as if its pacing circles were getting smaller.

The wizard stared at him, then turned away as if he didn't know how to respond. He probably didn't, Harry thought, and it was to the benefit of everyone that this conversation end now.

He turned to Owen, who was staring at the spaces between the stars with a frown as he snapped his own bracelet on. "I need to ask you to stay out of the way," he said quietly. "I know that you're sworn to protect me, but—well, it can't happen now, not when the prophecy asks for the particular people it does."

Owen tore his gaze from the sky, and nodded. "I know that, Harry."

His eyes were heavy with shadows that had nothing to do with the upcoming battle, Harry was sure, and he frowned. "What is it, Owen? Has Draco caused another problem with Michael?"

"No," said Owen softly. "Michael's caused his own problems. It's nothing I want to talk about right now, Harry."

Harry made a small half-bowing gesture and a note to ask Owen about Michael later, and then turned. A breeze was tickling the back of his neck, a breeze that hadn't been there a moment before. He held out his hand and cast as strong a defensive ward over his allies as he could, then moved forward. Draco walked at his right shoulder, the posture the prophecy said he should take. How literal that had to be, Harry didn't know, but he had to admit it was much more comforting to fight Falco with full knowledge of what the prophecy said and how well the three of them fit it, instead of half-guessing and only realizing afterward what had happened, as in the fight with Dumbledore.

The stars began to dance and jingle and shake as if they were bells on a Christmas tree branch. Freezing music drifted down to Harry's ears, sharper and keener than the flakes of snow. He shivered a bit, then glanced over his shoulder. Snape was not far behind him, a stubborn expression on his face.

"Severus," Harry said softly. "Please. Get under the ward."

"No," said Snape.

"He'll hurt you," said Harry, more agitated now. He could feel the first rising of Falco's power in the distance, mighty as a tsunami. Of course, that would not be, mostly, *his* magic, but the magic of the wild Dark behind him. It seemed they were more closely allied than Harry had hoped, when he first began to believe that the Dark itself was the power this Dark Lord knew not. The prophecy was closer, too, and its thunder rolled like lead weights down Harry's arms. As if that were not enough, he could make out *two* of the damn things now, tangled and nested in each other. He supposed one was the original prophecy that Dumbledore and Lily had tried to raise him and Connor to fulfill, and the second was the prophecy that said the original one would happen three times. They'd probably both been present at Dumbledore's defeat, too, but he'd been too caught up in the battle to notice.

And now your mind is running in every direction, and you're thinking nonsense. He turned forcefully towards Snape. "Please, Severus, go back."

Snape opened his mouth to answer, and then the prophecies abruptly drew away. Harry turned just as Falco came down.

He and Draco stepped forward. He heard the soft sound that was Draco drawing his wand from its holster, and then every other noise was lost under the enormous shrieking howl of a wolf the size of Hogwarts.

Falco was in sea eagle form as he dived, but he flickered in and out of it as he reached the desert of the Dark and saw Harry waiting for him. Harry and others. Falco very nearly smiled. He had learned many things from Tom that were not as useful as he had hoped, like controlling the sirens, but *one* thing Tom had told him was correct. It had to be, because, watching from a distance, Falco had seen other people successfully use the same tactic.

He nodded to the wolf pacing beside him. It was enormous; actually, he didn't know how large it was, because its edges faded into the night around them and it rebuilt itself again and again from the blackness, now with a grotesquely huge paw, now with a muzzle that could have smashed in the Ministry. It lifted its head at his signal, though, and howled.

The waves of sound rolled over and around him. Falco staggered, but managed to keep flying straight. His heart surged and leaped, and he felt something like gladness, the warmest emotion that had touched him in a long time.

Almost over. And I know this tactic works. Tom said so. Other people said so. Harry cannot compensate for it.

The Dark shot around him, circled around him, as he dived lower and lower, and made the stars shake. Falco could feel the Light waiting just beyond, drawn, as it always was, by the rising of any power of the Dark's. Normally, it would not interfere on Walpurgis, any more than the Dark would on Midsummer.

But it had lost a wizard who had long flirted with it to the Dark when Falco Declared, and if someone powerful enough called on it, giving himself or another to the Light, then the gryphon would spread its wings.

Falco fixed his gaze on the person who would make Harry do that.

A prophecy swayed off to the side like a serpent ready and waiting to strike. Falco ignored it. It was going to be fulfilled, of course, but that was why he had come here. He was a willing sacrifice. A sense of clean and clear purpose filled him. He was, in the end, different from poor Albus, who had needed to torture people just to send out a signal. Falco thought this battle would cost very few lives, maybe one, and maybe two.

He struck. Harry had already begun raising his magic to meet a direct blow.

Falco's strike went past him, a wicked black arrow fringed with teeth, closing around Draco Malfoy and flooding his body with poison, his lungs with black smoke, his tissues with racing cancer. Ripple after ripple of power went home, like waves pounding on the beach. Falco gave all he had into the strike, not bothering to defend himself. Harry would realize what had happened in a moment.

He heard the Dark wolf howl in triumph, as he had expected.

He had *not* expected to hear Harry howling back as if in answer, or to sense him begin to fight instead of calling on the Light for help.

Harry turned as Draco fell, shock in his mouth thick as the taste of mint, for a moment. This *could not* happen. The prophecy had said that someone who loved him, with power, must stand at his right shoulder and help him defeat the Dark Lord. How—how could Draco—

And then he sensed the reek of Dark magic coming from Draco, turning him into little more than a corpse, and a barrier that hadn't fallen in almost two years broke inside him.

It was one thing for Voldemort to do something like this, or Rosier. They were madmen, and both seemed to have a personal grudge against Harry. Harry *knew* Falco opposed him for other reasons, and if such a human emotion as hatred had occurred to him in the last hundred years, he had probably rejected it as being contrary to what he wanted to achieve.

And now he had hurt Draco.

The barrier crumbled further. Pure and roaring rage had its own black tide in him, to answer what Falco had done. Harry could sense the wild Dark drawing back from Falco to watch, gleeful, as he turned the air around his enemy, inside his lungs, on his skin, to serpents.

He saw the world through a torrent of pitch, and he heard his own screams distantly, mingled with long hisses in Parseltongue that he didn't think anyone else could translate. He took a single step forward, still forcing all his magic at Falco, wanting him to *drown* in venom, as he had tried to drown Draco in it—

Don't think about that. He would crumble into his fear if he thought about that, if he had time to think about his world falling from beneath him.

He thought of the rage instead, and he screamed and screamed and ordered the serpents forward, and an enormous one had coiled around Falco's body now, half the arms of a man and half the flailing wings of a sea eagle, and could crush him if Harry would but give the command.

Harry gave the command. He could have wished Falco out of existence at that moment, washed on the flickering waves of his own loathing, but that would be too painless. He wanted the man to *suffer*.

He heard someone moving up behind him, but he didn't look to see who it was. He was leaning forward, banishing thoughts of Draco as they arose, concentrated on the *need* to inflict pain.

And then Falco's magic rose up against his, and the wild Dark leaned in at his back, unstoppable, unfightable. Harry's serpents exploded into a dark rain of flesh and muscle, and he went sprawling to the ground, pelted with bone shards, while Falco moved to hover above him.

Falco was frightened, and angry. *Why is he not calling on the Light?*

He could feel the bruising impact of the serpent's coils on himself if he let his mind dwell there. He would not let it dwell there. The wild Dark, which had drawn off as if to watch the chaos with a gleeful eye, had come back to him, and now it was helping him drive Harry down.

And a new thought darted into Falco's mind, swift as rain, quick as light.

Why not kill Harry?

If it could be done, then it would solve a great many problems. Yes, it would disrupt the prophecy, but prophecies could shift. Obviously, it would have to choose someone else if Harry was dead. It would still come true, but human interference could change the course of it. Someone else would kill Tom, that was all.

Of course, killing Harry would leave Britain with two Dark Lords and no Light ones, but Falco could depart again, going into hiding or to another wizarding community where no Lords or Ladies lived. He was not bound to the island of his birth. And it would mean no more *vates* in the world, in a surer way than any Declaration to Light could ever do.

He wondered, for a moment, how much of his decision was driven by the mighty and unexpected pain he had suffered when Harry sent the serpents to grip him, but he dismissed it from his mind. If he was going to kill the boy instead of sparing him and making him Declare—and he had almost made up his mind to do so; Harry was Darker than he had ever thought, to reach for Dark magic at the moment when his lover's life was in danger—then he didn't need to give him mercy or worry about his own motives. He only needed to kill him.

He decided that breaking his mind would be the simplest procedure. Whether or not the body lived after that, his task was done.

He wrapped and shaped his power into another arrowhead, aided by the will of the wild Dark. He could feel it champing and dancing beside him, eager as a wolf on the blood trail. Falco would fling the arrowhead into the exact and vulnerable center of Harry's mind, and destroy his sanity; a second shot would destroy the tattered shards of what remained.

And then someone else attacked him from the side, and at the same moment, the prophecy rose and *rushed* forward, a song in its throat like a tide made of icicles—

And the wild Dark wheeled back and away from him, once again hovering at a distance to watch.

The world was very simple.

There was Harry, lying still on the ground, covered in blood, covered in gashes. There was the Dark Lord about to destroy him, with so much magic that it made his head swim and his eyes blur. Harry could absorb that power, perhaps, but backlash and worry about Draco had paralyzed him. He could see tears already forming on Harry's face, as the fear for Draco began to fight its way through the wall of hatred he had raised.

Luckily for Harry, *his* impulses were towards vengeance, and his hatred had always been stronger than his fear.

Snape aimed his wand at Falco, his magic rising like a tornado around him at the same time, a wheel of eyes and fangs and claws. "*Inimicus!*"

Even as the Hostility Curse shot away from him, he felt thunder like a drum in his head, and a high, ecstatic singing that was probably the result of Harry's allies doing something to aid him, assuming they had broken out of the ward Harry had put them behind. Snape would not turn to look. He was going to defend his child, and he was going to use Darker magic than Harry would have approved of to do it.

The Hostility Curse hit Falco, and the man—half a man now, half an eagle, and some other creature, fading into night, at the edges—turned to stare at him. He would have been stupefied and blinded by the loathing put behind that spell, Snape knew. It was a curse that let an enemy know exactly how one felt about him.

And knocked him off-balance for the next one. Snape smiled slightly. "*Contundo!*"

That was a spell he had learned from Evan Rosier, one that slipped inside an opponent's magical shields and promptly began to

beat on their joints and the fragile places in their bones, shattering them. Falco shuddered, and lost another moment to the pain, to the wonder that he could be hurt, or perhaps to the fact that the wild Dark had circled away and abandoned him again.

Snape followed that curse with another. This was vengeance. It would not do to give his enemy time to recover, but neither would it do to blend the curses together so much that he could not *appreciate* the finer nuances of pain Snape intended to give him.

“*Confervefacio!*”

His wandless magic whirled around him and bore the spell up in a cloud of colored sparks; while normally it could strike anywhere on the body, Snape had wanted it targeted at Falco’s eyes, and so it was. He smiled again as he heard the shriek. One’s eyes melting into jelly and dribbling out of one’s head would be a bit distracting even to a Dark Lord.

Another step forward, another Dark spell. “*Deliquesco medullae!*”

The marrow in Falco’s bones vanished. Snape had never felt the effects of that spell himself, but he was told it was exquisitely painful. He listened with a detached ear to the wail that produced, then swung into the next one.

“*Ad—*”

And then Falco recovered enough to strike out at him.

It had all gone so wrong, so badly, so suddenly, and Falco did not know what to make of it.

He could hear the rustling laughter behind him as the wild Dark watched him struggle and writhe in pain, and he could feel the sudden creeping changes in his body as his bone marrow vanished, and he could sense his magic rushing in to compensate, but what drew his attention most were his eyes.

He could replace them, perhaps, but the *pain—*

This was Dark magic unleashed. This was a man who had not become a Dark wizard because he was thinking about the balance of the world and how many Light wizards already existed, or even because he had come from a pureblood tradition that expected its children to Declare for the allegiances of their parents. This was an upstart, a wizard who had done what he had done out of hatred, who even now was doing this out of vengeance.

He dared to hurt me.

And Falco moved, bringing around his power and striking out with it, shapeless, formless, not knowing what would happen, but willing *something* to do so.

He heard a dry crack, and wished he knew if it meant that he had shattered Severus Snape’s back, or neck. He heard the wild Dark laughing again, howling itself hoarse, but it did not come to him. He should have known better than to trust it, Falco thought bitterly.

He began to concentrate. He could, if he thought about it hard enough, Transfigure flesh into other shapes. He *might* be able to grow eyes in the palms of his hands. Granted, it had been years since he had studied the delicate shape of the eye and he did not know if he remembered enough about the iris and the cornea to be able to do so, but he would try.

And then Harry recovered.

One kind of barrier had given way when Harry was worried about Draco, and another when that worry intruded and occupied his mind. And then he saw Snape fall, one of his legs broken so cleanly that it had snapped like a branch, and yet a third kind of barrier broke.

The lightless fury that climbed out from inside him was familiar. He had felt it three times before. Once was when Minister Fudge attempted to drain his magic. The second was when his mother had confronted him and tried to convince him to come back to Godric’s Hollow with her. The third was when Bellatrix had cut off his hand and he had faced Voldemort in a duel immediately afterwards.

He had not felt it in nearly two years. But it came back to him, filling his limbs with familiarity. And Harry did not need to rise to his feet in order to use it. He opened his mouth in a soundless cry, and the fury lifted through him, ripping and twisting and warping through his magic, blasting the air with such ice that Harry felt it lash and burn down his throat. His magic came right behind it, and together they aimed themselves at Falco.

And then the wild Dark was there, too, slamming its shoulder into Harry's power, driving it forward, howling and dancing. Harry could not rely on it, he knew that, but the consideration seemed far away right now. He reached for the chaos, and it answered him, harsh and gleeful as if he had Declared for it. This was not the wild Dark of last Midwinter, or last Walpurgis, or any other time but when it had come from the sky after Midsummer and tried to charm him away. That was the significance of the wolf form, Harry realized hazily. It had worn it once before. It was, in fact, wearing it for the same reason now, because he was uncontrolled enough to attract its attention.

They hit Falco from three fronts, three sides. Harry felt him writhing, filled with magic as it held him up despite lack of bone marrow and tried to let him know what was going on and protect him from attack.

He knew what he wanted. And he was already divided neatly into three, his magic and the rage and the wild Dark. He sent them each to their tasks, and heard the wild Dark's voice whispering in his head: *I go.*

The rage wrapped around Falco, blasting him with the cold, whispering into his head that he was going to die.

The magic opened bright tunnels between Draco's and Snape's fallen bodies, sucking Falco's magic from him without remorse, and channeling it directly into them. Harry did not try to give his power to them as a permanent gift. He did heal the break in Snape's leg, and the poison and disease that Falco had set loose in Draco. He did it without flinching, and he could not have said how he did it, though in an ordinary state of mind, he would have had to think about it intensely to achieve the effect he wanted. This was Harry angry, however, so he simply willed it, and it happened.

The wild Dark waited, poised, circling, until Falco was beginning to recover and fight against the drain of his magic, which shock and pain had kept him from doing at first. Then it struck. Harry saw a giant black paw move across the sky, bearing silver nails like shooting stars.

It tore Falco apart on all levels; the physical was the least of them. His organs spilled out and pelted into the snow-covered sand around Harry with the soft sounds of leather sacks bursting, but his mind went flying too, his sanity torn like the cloth of a kite, and his soul unraveled like the bit of Tom Riddle from the diary Horcrux, and his magic tumbled out like blood and was sucked into the wild Dark's hungry maw.

It devoured him, and in less than a minute Falco's skin was left floating in the air like a flag. Harry thought it might come to rest on the earth in front of him, but the wild Dark puffed on it and blew it away into the night, to be chased and played with by multiple shadow-puppies.

And the prophecy sang all around him, ecstatic, warm, somnolent.

Harry, gasping, drove his hands into the sand and gradually worked himself to his feet. His mind rang and his body blazed with power, which he knew would give way to magical and emotional exhaustion, which would give way to pain. But for the moment, the magic still held him up, and he bowed in the direction the wild Dark had gone, understanding many more things in that moment than he had before.

The power Falco didn't know was the Dark. But it was my own Dark magic, and Snape's, as well as the wild Dark. And that truly is chaotic. It helped both him and us. Why? Probably for the sake of a good time. I finally have a safeguard against ever trusting it again.

And the prophecy—

The prophecy said that Snape needed to stand at my right shoulder this time, and not Draco after all.

Harry grimaced a bit, as the lines of the third prophecy Trelawney had given shuddered in his mind again.

*“Three on three the old one coils,
Three in its times, three in its choices.”*

The old prophecy is happening three times. I got that part right. But it's making a different choice of elder and younger each time.

It already chose Draco and me. It couldn't have us a second time.

He thought the prophecy's song grew especially smug at that, as he turned to check on Draco and Snape. His other allies had already broken the ward he'd put them under, probably with their combined strength, and were running towards them. Narcissa was bending over Draco, her face pale with shock. Draco had his eyes open and appeared to be aware of his surroundings, Harry saw.

He stooped over Snape, and Snape's eyes met his without backing down. Harry squeezed his hand.

"Thank you," he said. "I would not—would not have found the strength if you had not done what you did." Already he could feel the rage dissipating, departing, not being locked behind barriers in him again, but fading into the charged midnight. Well, if there was any time of the year in which that could happen, it would be this one, especially since the wild Dark on this Walpurgis seemed to have allowed him to mirror its mood.

"I could not stand by and see you hurt," said Snape in a groaning, rasping voice.

"I know." Harry looked at his leg. "Can you walk?"

Snape demonstrated by standing, though he braced one hand on Harry's shoulder to do so. His face flashed white when he took his first step, but in a few moments he was only limping, and Harry was satisfied. Falco's magic had returned what Falco's magic had stolen.

"Harry?"

He turned swiftly, Narcissa's voice making him fear the worst, but she shook her head at him and stood with Draco in her arms. She must have cast a Lightning Charm, Harry thought distantly as he strode over to her.

"He's asleep," Narcissa whispered. "The shock, you know." Harry nodded, and avoided her eyes for a moment, but she caught his cheek with one elbow and tilted his head up. "Harry. I do not blame you."

He made himself look into her face until he believed her, then studied Draco with wide-open eyes that saw the magic as well as the physical reality of things. One by one, his muscles relaxed. There was no disease left. Draco would probably still have to spend some days in the hospital wing under the care of Madam Pomfrey, from the effects of having that much magic shoved into and then drawn out of his body, but he would do much more than simply survive.

He looked at his allies then, but saw at a glance that all of them were standing and well. The strangers who had been around the fire were gone, but Harry saw no bodies on the ground.

"They Apparated out when they saw the battle start," Thomas assured him, coming up to him. "Cowards. That was *fascinating*." He stared into the black sky as if longing for the wolf to come back.

Harry sighed a little. "From a certain viewpoint, yes, it was, Thomas," he agreed. "Do you want to come back to Hogwarts with me and examine Draco?" He trusted Madam Pomfrey, but he would feel better if he also had someone to study Draco for the aftereffects of magic.

"I'd be delighted." Thomas beamed. "Just let me inform Priscilla and my children." He tapped his wrist with his wand to start the communication spell.

Harry nodded to the others. "Thank you for coming," he said. "I appreciate that you were willing to stand with me. I'll be at Hogwarts if anyone wishes to Apparate there and talk to me." He *certainly* wasn't going to sleep tonight, as keyed up as he was.

One by one, the people around him began to vanish. Snape seemed inclined to wait for him, but Harry gave him a long look, and he went.

Harry used that precious moment of time alone to compose himself, as much as that was possible, and draw a deep breath.

Inevitably, his mind returned to the prophecy.

It has to make a third choice. It has to have a third pair for elder and younger. And who is that going to be? Me and someone else who loves me, going in to face Voldemort? I can't imagine doing it without Draco or Snape, though. And if it's Connor...well, he still doesn't love the whole of the wizarding world. I don't know who it can be, and that makes me nervous.

He heard a low snarl, and opened his eyes. The black wolf crouched in front of him, green-eyed, bearing the silver lightning bolt on its head, and its gaze was pure invitation, calling him into the paths of the Dark and the million mindless secrets that lived there.

“I am not going to Declare,” Harry whispered. “Falco was wrong about that, and so are you.”

The wolf gave a little satisfied chuff of breath, and spoke in the voice he’d heard on the night he went to free the thestrals. *It doesn’t matter what you do. I will have you someday.*

“I don’t think so,” Harry said.

The wild Dark laughed, and laughed, and then broke apart, scattering into the air as a cloud of black flakes that it hurt Harry’s eyes to see.

He glanced once at the desert, then wearily Apparated back to Hogwarts. It had been a Walpurgis night like none other in history, he thought, but he supposed the wild Dark might be insane enough to disrupt its own celebrations on a whim, too.

Interlude: The Liberator’s Ninth Letter

May 1st, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

Falco Parkinson is dead.

I know that you probably know this already, but I could not forbear writing you a letter when I felt him perish in my head. I was having a dream I did not understand, because of the confusion of light and magic in it, but I saw the moment when the Dark rent him apart.

I am so relieved, sir, but I can only imagine what you and Harry vates must be feeling, now that the Dark Lord who threatened your power and his life is gone at last. I hope my information has made some little difference in the fight against him.

As well, sir, I heard the speech that you gave a few days after I sent my last letter, saying that anyone who was a friend of the Ministry and unfairly threatened by your enemies had only to come to you for protection. I have been thinking about that since. As I said before, I have so rarely been out of the house that I am woefully ignorant about the ways of the wizarding world. My parents Apparated me most everywhere, when they allowed me out. I have seen the houses of some of their friends, and Diagon Alley once or twice, but I have never seen a map, and I am not sure how far the Ministry lies from my home.

I do not ask for rescue. I am not even sure how useful my information was to you, sir. I still think that I must find my way out of here myself. But I will, if I can, include a subtle list of clues here that may enable you to tell me my location relative to the Ministry. Sending a letter to me will not work, but another speech which includes, among other information, the placing of my father’s house might. As I said once before, however, he has spells that will enable him to identify a letter leaving the house with his name in it, or an anagram, so I must be as careful as I can.

I know we are in a place often called the evergreen country.

I know that my parents have often told me the Dark is anathema, and should be cast out of proper wizarding society if at all possible.

I know that my father’s “friends” are submissive to him, and would bow their heads and lend their money if he asked to any project, though none of them have very much.

Our name resembles the light that comes after the moon and the stars.

I am sorry, sir, that I can be no more specific. And please do not distress yourself if no opportunity comes for some months to give me any clue. I have survived so far, and I can continue surviving. But I have begun to trust that I will be free, and even that I have friends who can aid me after my escape. I hope that I may someday see you face to face, to thank you for the sense of purpose and the inspiration that you have given me, and be able to do the same thing for Harry vates.

Yours,
The Liberator.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Four: A Week of Sunlight

Thursday

Harry wasn't by Draco's bed when he awakened, but he came in less than a moment later, carrying a huge book in his arms, and his smile when he saw Draco was as sweet as Draco could have hoped. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Awful," Draco said frankly, stretching his arms above his head and then wincing as pains shot through them. "What in the world *happened* last night?" He could remember the glimpse of a white eagle and a dark wolf traveling towards him, and then nothing after that.

"Falco attacked you," Harry said quietly. "Hit you with an arrow made of poison that tried to corrupt your body." His hand stroked Draco's shoulder as though he wanted to convince himself Draco was still healthy, living flesh, and present in the same room with him. "I grew angry and attacked him in turn, but he managed to throw me off. Then Snape struck, and when Falco drove *him* back, I finally mustered the rage to defeat him."

"Is Professor Snape all right?" Draco asked, attempting to keep down his jealousy that other people had got to see that sight and he hadn't.

"Yes, he is. Recovering from a sudden healing of a broken leg, but Madam Pomfrey says he'll be fine." Harry wrinkled his brow at him. "Draco, what's the matter? You're biting your lip and trying not to grimace."

"I love the sight of you when you're in the full flood of your power," Draco said, deciding that he couldn't conceal his jealousy well enough. "And other people were able to see that, and *I* wasn't."

Harry put the book down on the edge of the bed, keeping his head attentively bent over the pages for a moment. Draco saw the muscles in his cheek quivering, and knew it was to hide a smile. He scowled, and then scowled harder when Harry began to laugh, quietly.

"If you think it's *that* funny," Draco began.

Harry waved his left hand at him, light striking silver from the dog's-head emblem in the center. "Not at all. Oh, Draco. Some things about you will never change, and I do love that." He leaned forward and kissed Draco, nicely enough that Draco felt a bit mollified when he drew back. "I'll put the memory into a Pensieve for you when you're well enough to appreciate it. Now. Madam Pomfrey said you would be feeling awful when you woke up, so I brought a book to read to you and keep you entertained. But first, do you want anything to eat?"

"No," Draco said. His stomach felt like a hollow, but it was a churning hollow. He was sure that he would vomit up anything he tried to eat. He arranged himself on the pillows and stared pathetically at Harry. "What book did you bring me? It had better not be for homework."

Harry shook his head and took a seat on a chair beside the bed, once again gathering up the book. "No. I asked your mother what your favorite book had been as a child, and she owed me this this morning."

Draco felt his mouth fall open. Perhaps he should have recognized the book at once, but he hadn't seen it for years, since his father had made a quiet little speech on his eighth birthday and told Draco it was time to put away childish stories and concentrate on pureblood rituals, history, and spellwork. But sure enough, Harry was turning it to reveal the bright green lettering on the brown leather cover that Draco remembered. Perhaps he should have found it garish. He had learned to appreciate it too young, however, to care. He associated that book with too many memories of his mum or house elves reading stories from it to him.

Of course, it would be embarrassing if anyone came into the hospital wing and found Harry reading children's stories to him. Draco tried to warn him about that. "Um, Harry, maybe you should put up a privacy ward?" He shook his head a moment later. "What on earth inspired you to ask my mum for that, anyway?"

"I almost lost you last night," Harry said bluntly. "It was Falco's mistake, ultimately. He could have paralyzed me if he'd taken you hostage—"

“Just like everyone else,” Draco said, thinking of Rosier and Voldemort.

Harry picked up his hand and kissed the back of it. “But he tried to kill you,” he said softly. “I was so angry, Draco. I think part of me is still reaching up into the night, trying to find the bit of my temper that flew away. I’d like you to hear stories that I know you’ll enjoy. Please?”

Draco studied his face for a moment. He could have defended his dignity by saying that they were children’s stories and of *course* he would want different reading material as an adult, but the truth was that he’d never enjoyed any other fiction he read with the pure, sheer pleasure of the book Harry held now.

“All right,” he whispered.

Harry beamed at him and sat back to flip through the book. “Which one do you like best?” he asked.

It didn’t take Draco long to answer that. “The Sword, the Cup, the Tree,” he said. He had always felt the story flowing past him as a tide of wonder, of beautiful words and images. He had tried to memorize it, but every time he read or heard it, he became so caught up in the experience that he was left with only scattered debris at the end. He was lucky he was able to remember the title, he thought.

Harry sought a moment for it in the table of contents, then sat back and began to read. Draco closed his eyes, not to fall asleep but to let himself be drawn into the tale more intensely.

“A sword as beautiful as morning! A cup like the bottom of a jewel! A tree that bears song in its boughs! *Those* are the gifts that I want for my joining, Mother, and I’ll take no others.”

Memories of warmth and love and comfort piled up around Draco, adding to the warmth of the blankets and the hand Harry placed on his, cocooning him in such contentment that he would have purred if he knew how. He let himself be swept away, once again.

Friday

Snape lifted his head slowly. A small, soft sound had distracted him from his marking. He turned around, half-certain he would find the Potter brat crouching in a corner under his Invisibility Cloak and trying to distract him. It was the kind of thing the Potter brat would do.

Harry frowned at him over the potion he was brewing, a burn salve for the hospital wing. Snape had tried to explain that Harry didn’t need to repay Madam Pomfrey for Draco’s care, and Harry had said that he understood that but wanted to make the potion anyway. “Is something wrong, Severus?”

“I thought I heard...something.” Snape drew his wand and cast several spells that would allow him to detect unseen intruders, assuming that any had got through his wards in the first place. He could find no one. Other than a spider spinning a web in a corner, Argutus, who was coiled around the legs of the table on which Harry brewed his potion, and a small army of ants come in from the Forbidden Forest who had found crumbs in the corner and were excitedly carrying them back to their nest, nothing was alive in the rooms but him and Harry.

“I didn’t hear anything.”

Snape at last nodded and turned back to his marking. This time, when the small sound started again, he didn’t turn or lift his wand. He tried to sharpen his senses instead, imagining that his hearing extended beyond his head. He chopped away other stimuli by lowering his eyelids until a web of darkness occupied his sight and forcing his attention away from the texture of parchment and quill beneath his hands.

The sound was definitely coming from behind him, and not too distant. And it was musical, if one wanted to apply the term musical to such a tiny, faint noise. A hum? Yes, it could be a hum.

Snape’s first thought was of a trapped insect, perhaps a bee, his spell hadn’t managed to detect.

Then he had a far more interesting thought, and cast a spell on himself to give him absolute silence before he turned.

Harry was measuring the next batch of ingredients into the burn salve. Argutus gave a long, drawn-out hiss which Snape presumed was his version of advice. Harry hissed back at him, sounding more amused than anything, even given the often angry tone of Parseltongue.

And the small sound stopped, and then resumed again the moment Harry ended his hiss.

Harry was humming beneath his breath as he prepared the burn salve, seeming entirely unaware of it.

Snape watched him in silence for a long moment. Harry didn't stiffen or flinch or glance up at him, and *that* was also unusual; most of the time, he was too aware of his surroundings, to the point where Snap thought his training had made it impossible for him to fully relax. Now, though, he was focused, intent, and yet comfortable, and he hummed.

And Snape did not think it was just the burn salve, a relatively uncomplicated potion, that had made him so.

He likes being in the same room I am. He likes brewing potions when he knows that I'm here to watch him.

Snape shook his head slightly, and Harry caught a glimpse of the motion from his peripheral vision and stopped humming. "Is something wrong?" he asked again.

"The Gryffindor essays," Snape said with some dignity, "are particularly bad." That was no less than the truth.

Harry laughed, and in the sound was more delight than the situation warranted. Snape felt an unfamiliar emotion heave itself slowly over like a seal in his belly. Harry was—happy here with him.

"I'm sure you'll manage to show that House of dunderheads what's what," Harry told him.

Snape turned back to face the essays again. "I certainly will."

He waited for the humming to resume before he started the marking again.

It went on for approximately ten minutes, before Harry said, in English, "Argutus, *don't touch that!*" and there was a loud explosion and an Omen snake to be rescued from the thick blue paste that had adhered to his scales. But even that did not disconcert Snape. He credited the humming with putting him in a good mood beforehand.

He might have few enough moments like this with his son. He would take them when and how he could.

Saturday

Harry paused for a moment when he heard voices ahead of him. He had assumed he was alone in the hallway just outside the library. He debated for a moment whether he should walk ahead and simply pass whoever they were; they seemed to be more intent on their conversation than going to the library, while Harry needed to continue with his Horcrux research.

Then he recognized one of the voices as Hermione's, and one of the voices as Zacharias's, and heard his own name. He hesitated. He didn't want to eavesdrop on them, but Draco would surely tell him he was stupid to miss a chance to hear what people were saying about him among themselves. And he listened to what Argutus told him of people's behavior, which was just another form of eavesdropping.

He promised himself he would move away the moment he heard something that made him uncomfortable, and laid his head on the wall.

"—makes it a lot more palatable," Zacharias was saying, his tone smug. Of course, Harry didn't think he had many voice tones that were not variants of "smug." "She even admitted that she might, *might*, come around to thinking better of the Grand Unified Theory, since Harry obviously doesn't feel that it denigrates his magic or makes him look less powerful than he really is."

"Of course, Harry's a halfblood," said Hermione, her voice relaxed and musing. Harry smiled as he pictured her standing in a posture other than with her hands on her hips, perhaps even leaning against Zacharias and closing her eyes. If anyone deserved the ability to put aside her burdens for a time and collapse like that, it was Hermione, especially since the end-of-the-year exams were approaching and Hermione would soon make life intolerable for herself and everyone else in Gryffindor Tower—if she wasn't

already doing that. “That might mean that your mother would be less inclined to listen to him.”

“She’s not *that* prejudiced,” said Zacharias, and Harry could feel the look Hermione gave him. “Or, well, all right, she is, but Harry’s a special case. His magic tends to overrule her feelings about his blood. If that wasn’t the case, she would never have fought beside him at Midsummer, or let me do so.”

“Would you have done it anyway?” Hermione interrupted.

A reflective pause, and Zacharias said, “Yes. It would have distressed my mother, but yes.”

Hermione made a soft, satisfied noise. Harry, meanwhile, tried to stifle his grin and failed. He hoped that no one would come up behind him and ask him why he was grinning like a fool.

“As I was saying,” Zacharias continued, “she *did* think that Harry would feel insulted and belittled by the Grand Unified Theory, or not care that much about it. He still doesn’t have that many Muggleborn allies, after all. His most influential campaigns have been about other species. But now I’ve told her that he supports it fully, which is true, and applauds the free will of magic that chose him apparently at whim.”

Whim would be better than prophecy, Harry thought.

“And that made her say she’ll think about it,” Zacharias said. “It’s a long way from outright conviction, but it’s much better than absolute refusal.”

“Good,” said Hermione, and then there was a sound of kissing which seemed like it might endure for a while.

Harry softly backed off and took another corridor to the library. He still could not stop grinning like a fool, though a few of the students he passed gave him odd looks.

That’s how it spreads, how it grows. A little at a time, tendril by tendril. Small things help it along more than large epiphanies. And most of the time, if I’m there, it’s just as a guiding figure, not someone actively helping.

Harry lifted his head. House elves were speaking in their own voices now, thanks to Dobby. If wizards and witches could do the same thing, he was more than proud of what he had achieved so far.

Sunday

Harry smiled, and stepped forward, firmly shaking the hand Periwinkle Lyrebird held out to him. She was a small woman, almost dwarfed by the enormous red robe she wore, marked with a dancing lyrebird. Harry eyed the patches in it, and nodded to himself. The Lyrebirds were not much richer than the Weasleys, if he read the signs correctly. They would benefit from the money he gave them, and the debt of gratitude would benefit him in more ways than just raising a few poverty-stricken pureblood families back to their old status.

“As we agreed, so it is done,” said Periwinkle, in a soft, creaky voice that carried some distance, thanks to the spells Harry had quietly spread on the wind outside Hogwarts. The crowd of students, a few reporters, some Ministry officials, and other purebloods, Light and Dark, who had traveled to the school when they heard of what was going to happen today leaned forward. “We have the promise of your allegiance to protect us from enemies, *vates*, including Cupressus Apollonis. In return, you have our alliance and our support. And we have your promise of Galleons fulfilled.” She turned to face the small group of wizards and witches behind her, all representatives of Light families who until recently had been too frightened to move against Apollonis. “Now we fulfill our promise as concerns our house elves.”

The men and women gently led their house elves forward. Harry wondered if they would have been as gentle with them if this ceremony was in private, and then forced himself to dismiss that concern, and breathe in the warm, thin air and the soft May sunshine. It was public now, and they treated their house elves kindly for this one moment.

After this moment, it would no longer be a concern.

Periwinkle and the other humans stepped away, and Harry knelt so that he looked into the house elves’ wide, earnest eyes. More than one pair was wet. Others gripped their ears and pulled on them in silence, or tried to hide their faces from Harry’s gaze. They knew, at the moment, only that they were being shoved away by families they had faithfully served, and could not understand

why.

Harry reached out for their webs. Essential weaknesses pervaded them already, weaknesses that would not have been there if the owners had not yielded their claims of their own free will. He closed his eyes, committed himself to a vision of transparent, tangled paths with enormous knots in the middle that tied the conventional freedom-binding webs to the ones that convinced the elves their service was of their own desire, and launched himself forward.

It was not easy, but it was as close to uneventful as any web-breaking Harry had ever done. He felt Draco, out of the hospital wing for the first time this morning, come forward and tighten his hand on his shoulder, but otherwise sensations from his own body were distant. He sliced through the webs like a knife, kicked at the knots, and bit his way through the tangles, and sometime in the middle he felt the elves' magic rise, helping him shrug the bonds off.

The moment the last strands came loose, he flung himself backward, drawing his magic up in golden-shining replicas of phoenix wings to let his audience know it was done.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the house elves' bodies dissolving in front of him, turning into a mixture of great green trains and silver veils of magic. They danced around each other, celebrating, losing shape and form until Harry could imagine they were portraying the primal matter their shapeshifting kind had come from. His eyes filled with tears as he watched the image that, for one moment, arranged itself out of the silver and the green: a healthy, living tree, with silver leaves and fruit, rooted in the earth deeper than any human could go and extending higher into the sky than any mortal tree could reach.

Then the magic collapsed into one long, straight beam, and soared off into the sky. Harry shaded his eyes with one hand, and thought they were aiming at the sun.

He glanced around, and saw more than one wet cheek, more than one pair of hastily wiped eyes, in the audience. Some people gaped with open awe on their faces. Harry smiled. Dobby's impact had spread far and wide, but this would go further. And some people already looked hungry for another sight of such wonder. Well, they could achieve it if they had house elves and would free them.

"Thank you for coming today," he said, and nodded to Periwinkle Lyrebird. "May all house elves, in the end, go free with such grace."

Once again, as yesterday, he was grinning like a fool, but this time he shared it with more than one person, including Draco, who turned him around and concealed his own foolish smile by pressing his mouth to Harry's.

Monday

Connor paused when he reached his usual table for Charms study in the library. Harry was sitting there, bent over his Charms textbook and muttering imprecations under his breath which seemed to be directed at the fact that he couldn't find the bit of evidence he needed to make a point for his essay.

"Harry?" Connor ventured at last. He glanced around, to see if Ron was sitting at another table, but he hadn't arrived yet. Draco wasn't there, either, for that matter, and that surprised Connor even more. He would have thought his brother's boyfriend would be sitting right next to him the day after he finally managed to leave the hospital wing.

"Connor! Hullo." Harry grinned up at him, and nodded to his book. "Have you started on the essay for Flitwick yet?"

"Hermione tried to make me, but I didn't let her," said Connor blankly, sitting down and chiding himself for being so surprised. Why was it unusual for Harry to want to study with him?

Well, he's never done it before, that's why.

And because he was a Gryffindor and didn't need to attend to all the intricate emotional and verbal maneuvering that Slytherins seemed to perform around each other, Connor felt able to ask straight out. "Why are you here, Harry?"

"It occurred to me," said Harry, still flipping back and forth in the book, and then slowing and reading a paragraph that seemed to continue from one page to another, "that we don't spend much time together outside of Quidditch practice. Now, I like flying, but I don't think it should be the only interest common to both of us. And since I'm not playing this year, and you are, all I'm really doing is training *you*, while not benefiting Slytherin in any way." He grinned again, letting Connor know that he didn't really

mean that last statement. “And I know that we both have some difficulty with Charms. I know specific spells, but not a lot of theory connecting them, because I mostly learned defensive magic, whether it was charms or curses or something else.” Connor flinched a bit, expectantly, but Harry didn’t look as though he was reliving bad memories of his childhood when he talked about his training. “You have the difficulty because—” Harry broke off and shook his head. “I don’t *know* why, Connor, and I should. I should know that kind of thing about my own brother.”

“I understand why you don’t,” said Connor, anxious in case Harry should start blaming himself again.

“I know,” Harry whispered. “But I want to spend some more time with you, and *find out*. What is the biggest difficulty that you have with Charms?”

Connor let out a small, relieved breath, and opened his book. “Hermione’s asked me that,” he said. “And Parvati’s asked me that. A *lot*.” He scowled, thinking of the way that Parvati could flip her wand and perform the smallest and most delicate spells, ones that arranged her hair to fall just the way she wanted or moved her makeup around on her face without her needing to spend hours in front of the mirror the way Connor had heard some Muggle girls did. “And I don’t know why. I don’t think it’s just one problem. Sometimes I understand a Charm well enough, and then don’t understand any of the others related to it.”

“Then let’s look,” Harry said, sliding over to sit in the chair next to him.

Connor couldn’t help taking one more look around the library. “Have you seen Ron? We usually study together now.”

“I know.” Harry peered up at him from beneath his fringe. “I caught him earlier and asked him if we could have this hour alone. And I told Draco the same thing. You don’t mind, do you? I know I should probably have asked first, but I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Not at all,” said Connor, and felt a small and happy pit open in the center of his stomach as he bent over his Charms textbook beside Harry.

Harry concentrated, and the book fell open at the page Connor had studied most often and still didn’t understand, the Bird-Calling Charm.

“How did you do that?” Connor asked, impressed. “Did you read my mind?”

Harry looked at him as if he were mad. “No, I felt the crease in the book and moved it so it fell open there,” he said, holding up his hand, which Connor hadn’t noticed under the binding.

Connor shook his head. He was still unused to Harry having a left hand, and had missed it. “Right.”

It still didn’t diminish his happiness.

Tuesday

“Tell him he’s a bastard,” Millicent said helpfully, hanging over Harry’s shoulder. “That’s the worst insult for someone like him, to imply that he’s not the rightful heir of his family’s legacy.” Then her eyes lit up. “No, use some of the proof from the Grand Unified Theory to show that he must be a halfblood or a Muggleborn, because of course no intelligence can possibly still exist in the pureblood lines.”

Harry raised an eyebrow and noted to himself that Millicent seemed to resent the Grand Unified Theory more than he’d thought. *Something to remember*. “What do you think, Draco?”

Draco was reading Cupressus Apollonis’s letter, which he’d sent to Harry when he found out his allies were abandoning him, in silence. Now he lifted his head and raised a lazy eyebrow.

“You didn’t even notice the implication he gave that you both have an equal social standing?” he asked.

“What equal social standing?” demanded a Slytherin third-year, Josephine Hornblower, leaning forward. Harry had been aware that the letter was attracting attention outside the contingent of himself, Millicent, Owen, and Draco, but this was the first person who had intruded.

“Look at this.” Draco unabashedly showed her the letter, ignoring Harry’s attempt to snatch it back. “He’s claiming that they’re both Lords. That’s insulting on at least two levels. Harry’s not Declared and he won’t use compulsion, and Apollonis doesn’t have enough power to be a Lord.”

“That was a turn of phrase,” Harry muttered, disgusted. “I think it was just his wording that was bad. It’s not what he *meant*, Draco.”

Draco’s second eyebrow joined the first. “So what?”

Harry opened his mouth to retort, but Josephine interrupted. “That’s *disgusting*,” she said roundly, and waved the letter like a banner. “He has no right to talk to anyone like that, much less someone stronger than he is and who just took his allies away from him. If he didn’t have the power to keep them, then he shouldn’t have extracted promises from them in the first place.” She faced Harry. “I want to take this and have my cousin publish it. Can I?”

Harry imagined that letter in the *Vox Populi* and opened his mouth to refuse. It would insult Cupressus horribly, and probably make him all the more infuriated and likely to strike out blindly.

And then he thought of the insulting tone of the letter, which he would have found intolerable even when his training was in full effect, and how Cupressus seemed to believe that the allegiance of Periwinkle Lyrebird and the others was some sort of material possession that Harry had stolen and could simply hand back to him.

Does he deserve the courtesy of a reply?

No, he doesn’t.

Harry shut his mouth and nodded to Josephine. “If you want to send it to your cousin Dionysus, you have my permission.”

Josephine gave him a smile that resembled a shark’s, and jumped up from the table to run to the Owlery.

“Was that the *wisest* idea?” Millicent asked, gingerly.

Harry shrugged and started eating again. “Maybe it would be better to keep it private,” he said. “But then, I think, he would continue to believe that I was going to back down and yield to him. Elder Juniper of the Wizengamot thought the same way, as long as I accepted the way he owed me. And I have no time and no patience to dance with Cupressus Apollonis the way he wants me to. I have no respect for him, either, given what he did to his daughter.” *His daughters, perhaps.* Scrimgeour had told him that he thought their nameless helper against Falco Parkinson was an Apollonis daughter, a younger sister of Ignifer’s, from clues in her latest letter, and he was planning a raid to free her if possible. “This will at least set the terms of our feud out in the open.”

“Of course it will,” said Draco, looking serene. “That’s why I showed the letter to Josephine in the first place.”

Harry let him think that.

Wednesday

“What is *that*?” Harry slammed to a stop just inside the room that Thomas had taken as his own, frankly staring. He had grown used to seeing scatterings of odd notes, equally odd diagrams, and sometimes spell residue in this room, but he had never seen anything like the white sphere that turned gyrations around Thomas’s head. Harry thought at first it was following the course of his wand, but then he realized Thomas stood with his hands and his wand both hanging limply at his sides, laughing.

“There you are, Harry.” Thomas motioned him closer. “This is what happened when I said *Diffindo* while holding my nose.”

“While holding your nose.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Thomas, not noticing or disregarding his tone of voice. “I received some new research from Jing-Xi today. She said that the part of the body least affected by cutting spells like *Diffindo* was the nose.” He touched his own nose, the strip of skin between the nostrils. “Probably because it refuses to have its openings simply sitting unconnected in the skin; they’re surrounded on all sides by more skin.”

“And so when you held your nose—“

“It influenced the course of the spell,” Thomas said smugly. “The magic reaches back to the caster, and relies on the presence of an uncut nose to work. Jing-Xi thinks that those people with damaged noses, say, broken in battle, are the ones who can least successfully cast it. I hold my nose, and the magic can’t sense either a wound or the ordinary place it depends on for its anchor. So it turns inside out and becomes this unbroken sphere instead.” He grinned up at the white sphere. He held his hand out, and it came and hovered over his fingers, never quite alighting.

“That’s really *strange*,” said Harry, unable to help himself.

“No, it’s not,” Thomas said absently, still gazing at the sphere. Harry studied it, too, but it wasn’t like a crystal ball; he couldn’t see a reflection or a trace of a vision. It simply existed as a dove-colored round object. “It all makes sense. It’s just that, most of the time, all the laws of magic are interconnected at levels that we ignore, or never suspect exist. But we’re studying them right now.”

“Do you think you’ll ever understand them all successfully?” Harry asked, intrigued despite himself. Thomas’s attitude towards magic in general reminded him of his attitude towards magical creatures. It did not really matter if the laws, or the magical species, had an impact on the future course of wizarding society, or were *useful*. It was enough that they existed.

“Of course not,” said Thomas, looking momentarily distressed. “Or, at least, I hope that I’m dead by the time it happens, if it does. How *boring*, to live in a world like that.”

He went back to peering at the sphere, and Harry went back to watching him and smiling, because he couldn’t restrain that much of his amusement. He’d intended to ask Thomas if he’d found any traces of magical contamination in Draco’s body.

But given Thomas’s expression and the sudden, slow revolution of the sphere for no discernible reason, that could wait.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Five: A Dagger Through the Vitals

“Sir! *Sir!*”

Rufus woke with a half-shout, staggering up from the middle of his bed. He blinked for a moment, and then frowned when he saw the room lit only by the glare of the green flames from the hearth. He habitually left his Floo connection open to a select number of people, so they could fetch him if there was an emergency at the Ministry in the middle of the night, but he didn’t recognize the woman whose head hovered there now.

“Is something wrong, Madam?” he asked gruffly, trying to look as dignified as he could while beneath the sheets in his pyjamas. A dressing gown hung on the back of the bed, luckily, and he slung it around his shoulders while he watched her closely.

“I’m sorry, sir.” The witch covered her mouth with one hand and looked down. Rufus saw the crossed wand-and-bone emblem of St. Mungo’s on her shoulder, and doubted that it was because of any embarrassment at seeing a near-naked man on her part. More likely, embarrassment at disturbing the Minister out of his sound night’s sleep. “But you did ask us to let you know if she ever woke up, and they said this was the Floo connection to use during the night, not the one in your office, and—“

“If *whom* ever woke up?” Rufus asked, baffled. There were patients in St. Mungo’s whose awakening would have been cause for rejoicing, old comrades of his put into comas by Death Eater curses during the First War, but Rufus couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually hoped for that.

“Fiona Mallory, sir.” The witch seemed to shrink in front of him as he stared at her. “The, er, the Auror arrested and sacked for the torture of Harry Potter’s parents, sir? She went into a coma from a Dark magical artifact, and now she’s awake.”

Rufus felt his heart give a single hard pound, and then he was fully awake and committed to the situation. Fiona had been one of his finest Aurors before she let her own anger at the abusive Potters get the better of her. He had never been able to shake the sensation that her sudden sleep was revenge more than an accident with Dark magic, even as he’d had to admit failure and move her from the Ministry to St. Mungo’s. “I did leave instructions to know at once if that happened. How did she wake up?”

The witch swallowed loudly, and Rufus realized then that some of the pallor in her face came from fear. “Un—Unspeakables, sir. They came into her room with a kind of wand that held all of us motionless. When they touched her with it, it glowed blue, and she w-woke up.”

Rufus hissed. It made sense that the Unspeakables would possess an artifact that could end Mallory's coma. They probably had the one that had dropped her into it in the first place. "And where is Fiona now?"

The witch cringed.

"Madam?" Rufus asked softly.

"The Un—Unspeakables gave her a Portkey," said the Healer, so softly that Rufus almost couldn't hear her. "She was saying something about speaking to Harry when she vanished." She peered at him with wide, frightened eyes. "Has she gone to talk to the *vates*, then, sir?"

"Yes," Rufus said shortly, only because she would spread rumors if he didn't acknowledge this somehow. *Damn it, damn it, damn it.* The last thing that needed to happen was Harry confronting his parents' torturer in the middle of the night. Of course, it was probably something the Stone would find amusing.

What are you playing at now, rock?

"Thank you for contacting me," he told the witch, and snuffed out the Floo connection with a wave of his wand. Then he hurried to put on the dressing gown and cast a handful of Floo powder into the hearth, hoping against hope that he would not need to call long before his target awakened.

"Headmistress's Office, Hogwarts!"

Harry felt the surprised quiver of the wards before he even opened his eyes. He was already rolling into a battle-prepared posture, feeling Draco's loose clasp on him suddenly turn firm. He cast a silent Summoning Charm for Draco's wand, and heard it smack into his palm.

Then he opened his eyes.

A woman stood in front of him whom he didn't recognize at first, gaunt and starveling, her hair straggling like a mass of twigs around her face, her blue eyes sunken in her head. She clutched the Portkey that seemed to have brought her straight through the wards as if it would keep her from falling. Harry narrowed his eyes. The Portkey wasn't the bit of rubbish touched with *Portus* that usually served well enough. It was a small, key-shaped piece of silver, and it shone with such magic that Harry immediately brought some of his own power up in defense.

"Auror Mallory?" he asked slowly. The last thing he'd known, she lay in a coma from an accident with a Dark magical artifact, and she wasn't likely to wake up soon.

"Harry," she whispered, and stared at him some more.

"She's not supposed to be here," Draco said, his arms tightening so much that Harry almost couldn't breathe. "How did she get through the wards? What does she want? Be careful, Harry."

"I know," Harry murmured, his puzzlement increasing when Auror Mallory simply stood there. Someone had exercised her muscles for her, probably by magic, while she lay in bed, but they were still thin blobs of meat around sticks. She certainly didn't make a very efficient assassin. *Who would send her, anyway? Why not send someone else to kill me?* "But—" He shook his head, and decided that just because they were speaking about her as if she wasn't there didn't *mean* she had to stand there silent and gaping. "Auror Mallory," he said gently. "Fiona. What are you here for? Who did this to you?"

Her eyes came painfully alive, and she took a single staggering step forward. "They rescued me," she whispered. "The ones who put me in the blackness in the first place, they rescued me and sent me back."

"Who?" Harry asked.

"The Unspeakables."

I thought the Stone was staying out of politics, Harry thought, even as he had to admit that it wasn't a very political move to wake up a sleeping woman and send her to him. Even if that woman *had* tortured his parents. Harry felt an uneasy consciousness stirring and struggling in him; he thought he should probably hate her more than he did for that, but Lily and James had been put

so thoroughly into his past that it was like trying to remember a hatred from a hundred years ago. “Why did they send you back?” he asked. “Why release you?”

“They wanted you to know,” Mallory said, and then bowed her head and began shivering. Harry cast a Warming Charm on her, eye all the while on the silver Portkey. It simply shone.

“Why aren’t you fetching Professor Snape?” Draco hissed to the back of his neck. “You *should* be.”

“I won’t hear what she has to say if someone takes her away now,” Harry pointed out. He thought this was eminently reasonable, and didn’t understand why Draco lifted his wrist as if he would cast the phoenix communication spell. “*No.*” He forced Draco’s hand down, and turned to look at Auror Mallory again. “What did they want me to know?” It would probably be a lie, even if she sincerely believed it, but that didn’t matter. Harry didn’t have to act on Unspeakable lies any more. If the matter required it, he would go and face the Stone down again in the Department of Mysteries. The anger surging through him was certainly strong enough for that.

“Know—“ Mallory squeezed her eyes shut, and stood a moment as if debating whether to tell him the truth. Harry, his magical senses raised to a high pitch because he expected the silver Portkey to do something spectacular, felt it when the wards on the Slytherin common room quivered and then admitted someone. He grimaced. *Merlin knows how Snape found out about this so fast, but maybe he felt her come through the wards, too.*

“Know that I only tortured your parents later,” said Mallory suddenly, opening her eyes. “The first person who tortured them was Lucius Malfoy.”

Harry felt the moment when the words tore through him, a dagger through the vitals, a steel blade that impaled and twisted his guts out of line. He wanted to bend over and feel at the wound beating inside him, judge how badly he was hurt.

But he heard Draco draw a pained breath at the same time, and forced himself through the moment by remembering he wasn’t the only person with a stake in this. He scooted backward and wrapped one arm around Draco’s shoulders and one around his waist, drawing him against him. He held him there while he gazed at Mallory. “What did he do to them?” he asked, surprising himself with the flat calm of his own voice. “And when? Do you know?”

“Not long before I was arrested,” she said, voice becoming more lively, as if the memories sparked more strength in her. “The same day. I was there to take the fall for him, just in case someone suspected that something was wrong with the wards on your parents’ cells.” Harry saw a flash of contempt deep in her eyes, even now, for Lily and James. He supposed they didn’t stop being abusers to Mallory just because they’d hurt. “I know he did something bad to them. Something painful, worse than the battle curses I used. I don’t know what it was.”

Harry nodded tightly, and felt the touch of wet breath on his neck as Draco made a torn noise of disbelief. “Hush,” he whispered, then looked at Mallory. “And this is true?”

“I swear it is.” Mallory smiled, a bit bitterly. “Scrimgeour sacked me after that, because he thought I’d overstepped the boundary of my duties—“

“You did,” Harry murmured. He could feel Snape now, trying his best to open the door of their bedroom. Harry lifted locking wards his guardian couldn’t get through and continued stroking Draco’s back, gaze focused on Mallory.

“How would I have come into contact with a Dark artifact held in the Ministry?” Mallory spread her hands. “The Unspeakables did it for him, put me into that coma. And they took me out again. I don’t know why. I don’t know anything about them. But I swear that everything else is the truth.”

I can’t be allies with Lucius any more.

But this is Draco’s father, and saying that is like saying I won’t be Draco’s lover any more.

Harry felt the first impact of Snape’s magic against the wards, and sighed. He would be in here in a moment, and he would probably attempt to kill Mallory first and ask questions later. He was in that kind of mood, from the sound of it. “I’ll tell everyone else. You should go. Do you have a safe place?”

Mallory blinked. “You—you care about that? I tortured your parents!”

“You did.” Harry stared at her some more, and still there was a void of feeling where he should have expected raw anger and

pain. *Probably, the rest of it just hurts too much.* And the silent sobbing Draco was now giving against him increased his own emotions towards other people, not Mallory. “But I think I forgave you for it. And you’ve told me who really instigated the torment. So I think you can go.” He shuddered as Snape’s wandless magic nearly managed to penetrate a weak place in his wards, and added, “Not for very much longer, though.”

Mallory nodded. “The Unspeakables swore they would see me safe,” she said, and clenched her hand around the Portkey, and tilted back her head, and dissolved into a mass of silver sparks, and was gone.

Harry lowered the wards and lay down on the bed with his arms folded around Draco, still rubbing his spine, still letting Draco cling to him like a young monkey, and now murmuring soothing words. “Draco, I’ll never make you choose. I promise. He’s your father. I know that. I respect that. You don’t have to choose between us. I promise that—“

And then the door flew open, and Snape was there, and perhaps it was better that Harry hadn’t promised anything, because the memory of the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow were coming back to him, and what he had promised to do to anyone who broke them, and the fact that Ignifer had told him the Unspeakables had threatened her father. Cupressus Apollonis had not broken. Would Lucius, who owed an actual debt to the Unspeakables in the form of Mallory, have done so? And what might he have given them if he did?

Not what, Harry thought, his mind landing as if by fate on the fact that they still didn’t know who had betrayed Hawthorn as a werewolf to the Ministry. *Who.*

Snape bowed over him, saying harshly, “What happened? Are you hurt?”

“Not physically,” said Harry, sinking his emotions into the Occlumency pools. Snape’s sharp glance said he knew what Harry was doing and did not approve, but Harry ignored him. This was too important. He needed to view his situation as an outsider and keep moving forward, or the pain would cripple him. “Fiona Mallory woke from her coma. The Auror who tortured my parents?” he supplied, when he saw the confusion in Snape’s eyes. “She said that she did cast curses on them, but she was the fall witch for Lucius. He tortured them in more depth and detail.”

Snape closed his eyes, and his mouth tightened for a long moment. Harry curled up more around Draco.

“I am taking you both to the hospital wing,” Snape said, as the small, frantic sounds that Draco was making soared. “He needs a Calming Draught.”

Harry knew that Snape would pour a potion down his throat, too, if Harry gave him the chance. He would not give him the chance. His Occlumency would serve him well enough, to let him think about this.

And he had to think.

But he could see the path sprouting ahead of him, leading him, step by dismal step, to the end of draining Lucius Malfoy of his magic.

Draco couldn’t breathe that well. He could hear Madam Pomfrey speaking to him in a low, worried voice, trying to get him to uncurl from around Harry and swallow a Calming Draught. Now and then she would stop and ask Professor Snape for some report on his symptoms, and whether he still thought Draco needed the potion. And all the while Harry held him and didn’t stop moving his hand on his back.

They probably thought he refused to uncurl because he was ashamed, Draco thought, or because he was frightened about what would happen to his father if Harry went after him.

He wasn’t, or else that was only in some part of his mind which the main emotion he felt wouldn’t let him access. He was murderously *angry*.

Did he have to be so stubborn? So stupid? He tortured the Potters because he was taking the place of Harry as vengeance-taker, I know. But he knew, he had to have known, that this was one of the cases where the victim waived not just his right to take vengeance but the right to vengeance altogether. He should have come to Harry, talked to him, asked him about this. And then Harry would have had the means of outright refusal, instead of finding out now.

What he did was wrong. I know how the tradition functions. Someone else can take revenge if the abused child doesn’t take it, but

he has to have the child's permission. The only exceptions are blood family. Connor could have done this, but not Lucius.

And he thought he was high enough above the old laws and rules to ignore them all. He thought they didn't apply to him.

I am so fucking tired of having Harry be a better guardian of the Malfoy honor than my father is.

At last, he heard Pomfrey and Snape discussing a spell to make him look up, and that was when he decided that he'd had quite enough of that. He uncramped his limbs, and when Harry gave him a long, anxious look, nodded. He could sit up on his own. He *could*.

"Has anyone contacted my mother?" he asked, attempting to ignore the fact that his voice was hoarse and his face splotched from his tears of fury. Madam Pomfrey came towards him with a Calming Draught. Harry held out his hand and prevented her from doing so, eyes on Draco's face all the while.

"No, Draco," he said quietly. "We didn't know if you'd want that done. Would you like it done?"

Draco nodded once. Harry bowed his head slightly, then started to move away from the bed and towards the hospital wing's fireplace.

"Harry?"

He got a look in return that made him shiver, it seemed so cold and uncaring, until he realized that Harry had locked down his emotions in order to function. *Well, that makes sense.* "Yes?"

"Are you going to kill my father, or drain him of his magic?" Draco was proud of his voice. It didn't waver. It didn't even make it sound as though those were things that might or might not happen. It made it sound as though those were the only two alternatives, and Harry had to make one or the other of them come true.

"I don't know," said Harry quietly. "It would depend on what he did to my parents. And—to other people."

He took a handful of Floo powder before Draco could ask what that meant, and cast it into the fire with a call of, "Number Twelve Grimmauld Place!"

"Mr. Malfoy," Pomfrey said, almost shoving the vial in his face. "I do insist that you swallow this. You are too on edge right now."

"I am not on edge," said Draco, and thank Merlin, he could use his voice like a rapier, not like the wound spring he had suspected it might uncoil as. Pomfrey actually took a step away from him. "I am *angry*. I am mourning the downfall of my family honor. I am plotting ways to let my father know how disappointed I am in him before he dies. That's all."

"Let him be, Poppy," said Professor Snape quietly.

The matron glanced between both of them, then threw up her hands and stomped away, muttering about Slytherins. Snape took another step forward, eyes focused intently on Draco. Draco leaned forward and looked back. This was a man he hadn't seen in at least a week, since Snape had visited him in the hospital wing after the battle with Falco Parkinson: his Head of House.

"You know that your father may not survive the morning," Snape said.

"I know it," said Draco, and he did, and amidst all the pain that he wasn't going to admit to was the clean, sharp sawing of his anger. He really did feel that—not just because he wanted to, but because he *did*. It swept him up in pride. He was a fitting Malfoy heir after all, in a way that his father had not been for years. "He betrayed our name. He betrayed our honor. He has to die. Or lose his magic," he added. "That was the punishment Harry laid out for violating the oaths of the Alliance, and I would be content with that."

"Lucius would rather die than lose his magic," Snape said.

"I know that," Draco said.

"You are not mourning the loss of your father?"

Draco curled his lip. "I would be mourning it far more if I thought there was a chance he'd been under Imperius, or otherwise

coaxed into doing these things,” he said. “As it is—no. He knew what the consequences of getting caught were, and one of the first lessons he taught me was not getting caught. He should have known better.”

Snape nodded and paced slowly away from the bed towards Harry, who was talking to Narcissa through the fireplace. Draco leaned back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

He did mean it. Lucius had always slipped through the nooses and traps his enemies laid because he took grand risks, but no unnecessary ones. He had been growing more reckless of late, as his disownment of Draco showed, and the moment a Malfoy took a risk and failed, he became contemptible.

Unless he really was under Imperius.

But he hadn't been. And he hadn't been when he was a Death Eater, either, even if he had managed to convince the Wizengamot he was.

Draco flinched a bit as he recalled one of his very first serious conversations with Harry, back in first year, when Harry had insisted that, yes, Lucius was a Death Eater, and calmly detailed his crimes. Draco had refused to believe it then—because he loved his father, but even more because he could not believe that the proud, elegant man he knew would leave evidence of his crimes behind if he had really performed them of his own free will. So he had been under Imperius. He had to have been.

But he wasn't.

And you tortured three Muggleborn children and their parents to death, Father, and left signs that you did so. You killed the Prewett twins, but only in company with four other wizards. Your deeds in war are of a piece with what you have done in the last year.

For the good of the family, Lucius Malfoy had to cease to be a wizard.

Draco took a deep breath, glad now that he'd learned the pureblood dances, glad that he'd been raised a pureblood. This made things easier when someone in the family had a horrible breach of taste or committed a horrendous crime. Other families would hang on their necks and cry and let themselves be dragged down, too. Draco had had the training to cut a useless blood relative out of his heart quickly and easily. The family must survive.

And then his mother came through the flames, and put her arms around him, and Draco allowed himself just a bit of comfort from knowing that someone else *did* feel the howling sadness and the pain within him.

Hawthorn paused. A letter lay on the table beside her bed. It had not lain there a moment ago, she knew. She had only turned her back to retrieve her hairbrush, which had fallen, and when she straightened, there it was.

Cautiously, she picked up her wand and approached, casting several spells on the way. No charms were revealed on the letter, only, strangely enough, the fading glow of Apparition, as if it had managed to transport itself.

The parchment was gray, and folded so as to make its own envelope. The seal holding it shut was black, an hourglass. Hawthorn Levitated the letter into the air and carefully slit the seal with a Cutting Curse, making the parchment fall open.

The words were written in an elegant, slashing hand, easily read from the careful distance she stood at. There was only one sentence.

Lucius Malfoy was the one who betrayed you to the Unspeakables, and through them to the Aurors.

Hawthorn stared. She felt old rage coursing through her like lava beneath solid rock. It was easily roused. She had had dreams, lately—such dreams, hard to remember, but still present in tattered pieces in her mind when she woke, of running after the Aurors who had mistreated her when she was in Tullianum, or Indigena Yaxley, or the mysterious person who had been the one to betray her werewolf status, and biting them. She wanted it so much. The hatred was a black beast beside her in the dreams, always present for the bite, and always giving her a moment of dark satisfaction before she finally woke.

But this—

This was confirmation. If she dared to think it was. The Unspeakables could have sent this letter through her wards. They could

also be lying, trying to set Harry's allies against one another.

But a part of Hawthorn's mind she rarely used now, the part that had reveled in the name of the Red Death when she ran with Voldemort, woke and stretched and applied itself with rapid calculation to the possibilities.

Was Lucius ruthless enough to betray an ally like this? Yes, if it would gain him something greater. Hawthorn did not know what else it might have won him, but she knew the great prize: more unimpeded access to and influence over Harry. Lucius and Harry had had their first falling out around the time of the werewolf rebellion—just before it, in fact. And if Lucius had betrayed her to the Unspeakables, he might have hoped that he would have some more say over Harry's actions with Hawthorn gone.

It had probably been nothing personal. The Unspeakables wanted werewolves. Had they demanded one of Lucius? They probably had. And he had given them one close to Harry, close enough that it would hurt Harry when she was taken. That it had provoked Harry into organized rebellion instead of mad scrambling was simply Lucius and the Department's bad luck.

That doesn't mean he did it, Hawthorn counseled herself, trying to keep down the howl of the wolf inside her. It was still near the dark of the moon, but even now, a provocation like this was enough to rouse the beast. *It means only that he had an opportunity to do so, and perhaps a motive.*

And the Unspeakables would hardly have told this to her now out of the kindness of their hearts.

With a hand that trembled, Hawthorn took the letter, folded it up, and put it into her robe pocket. Then she tapped her wrist with her wand to activate the phoenix song communication spell. She would do nothing hastily. She would not rush off to confront Lucius, as the Unspeakables had probably hoped.

She would contact Harry. She would ask him if he thought there was a possibility of this being true, and if so, what they should do.

Lucius also found a letter on his breakfast table that morning. He nodded. He had expected it. Gray parchment, black hourglass seal. When the piled stones began to fall at last, he had expected they would come from this direction, the most vulnerable place.

We have told them, the letter said. *Harry and Hawthorn Parkinson. They will be here soon.*

Lucius laughed, a little, and stood from the table to check that his defenses were ready. Since he was found out, what he *could* do was face his coming fate like a man. Some disgraced purebloods could recoup a bit of honor to their names by admitting to accusations they knew were true and accepting execution or maiming or a duel, whichever the accuser chose.

He did not quite intend to go *that* far. It was only fools who did. And Lucius knew what honor was worth, and the answer was not his life.

But he would give what credit he could to the Malfoy name, for the sake of the son who would bear it after him.

And, thanks to the Unspeakables' eagerness to make sure he knew just what was going to happen to him, he had extra time to prepare.

He shook his head in amused disbelief as he went into his study. *I hope that Harry considers the trade in allies he's just made fair.*

Harry watched Narcissa and Draco embrace in silence, and tried to decide what to do.

Birds of fright wheeled and scattered in his thoughts whenever he tried to attend to them without the Occlumency pools. Therefore, he didn't try to attend to them without the Occlumency pools. He kept his emotions pinned, because they couldn't help him in this case, and considered his options.

Execution of Lucius was one possibility, for overstepping his bounds. But Harry had refused that option with most of the people who had hurt him, his parents included, and he would not embrace it now.

Turning him over to the Ministry for trial would work—if only he could be sure that the Unspeakables would not touch him there,

if only he could be sure that the Wizengamot would actually find him guilty this time and not be swayed by Malfoy money and Malfoy charisma into letting him go. No, much as he would have liked to, Harry could not say that he trusted the Ministry to conduct an objective trial of Lucius Malfoy.

Cowing him as he had Henrietta and binding him with Unbreakable Vows would perhaps have been a choice if Harry thought he possessed the power to grind Lucius's temperament into gravel. But he did not, and Lucius Malfoy was not Henrietta Bulstrode. He might pretend to bow his neck, but he would wriggle and test the slack in his bonds, and find some way to get around the Vows, Harry was sure. Besides, intense anger at Henrietta for the way she had treated Edith had been his main impetus to bind her, not the injury Henrietta had done him.

If he harmed Hawthorn, his thoughts whispered, could you not find the anger to bind Lucius?

But if he harmed Hawthorn, then he had done it while a member of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. And he had been subject to its oaths then, and there was only one punishment for that. Harry had said he would drain the magic of anyone who betrayed a comrade rather than simply withdrawing from the Alliance.

He closed his eyes. He would have found this so much easier if not for Draco.

"Harry?"

It took him a moment to realize that the voice came from his wrist; he had been so caught up in his thoughts that he hadn't heard the warble of phoenix song. And, ah, it was Hawthorn's voice.

"Mrs. Parkinson," Harry murmured, glad his own voice did not shake. "What is the matter?"

"I've received a letter saying that Lucius Malfoy betrayed me to the Unspeakables," said Hawthorn. "I need—I need to come to Hogwarts and speak to you about this. May I?"

Harry heard the soft sounds from Draco's direction cease. He looked, because he couldn't help himself, and saw Draco leaning in the shelter of his mother's arms, eyes fixed on his. Harry looked straight into his boyfriend's face, and could not look away.

He saw Draco mouth, "Tell her yes."

As if in a dream, Harry lowered his mouth towards his wrist and said, "Of course, Hawthorn. Come ahead. I'm in the hospital wing."

"Wounded?" Hawthorn's voice grew sharp. Harry marveled at her strength, that even bound up in her own pain she would spare a moment's thought for what might have happened to him.

"No," said Harry. "Just in shock, a bit. Please do come ahead, Hawthorn." He ended the communication spell when he heard her assent, and looked again at Draco and Narcissa, not believing what he saw in their faces.

Draco spoke before his mother could. "Drain him, Harry."

"Draco, he's your father—"

"He betrayed her," said Draco stonily. "You don't *do* that, not when the ally has never done you any harm. And not when you can get caught." He shifted restlessly closer to Narcissa, but Harry thought he was offering comfort as much as seeking it. "And he put you in an impossible position politically, and he knew it. And he didn't think about what the effect would be on you, of knowing that your parents suffered. He just tortured them because he wanted to, because he could. He doesn't think about other people, and the only time a Malfoy can afford to do that is when he doesn't have any dependents or any allies. He had both." Draco's face was eerie in its intense conviction. "Drain him, and keep his power for yourself. His magic is the only thing of value he has left to offer, now."

Harry looked at Narcissa.

"If he did all that Mrs. Mallory and Mrs. Parkinson have said," said Narcissa, after a moment of long, long silence, "then I must agree, Harry. I am—I am the one who sought Hawthorn out, who brought her into this alliance with you. I did it intending her nothing but good, as well as knowing that she would make a wonderful loyalist for you if you could persuade her. It is like the maneuvering I did on your behalf in the third year; I intended nothing but good, and still I wrought you harm. I have wrought her harm, exposed her to my husband's attention. I knew that he was conducting correspondence with someone mysterious in the

days before Hawthorn was arrested. I should have picked up the clues.”

“Mrs. Malfoy—“

“Narcissa, Harry. Call me by the name I have most claim to. And I say that I should have picked up on them. The standard that most matters in such a thing is the witch’s. I failed my own.” Narcissa leaned her head on Draco’s hair, pale and silent.

Harry closed his eyes and nodded, even as he heard, faint and far away, the “pop” of Apparition as Hawthorn appeared on the edge of Hogwarts grounds.

Lucius felt the moment Harry, Draco, Narcissa, Severus, and Hawthorn arrived on the outer defenses of the Manor. Of course, the first three of them could have passed through the wards without trouble, linked to them as they were, but the presence of the fourth and fifth kept them excluded.

Lucius waited, calmly, at the door to his study. On one side of him was a stack of papers and ledgers that Draco would need to examine to know the intricacies of the Malfoy legacy. Lucius had played him no tricks, but that did not mean that what he must keep track of was *simple*.

On the other side of him stood a single vial with three drops of clear fluid in it.

In his hand was his wand.

He waited, and lowered the wards when he felt Harry begin to drain them. He did not want his home damaged. It would be Draco’s home thereafter, and the home of the heirs Draco adopted. It was not, strictly speaking, Lucius’s property to expose to the spells of his enemies anymore.

He could taste their wariness as they ventured inside, looking for traps all the way. Lucius had not trapped the rooms, however. They would discover that eventually, and come to him. He was willing to while the moments away by running his plan through his head, though he knew it was perfect; he wished to admire the angles and the cleverness of it. And sooner or later, they would arrive at the door of the study, and see him, and pause.

They did. Severus was in the front, beside Harry, and Lucius was glad, because they would be able to identify the Veritaserum Lucius picked up and swallowed even from a short distance.

The brief, cloudy dullness of the drug came over him. However, Lucius fully planned on telling the truth even without prompting, without questions, and so the numbness faded.

He looked Harry in the eye, and said, “I used a species of insect on your father that will give him cancer in a short time. They should remain even though he is drained of magic. The answer as to how to defeat them is there.” He gestured to the book on medical magic he’d placed among the Malfoy ledgers. “I cast a spell on your mother that will stretch her dying moment to an eternity of suffering. You can take that away by using your *absorbere* gift, I am certain.”

“Did you betray me?” Hawthorn asked, shouldering Harry and Severus aside so that she could see him. Lucius lifted his head and studied her, letting his mouth reply without hindrance.

“I did.”

And then things fell out as he had known they would. Lucius felt almost as if he were the piper and led his foes the dance.

Hawthorn howled and charged at him. Lucius had known her rage and hatred would compel that; even though she was a controlled witch most of the time, she hated traitors, always had, and she had a werewolf’s temper urging her on now. He lifted his wand and cast the complicated illusion spell he’d practiced until he could do it nonverbally.

The spell took form in the air between them, in enough time that Hawthorn had to stop and watch it. It reached into Hawthorn’s memory and tugged out the image of her child dying—it had to be her child, because her dead husband had not been her mate—and played it again in front of her.

Lucius listened, timing out the moments, feeling the stunned immobility of the others melting instant by instant, and heard only the wolf in Hawthorn’s voice when she howled again.

She came at him without mercy, but also without coordination, and her wand was half-forgotten in the overpowering, pressing need to grip him in her jaws or shred him with her nails. The book on werewolves had said it would be so. The pack instinct was strong in them, and they could be fooled by the spell into thinking that someone who had not actually killed their child or mate was the murderer.

Lucius flicked his wand again, and sang the second spell he'd prepared in his mind. *Argenteus!*

A series of silver blades formed in midair between him and Hawthorn, and flicked forward, studding her shoulders, her arms, her torso. The shock did not kill her at once, as it would have with a normal human, but it bore her to the ground, and then she howled once in such pain that Severus bent over to help her.

Lucius had debated in his mind whether Harry would bend over to help Hawthorn, too, but he did not think so, and he was proven right as Harry stood where he was, staring, eyes focused on him.

It was too bad, really, that he had to be exiled from such power, Lucius thought, watching even as he felt the winds begin to build and knew Harry was gathering his magic to swallow Lucius's own. He should have trusted his insight that night when Harry had declared the Alliance. Here was a wizard worth serving, strength worth being close to—might, as he had described it, once, long ago, to his son.

But that might was not worth losing his own magic to, and so, before Harry could overcome his own shock and doubt and personal pain long enough to drain him, Lucius touched the Portkey that shone around his neck, in the form of the top button of his robe, and flickered out of his study into the room behind it. At his gesture, wards sprang up around the open door to the study, blue and green and softly flickering. Lucius had shown no one else these wards, not even his beloved Narcissa. His father had impressed on him the need to keep them secret and safe, and so Lucius had always done. Those wards, the product of an Unassailable Curse, would only allow someone of Malfoy blood to pass into this room, and they could not be destroyed, anchored as they were in the actual flesh and tissue of the line, unless all living Malfoys were already dead. Lucius thought the ancestor who designed them must have faced an *absorbere* at some point.

Narcissa pressed forward, and was thrown back. Harry tried to drain them, and the wards slipped away from him and snarled. Lucius did lock eyes with both of them, and try to give them a final farewell and a summation of all they had meant to him and what he thought of them now.

Draco slid past his mother, and into the room.

An expression of shock came over his features, holding him in place. Lucius had known that would happen. He spoke swiftly to his son, even as one hand shot behind him to hover above the powerful Portkey they would have sensed at once if he carried it on him.

“You are my pride, Draco. Though I had little enough to do with it that I am ashamed of myself, you have become a man, and a rightful heir to the Malfoy line. The best of your mother is in you, and of me as well. You are not a subordinate to Harry, I see that now, and you will do our blood proud.”

The Veritaserum in his body would not let him speak less than the truth. Lucius used that as a double-edged sword. It let him tell this young wizard, less than a month from his seventeenth birthday and thus from coming of age, with his blond hair half-tousled behind him from the wind of his speed and his wand raised in an attack position and his body coiled in a defensive posture, what he really thought of him.

And the words, so unlike what Draco expected to hear, kept him frozen in place one extra moment, the moment his father needed.

Lucius grasped the Portkey.

The Manor dissolved around him, shutting out the sight of Draco's lunge and the curse he tried to cast, which Lucius was sure went through his fading form and destroyed the desk he'd been standing in front of. He felt a moment's faint regret. He had liked that desk.

He landed on a desolate heath, and glanced around with a resigned expression. Finvarra Malfoy had not chosen the prettiest of the Malfoy properties to make the safehouse. Of course, if she had, then sooner or later a child would have contrived to kill his or parent so that they could safely inherit it.

And the house, though small, would keep Lucius comfortably enough, alive and safe behind wards that no one else could pass,

because no one else was a part of the oldest living generation of Malfoys.

He ducked into the house, and the wards closed around him. Lucius took off his cloak with a sigh and a shake of his shoulders.

The house was cold, but a wave of his wand lit the hearth. He was thirsty, but a few charms summoned him a glass and an old bottle of wine. Lucius had been saving it for the day that his son came of age. He felt no qualms in opening it now, even though he had always envisioned sharing it with Draco in proud silence. He had seen that Draco was already an adult, birthday here yet or no.

He drank, sitting calmly in front of the fire, and cast the Summoning Charm to call a book on the history of the merfolk to him. It was a subject he had long meant to study, and had never had the time to look at before.

Merlin, he loved being a wizard.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Six: The Last of the Potters

Harry did not wait for Draco to come out of the warded room from which Lucius had vanished, although he heard Draco curse and curse, the second one destroying a desk. Snape had called him back with a low hiss to Hawthorn's side, and Harry was stooping over her, seeing the red lines of infection spreading out from each embedded silver knife.

"We must take her to Hogwarts," said Snape, with what Harry recognized as one of his more controlled expressions. "I do not have potions that can stop silver poisoning here. She will need more than salve to insure that she heals correctly, this time; she will need the potions, and careful applications of medical magic so that she does not scar." He was holding his hands away from Hawthorn's blood, Harry noted, wary of the lycanthropic infection, even though it was the dark of the moon. "And there may be supplies we can only fetch from St. Mungo's, which will be a problem. They still make it a policy not to treat known werewolves if they can get away with it, and Hawthorn bears the Dark Mark as well."

"Leave that to me," Harry said quietly, staring at Hawthorn all the while. Silver studded her like a collar, a collar put around her life. Harry could feel an enormous weariness on her behalf. *So much suffering she has endured, and still no end in sight.* He put out his hand, and Hawthorn rose from the floor, Levitated in comfort. Luckily, she was already unconscious from the shock and pain. "I'll take her back to Hogwarts. You make sure Draco and Narcissa are all right."

Snape nodded, and then Harry was running steadily back through Malfoy Manor, Hawthorn skimming beside him. He steered her around corners and over furniture they'd examined for traps, letting his magic and his muscles do more of the thinking for him than his mind.

There were so many things to be done.

There were so many things he was not looking forward to doing.

But he had to do them, so Harry carefully balled up his emotions and sank them, and then reached the outside of Malfoy Manor with Hawthorn and Apparated away.

"We need Argent-Free Potions," said Madam Pomfrey, with a helpless shake of her head. "They've just been developed to help werewolves recover from silver poisoning—it hasn't been a large area of research, for obvious reasons—and I don't know all the ingredients, so I can't just ask Severus to brew them. And the only place in Britain that has them which I know of is St. Mungo's, to treat the few registered werewolves who don't mind the stigma."

"Then we'll get them," said Harry, and stepped away from the hospital bed. Hawthorn looked slightly better. Madam Pomfrey had spelled the knives away and used a combination of salve and potion to stop the progress of the wounds. Silver poisoning was as hard to remove as most curses, however, and the list of side effects Hawthorn might suffer from it was long, even if she stopped short of dying: brain damage, loss of ability to speak, a weakening in her magic, amnesia. Not to mention the scars. The scars, Harry knew, could well be most damaging to a pureblood witch of Hawthorn's pride. "I'll get them, from St. Mungo's." He walked towards the fireplace.

"How do you think you're going to do that?" Madam Pomfrey's voice was slightly scandalized.

Harry glanced back at her. She took a step away from him. Distantly, Harry wondered what his face showed, anger or blankness, and which she would have found more frightening. “Simple,” he said. “I’m the Boy-Who-Lived.”

He cast a handful of Floo powder into the flames, and called “St. Mungo’s!” as he stepped into them.

Harry found himself emerging from the fireplace in a large, quiet, pale room that seemed designed to calm people who might stumble into it at the middle of the night shrieking about their or someone else’s magical accident. The walls were a light foamy blue, and the paintings were exclusively of landscapes, mostly mountainous ones that faded into purple and more blue, with exotic magical animals moving around in them. Harry gave his head a shake when he felt his muscles half-uncoiling. *There are wards that try to get you to relax, too.* He fought them off.

The door opened a moment later, and a witch with large laughing eyes and a weary face stepped into the room. “Hello, can I help —“ She cut herself off with a stare, obviously recognizing him.

Harry nodded to her. “There’s been a horrible fight,” he said, and opened a rent in one Occlumency pool to leak pain and fear into his voice. He would use the power of his name and reputation to win what Hawthorn needed, but he was not adverse to doing even more than that, and appearing like an abused child. If other people were so determined to see him that way, he might as well oblige them when it could get him what he wanted. “A—a curse on a friend of mine. Practically a foster mother.” He looked down, clenching his hands together as if he were trying with all his might not to weep. In reality, the inside of his mind had never been so dry. “She’s a werewolf, and someone used the *Argenteus* curse on her.”

The witch gave a little gasp, and Harry looked up to see her eyes glistening with tears. Yet she did cling to the questions that Harry supposed they were trained to ask in such situations. “Is she registered, dear?”

Harry gave a little sniff and nod. “Everyone knows she’s a werewolf. That’s wh-why the enemy chose the curse for her that he did. He wanted to destroy her.” He let his voice sink, having decided a whisper was better than a wail. “He wanted to destroy me.”

“Oh, my dear,” the Healer murmured, and then pulled herself back on course with an obvious effort. “And she’s willing to pay for the potions that she’ll need to reverse the infection?”

“I’m going to pay for them!” Harry judged it worthwhile to add some indignation to his tone. “She’s like a mother to me. I can’t let her die!”

“Of course not.” The Healer licked her lips. Luckily, Harry thought, she didn’t need to ask if he could afford the Argent-Free potions, since everyone in Britain by this point knew he was the Black heir. “And what’s her name, child?”

“H-Hawthorn Parkinson.”

“The Death Eater?”

“The *mother*,” Harry corrected, and now he let the wail out. “The woman who’s lost her daughter and husband, and been imprisoned unfairly, and suffered from the stigma of lycanthropy, and who’s going to *die* in just a little *while* if you can’t give me something *right now*!”

Harry didn’t know if it was his performance or the magic that rose up around him, rattling the paintings on the walls, that decided the Healer. Either way, she gave a brisk nod, blonde curls bouncing, and then said, “I’ll be right back with the Argent-Free potions, dear.” The door opened and shut behind her.

Harry flicked a hand and cast the *Tempus* charm. He would give her five minutes before he went after her.

She was back in four, clutching four small stoppered bottles, three of blue glass and one of green. “She *must* take the one in the green bottle first,” she instructed him as she gave the potions to Harry. “Then the first of the others half an hour after that one, and the other two at intervals of an hour *each*. So an hour passes between the second and the third, and an hour between the third and the fourth. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Harry said, and debated telling her that he was a well-trained Potions student and could understand simple instructions. He decided not to. It would have been satisfying, but it would also have ruined his impression as a distraught child on the edge of breaking down. He gave her a wide-eyed, worshipful look that had her patting at her hair, looking flustered. “Thank you *so* much,

Madam! Please, send the tally of the costs to Harry *vates*. What's your name?"

"Eugenia Comfrey, dear." The Healer was giving him a sort of helpless smile.

"I'm never going to forget how you helped me," Harry declared, and that was true. If she had been difficult and tried to refuse him, he would have had to fight, but as it was, he would give the potions to Hawthorn, and he would do it much more quickly than he could have otherwise. So what if Eugenia had fallen for his bait and helped him because she thought he was helpless, or because he was famous or a powerful wizard? That was exactly what Harry had wanted her to do. It was hardly her fault. "Thank you, thank you, *thank* you!"

Clutching the potions close to his chest, he Levitated the Floo powder out of its dish on the mantle and made the connection spring back to life, calling on the way, "Hogwarts hospital wing!"

Draco felt as if he were moving, or possibly living, in a dream. His father had vanished, he had destroyed a desk, and—

And that was it?

That was all?

He was the heir of the Malfoy line and the Manor was his?

Well. That last was not a question, really. Draco had reentered the study and examined the ledgers and documents Lucius had left, along with instructions on who to contact if Draco was suspicious about the provenance of any of the documents. Yes, the Manor was his. Lucius had specified that control of most of the fortune and most of the estates was to pass to Draco in the event of his "disappearance," and the conditions left for the disappearance matched the ones he'd just enacted. Draco shook his head, slightly stunned. His father had been planning this for a long, long time.

He turned and regarded Narcissa. She hadn't moved from the door to the warded room, staring fixedly at the blue and green lines of the spells, as if they represented all the secrets Lucius had kept and all the parts of his life he'd shut her out of.

"Mum?"

Narcissa stirred, turning and giving him a faint smile. The smile worried Draco. It made her look like a marble statue, and generally, when she appeared less than fully alive, there was something wrong. He went over and held her, feeling a fine tremble move through her body.

They were alone in the house—Professor Snape had gone back to Hogwarts to brew potions that Mrs. Parkinson needed—so Draco let himself lower his head to her shoulder and whisper into her ear, "It will be all right."

"It did not end as I expected," said Narcissa, so pure a time later that Draco could not have said if it was moments or minutes.

"No. Not me, either." Draco stared at the wards and the ruins of the desk, and remembered the last words Lucius had spoken to him. He wanted to believe that they were true. They probably were, or at least on the same level of truth as the information Lucius had given Harry about his parents. And yet his father had given those words to him, and the Malfoy fortune, and still fled, instead of staying to take his punishment, as recovered pureblood honor would have demanded he do.

The contradictions were greater than Draco had ever thought he would find in a man like Lucius. It showed, he supposed, that Lucius had raised him to be one way, and Draco had actually *become* that person, that son, never knowing that Lucius himself was satisfied with a shallower and more cracked version of the truth.

Draco had read once that the end of childhood was learning one's parents were fallible. He would have ceased to call himself a child long before that, really, but this sealed it. He felt old, immeasurably old, staring at Lucius's faults with new eyes, forced to see him as just a person, like any other, and not a sculpture of frozen perfection.

"Are you well?" Narcissa asked him at last.

"Yes," Draco whispered, and he was. He did not regret his decision. He had simply come here expecting an end, that was all, and Lucius had assured there would not be one. Draco felt like someone who had gathered up his strength to make a leap across a ravine, only to find out that the ravine was far narrower than he'd expected, and he'd stumbled onto the grass beyond and crashed

into a tree.

As if I should have expected less from Lucius, really. His game lacks all sorts of supports.

He kissed his mother on the cheek, and finally stepped away from her. The Manor was his, but he didn't have time right now to stay and make it *completely* his. Exhaustion and worry and uncertainty clawed at him. "Come on," he said, offering his mother his arm. "Let's return to Hogwarts."

Harry nodded when he recognized the flutter of Hawthorn's eyes—she'd taken all four potions by then, and this was ten minutes after she took the last of the blue ones—and leaned forward. She still might be damaged; perhaps the silver poisoning had stayed too long in her body before Harry managed to get rid of it. If so, he wanted to be the first one to know. She had suffered this damage because of a man he had trusted, after all, and because Harry had not reacted fast enough when Lucius cast the multiple spells on her.

Hawthorn looked at him with recognition, but then her eyes filled with tears. "Pansy," she whispered.

It might have affected her memory. Grimly, Harry forced himself through the realization and past it. Mourning would not help Hawthorn now. Learning what she had suffered and how to help her cope with it was the most important. "Pansy's dead," he said gently, and squeezed her hand. "Do you remember?"

Hawthorn turned her head away. "Of course I remember," she said. "But Lucius showed me the memory again—so strongly that I was convinced he did it. That was why I attacked him the way I did, why he was able to cast the curse." She paused, and said, "Will there be scars?"

"It's too early to tell, but we don't think so," Harry said. "I fetched potions from St. Mungo's to cure the infection, and Professor Snape will be brewing more potions to help you recover. There will be weakness in your shoulders and arms for some time. Madam Pomfrey doesn't think it will have an effect on your magic, though."

She gave a shallow nod. Harry, thinking she had something more she wanted to say, from the trembling tension in her shoulders, waited, and wasn't surprised when she said, "I hate Lucius Malfoy."

"I know," Harry said.

"Do you?" Hawthorn turned over so suddenly that Harry was concerned for her wounds, and sure enough one on her right shoulder ripped itself open with the movement. He silently cast *Integro* at it, and it knitted. Hawthorn didn't even notice. "I don't know that you do, Harry. Have you *ever* felt that kind of hatred, the kind that demands vengeance? You certainly hate it enough to scold it out of all your allies wherever you find it."

"I've felt it," Harry said, remembering the summer before his third year and how part of him had hated his parents enough to set death traps for them, traps he didn't even remember setting. "But feeling it and acting on it are different things. If you'd simply believed the Unspeakables' letter, for example, and gone after Lucius without waiting for me, who knows what would have happened? He might have killed you. Even if he only cast the *Argenteus* curse, you might have died before help found you."

"I want him *dead*."

The passion in Hawthorn's voice was both human and lupine. Harry could understand it. It didn't mean that he thought Hawthorn was fit to get out of bed and go hunting Lucius yet.

He eased her back against the pillows, and nodded to her frustrated gaze. "Yes, Madam Pomfrey did say you'll need several days of rest."

Hawthorn closed her eyes. Harry could see the exhaustion sweeping over her like a tidal wave, but it was not enough to drown the burning hatred.

"I want him *dead*."

And then she was asleep. Harry contemplated her in silence for long moments, wondering what the best course for her would be.

I won't let her go hunting Lucius alone. Even if she's a stronger witch than he is a wizard, he'll have had time to prepare his

ground, just the way he did at Malfoy Manor, and he can use her wolf against her, especially if she finds him near the full moon. I'll help her do what she must to earn peace. I won't stand out of the way just so that she can foolishly dash in and get herself slaughtered. Hatred is not a license to madness.

He stepped back from the bed and gave a weary stretch, extending his arms over his head to their furthest extent. He needed to rest. Then he would wake up and do what else needed to be done.

Many of those other things involved his parents.

Much to Harry's relief, everything had come out as he intended. He'd come back to their bedroom to find Draco already deeply asleep, worn out by emotional turmoil, and so had gone to sleep himself without having to answer awkward questions. A modified version of the *Tempus* charm buzzed in his ear four hours later, and he rose and searched among the papers Draco had brought back. Yes, there was the book on medical magic that Lucius had said contained the possible solution to James's cancer.

Harry picked the book up and went to see Connor, using a few judicious Disillusionment Charms on the way so that he wouldn't have to stop and explain his presence to anyone. Merlin knew what rumors might coat the school already, given Hawthorn's presence in the hospital wing and the fact that Snape hadn't been there to teach his morning classes.

He reached Gryffindor Tower—since it was after dinner, Connor should be there—and gave the latest password. The Fat Lady admitted him without a murmur. Harry glanced quickly around the common room, and found curious stares coming to rest on them, but he moved too fast for anyone to stand and ask questions; in moments he was already ascending to the sixth-year boys' room.

Connor sprawled on his bed, restlessly flipping through his Charms textbook and muttering under his breath. When he strained his ears, Harry could just make out, "Stupid damn Snake-Calling Charm. Why *shouldn't* it use the same basic structure as the Bird-Calling one?"

"Mastering one struggle only to become involved in another?" Harry asked, as he shut the door behind him. "The story of your life, brother."

"Harry!"

He found himself bowled back against the door by his brother's rush and hug. Cautiously, Harry patted Connor's back with one hand, then pushed him away a bit so that he could breathe without the book being crushed against his chest. "What was that for?"

"No one knew where you were!" Connor answered, with a glare. "I *did* go to Slytherin after lunch, but one idiot wouldn't let me in, and another idiot said that you were resting and I shouldn't disturb you." He eyed Harry doubtfully. "Is that true? Did you actually rest, and would I actually have disturbed you if I'd come in to see you just then?"

"Yes," said Harry, deciding unadorned truth worked best.

Connor looked taken aback. "Oh," he murmured. Then he rallied. "Well! It was still rude. And I'm glad to see that you've learned sense at last, and you'll sleep after a difficult time. What *happened*?"

Harry gave him as much of the truth as he thought wouldn't betray others' secrets, short of the information about their parents, which he wanted to save until last. He didn't tell Connor Lucius's words to Draco, even though he'd heard them well enough, or exactly how badly Hawthorn had been hurt. Those were their weaknesses, possible chinks in their armor, to share or not as they willed.

Connor grew paler and paler as he listened, and leaned forward and gave Harry several little hugs along the way. "I'm glad that you had them with you," he whispered into Harry's ear, when the story finished. "I'm glad that you weren't killed."

"So am I." Harry patted his shoulder absently, then freed himself and held up the book again. "Lucius gave me details of how he tortured our parents, Connor. He took Veritaserum just before he did, so I know that what he said was true. He gave James a kind of cancer with magical insects, and the answer to how to cure it should be in this book. And he set a spell on Lily that would stretch the last moment of her life into a painful eternity, and he told me how to cure that, too. But I'll need your help. Moral support, if nothing else." He tried a smile, but he knew it was limp and unconvincing, and a moment later he knew he shouldn't have tried it.

Connor, being Connor-who-noticed-inconvenient-things the way he was lately, latched on to the one thing Harry hadn't wanted him to latch on to. "How are you going to be able to cure Lily?"

Harry met his eyes calmly. "The *absorbere* gift."

"No." Connor's face was the color of strawberries.

"Yes."

"No." Connor leaned forward and closed his hands like hooks on Harry's shoulders. They hurt. "Haven't you done enough to help them? The little speech at the trial was *more* than enough. I don't want you seeing them again, Harry. I'm sure that Snape would agree."

Harry shrugged, forcing his brother's hands away. "I might not need to be there when they cure James—"

"You won't be," said Connor. "I can go in and stand with him and do whatever else is necessary for that."

"But I don't think there's any other way to remove the curse from Lily," Harry continued. "I recognize what Lucius described. It was created by a sacrifice. There's no countercurse for it, and no healing spell. I can remove the magic by draining it. That's what I'll have to do."

He felt calm, empty, very drained himself. He'd thought when Mallory spoke to him that he could not hate her for torturing his parents because it all seemed so long ago. So it was with Lucius; the pain Harry felt on Draco's behalf and for the betrayal Lucius had given Hawthorn was much worse than what he felt when he contemplated the torture of his parents. And they could be healed. That meant he could give them something that would ease their pain, just as he'd done with other people. They *should* be nothing more than those other people to him, random strangers he could help, if they were really in his past. He had cut them out of his life. Releasing them back into it would do no harm, because they had no fertile ground to root in.

"Let the Healers and the Ministry officials look at Lily first," Connor said, and Harry was startled to see that he was pleading more than arguing. "There *might* be another way to take the curse from her. Just—please, Harry. Let them do that."

"They can do that," Harry agreed. "But if there's no other way to step around this, then I'll see her, and do what I need to do to take away the curse. No one deserves to suffer that much pain as they die, Connor."

"You *really* have no desire for vengeance, do you?" Connor muttered.

Harry gave him an empty gaze. "I've cut it out of me in regards to them," he answered. "They need my help, so I'm going to help them."

He would do this because it needed to be done, he told himself. The past was the past, and might remain that way. This was for their futures.

Rufus sat slowly back behind his desk. His whole head ached, but he had to acknowledge that came from tension, and it wasn't going to be soothed by his usual cup of tea, or Percy offering to do some of the paperwork.

The Healers had had the Potters for the past week. They had finally confirmed that, yes, they could do something about the cancer that James Potter had burgeoning inside him—though it would require blood from a family member. Connor Potter, Harry's younger brother, had offered his blood for that.

But the curse on Lily Potter was a strong Dark one, one that not even the man who had cast it on her, Lucius Malfoy, could entirely remove. It had to be stripped or drained by something that would absorb magic. And if such an artifact lingered in the vaults of the Department of Mysteries, Rufus didn't know about it. He'd asked for an official list of such artifacts from the Unspeakables. Of course, there was nothing like that on there.

Even if the Stone isn't playing with Harry, it won't want to make this easy for him. It probably wants to see what he'll do, when he has to face his mother again.

Rufus had his own speculations about the Stone's motives, of course. It seemed strange that it had worked so specifically to insure *Lucius's* downfall, rather than simply insuring that Harry knew about his betrayal. Why a letter sent directly to Hawthorn

Parkinson, rather than solely the communication of Fiona Mallory to Harry? She might have gone ahead and killed Lucius on her own.

The Stone might not have minded that. But surely it wasn't as good as seeing Harry upset? Harry had told him after the Unspeakables' capture of Adalrico Bulstrode that the Stone seemed interested in him as a figure of magic it had never encountered before, and it would probably conduct experiments on him. Altering his moods could count as one of those.

Rufus had listened to Harry often in the past week, as they discussed his parents and the Stone's motives. And all the while, words he couldn't speak had been burning behind his tongue.

It may have targeted Lucius because he took part in the Ritual of Cinnabrus.

The Stone hadn't been able to see what happened in Courtroom Ten, but it could have looked through the records of the wards and seen those seventeen people approaching the bottom level of the Ministry. Or it could have sensed the shimmer of the Unbreakable Vows around them, perhaps.

Plotting against it would be enough to annoy the Stone. It had shone itself willing to go after Harry for considerably lesser reason.

And that meant it might seek to hurt the others who had been there. Percy. Aurelius Flint. Griselda Marchbanks.

Rufus himself.

And still he could not speak, not breathe a hint of the truth, the bridle around his neck holding his mouth shut.

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, counting down the moments before he would have to firecall Hogwarts and tell Harry that his magic was needed to heal his mother.

"Yes."

"No."

"There's no other way."

"That doesn't mean you can't leave her to suffer."

Harry raised his eyebrows. Snape had grown to hate the gesture in the last week. It usually meant he was puzzled by Snape's lack of logic, and was about to show why, in fact, things *could* be the way that he thought they could. "But I can't," he said. "She's nothing to me now, just a fragment of my past, just someone I've done with. I have to approach her, but she's a stranger. I should be able to help her like any other stranger and then leave her alone again."

"Do you really think that will happen?" Snape lowered his voice a notch and took a step forward. "That you'll be able to stand before her without your emotions creeping upon you and overwhelming you?"

Unexpectedly, Harry grinned. It was the first smile Snape had seen him give in a week, and he did not like it. It had too much of the maniac in it, a glint that he usually only associated with Evan Rosier.

"I do think that, yes," he said, far too cheerfully. "I've been able to do what I need to do in the past week, Severus, and balance the life I'm leading right now with what other people require from me. I've been eating and sleeping on time, haven't I? I haven't ignored my classwork. I've come and told you when I had trouble sleeping, and taken a Dreamless Sleep Potion for it. And at the same time, I've helped comfort Draco and Hawthorn, and Narcissa when she needed it, and helped prepare my brother to see our dad again. I think I've done pretty well, considering how badly Lucius's betrayal might have thrown off my center of balance."

"That is not what I mean," said Snape.

"Then what do you mean, sir?" Harry took a coaxing step forward. "I can't understand it unless you explain it to me."

And there they met an impasse, because Snape *could* not explain it, except with words that sounded far too wet to him. He wanted Harry to—to live, was the way he would phrase it, but Harry *had* been living. He had not allowed Lucius's betrayal, nor the looming specter of the idea that he would have to heal Lily Potter, to delay him for very long. He had worked his way forward,

and identified dangerous signs of obsession in himself, and dealt with them. He had even, as far as Snape could tell, continued to research ways of dealing with the Horcruxes and freeing the thestrals. He hadn't broken down or flung himself too madly into one thing, his major coping mechanisms in the past. It was no wonder that Harry felt rather as though those fussing over him were fussing over nothing.

But something was still missing, and Snape could not say what it was. Or he could say, and in the words he would expose far more sentiment than he was comfortable speaking of.

"You know, sir," said Harry, evidently feeling that with the moment past, he had decided not to speak at all, "if you need help of me, you have only to ask." He reached up, squeezed Snape's arm comfortingly, and then made for the door.

Snape found his tongue again. "Harry, you *will* not go and heal Lily Potter."

Harry paused, but didn't look back at him. "And how are you going to stop me?"

That isn't a question I remember him asking before. But Snape held calm even in the face of such provocation. "I am your legal guardian," he said. "If I say that you cannot go to her, then you cannot, Harry."

Harry sighed and turned to face him. "You can't stop me that way, sir—"

"Severus."

"I don't feel like calling you that now. You don't have a right to command me." Harry cocked his head contemplatively. "I was wrong about the thestrals. I made a mistake there. But here, I've waited a week. There's no other way they can heal her. If I leave her like this, I have the punishment of knowing that when she dies, she'll do it in pain and suffering I could have prevented. I've thought about things the way an adult would, and tried contingency plans, and they didn't work. *You have no right to forbid me, sir.*"

Those words were delivered in a tone that actually seemed lower than Harry's normal voice, and some of the stones around Snape turned white-blue with frost. He was forced to incline his head stiffly, never taking his eyes off Harry.

"When you feel like talking about this, then come back here and we will do so," he said.

Harry relaxed then, and the frost vanished. "I probably won't, sir," he said. "I want to help her and have it over and done with, and then put the emotions out of my mind. But thank you for the offer. I'll remember it."

He left then, and five minutes later, Snape thought of the perfect thing he should have said to him.

Harry was Occluding furiously to be able to get through this without collapsing. Normally, given everything he had to do, Snape would have approved that. It was certainly better than wallowing in the grief and guilt as had happened when he killed the dozen children in the Life-Web.

But Occlusion meant that Harry hadn't yet faced his emotions. If his life was really so integrated and whole as he liked to pretend, then he should have felt free to do that and still do everything else at the same time.

And there Snape ran up against a wall of hypocrisy, because *he* hardly did that, did he? The only usual activities in his days were eating, sleeping, brewing potions, teaching, and marking, and the most usual emotions he felt while doing it were anger and bitterness.

I hope someone else tells him that, he thought, rubbing his left arm; it had been tingling rather fiercely since he woke up this morning. *Since he will never accept it coming from me.*

"This may hurt," the Healer told Connor.

Connor knew what *that* meant. Things that hurt a little in the eyes of Healers and parents hurt a lot in the eyes of children. So he braced himself for intense pain, the way he had when Peter trained him last summer, and was surprised when the only pain he felt was his arm contracting sharply as the Healer drew blood out of it. The liquid flowed through the air in patterns that followed her wand, and Connor, fascinated in spite of himself, watched it intently as she directed it gently into a vial that lay close at hand. Then she whispered "*Integro*," at his arm, and the small wound that had opened closed in a moment.

“That’s all the blood you need from me?” Connor cocked his head to watch the vial. It had seemed immense when the Healer first showed it to him, but now he could hardly believe that this small pool of red liquid would be enough to save James from cancer.

“We can amplify it and insure that it replicates itself when we put it in the body.” The Healer smiled at him. She was a short woman, with dark hair that reminded Connor of his own, and pale blue eyes that made her expression a bit watery but still kind. A round badge above her heart said that her name was Betsy—something; Connor couldn’t read the surname. “So, no, we don’t need much. Just the way that you only need two mice to have a whole colony of mice soon.”

“If the mice are male and female,” Connor pointed out.

Betsy laughed. “Well, yes, that’s right.” She looked up as the door of the small, enclosed white room where they’d sat, with only a portrait of a stuffy-looking old wizard for company, swung open. “And here’s your father.”

Connor stiffened, but didn’t bother pointing out that he called his father “James,” and that only. He’d heard Harry referring to him as “Dad” a few times in the past week, but Harry had denied that it meant anything when Connor questioned him. And when Connor had tried to raise other objections against Harry attending Lily, Harry had looked at him patiently, and Connor knew he’d lost the argument.

Two Healers and two Aurors accompanied James into the room. Connor didn’t know why they needed so many guards; James had been stripped of his magic, so he was hardly about to grab a wand away from someone and threaten them all.

And he looked so *pathetic*, coming along between the Aurors, his head bowed as if he hoped that he would be relieved of the weight of holding it up soon. He was much thinner than Connor remembered, and his skin had the ghostly pale look that Connor’s got the time he was so sick as a child that he had to stay inside for a month, only worse. His hair was thick with grease and sweat.

“I *did* ask for him to be clean,” said Betsy, sounding a little irritated. She waved her wand, and James’s hair was clean, as were his arms.

He looked up then, and froze when he met Connor’s gaze. Connor returned the stare as evenly as he could. He supposed the Healers hadn’t told James whom he was coming to meet.

“Son?” James whispered.

“Connor,” Connor said stubbornly, and folded his arms over his chest.

One of the other Healers looked as if he’d like to ask questions, but Betsy quelled him with a glance. “Into this chair, Mr. Potter,” she said, and slapped the plain wooden seat in front of her.

The Aurors had to steer James there, in the end; he wouldn’t stop staring at Connor. Connor just kept staring back. He felt a hard-edged pity, and a certain satisfaction. James was paying for being a coward and a hypocrite and someone who refused to see that his sons were being abused even when he *knew* about it. Connor supposed he couldn’t ask for much more than that.

Betsy pushed James down, and then picked up the vial with Connor’s blood in it. With a wave of her wand, she cut a small gash on James’s arm—he flinched—and then pressed the vial against it, and chanted a low incantation. Connor craned his neck, but couldn’t see the blood flowing into the wound, just that one moment the vial’s glass glinted red and the next that it didn’t.

Betsy healed the wound, and then began chanting again, this time quite a long spell. Connor couldn’t keep up with the Latin, so he didn’t try. He noticed the Aurors talking quietly. Betsy had closed her eyes and retired so entirely within the cocoon of the spell that Connor knew she didn’t notice.

James seemed to have seen the same thing.

“What is your life like now, Connor?” he asked.

Connor thought about lying, to try and punish him, but he didn’t think he knew James well enough to say what would punish him. He might have changed again in the year and a half he’d been in Tullianum, though his cringing suggested that wasn’t true. So Connor said, “Quiet. Voldemort hasn’t attacked since last Midsummer.”

“And that was Harry’s doing?”

“Yeah.” Connor couldn’t resist a dig, then. “He cut a hole in his magical core and drove him from the battlefield. Quite the heroic son you raised, even though you didn’t have much part in raising him.”

James shuddered and put the hand of the arm Betsy hadn’t gashed over his eyes. “Don’t, Connor,” he whispered. “You don’t know what life has been like for me. My magic gone, and then my mind invaded by the visions of Dumbledore’s *Capto Horrifer* spell, and then days and weeks and months when I had nothing to do but stare at the walls of my cell and think.”

Connor smiled. “Well. With that much time, perhaps you’ve even come up with an original thought.”

“Why do you have to be cruel?” James whispered, though there was no spirit behind it.

“Because you couldn’t restrain yourself in your cruelty,” said Connor, his exasperation bubbling over. “Maybe, if you’d shown *one* sign of remorse for the way you behaved towards Harry, just *one*, then I wouldn’t feel like I had to hit you when you’re lying wounded on the ground. Instead, I testified against you, and then I watched as you went to have your magic stripped, and I’ve never regretted it.”

James looked at him at last. “I’ve raised one hero and one proud and thoughtless and cruel young man, according to you.”

Connor rolled his eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself. We both know that you had less to do with our rearing than Lily did.”

“But don’t you ever regret your childhood, and the way it ended?” James shifted forward as much as he could, sounding earnest. “Don’t you ever wish it could have stayed the same, golden and untainted? Wasn’t I ever—” He paused, swallowed, then continued. “I’m always ‘James’ in your memories? Never ‘Dad?’”

Connor saw what he wanted, then. James had lost all sense of the person he’d once been in Tullianum; he had too much evidence that he was a coward, a broken man, a neglectful father, not the hero he’d once wanted to be. If someone outside the prison still remembered him as a hero, then maybe he could preserve some shreds of dignity when he went back into the cells.

Bugger off, gift for noticing, Connor thought, and hoped fervently it would listen to him this time.

He now had a choice between telling a palatable lie that might ease James’s pain a little, or going with a truth that would be honest but work as a torture. No, he didn’t think back on his father as a father. He’d worked hard to wipe out all trace of the emotion with which he’d once regarded James, the same way he’d worked hard to remove all traces of jealousy of Harry from his own psyche. Harry didn’t need a jealous brother. Connor didn’t need a broken father hanging around his neck. And he didn’t regard the days of his childhood as idyllic, either. How could he? He had to search every memory now for the hidden signs of abuse, for the truth that he knew was there even if he couldn’t see it—*especially* if he couldn’t see it.

Connor’s hands clenched on his arms. A year ago, he would have told the truth without hesitation, but a year ago, his anger had still been hot and burning.

His conscience spoke in Hermione’s voice, and told him that a lie wasn’t the same thing as resuming a relationship with James.

Connor sighed, and spoke. “Sometimes I have good memories of childhood, yeah,” he said, and James’s face lit up like the sky with fireworks after Voldemort had been reported dead the first time.

“And me?” he asked eagerly. “What do you call me, in your head?”

There was only so far a lie could take him, though.

“James,” Connor told him.

He might have said something else, but abruptly Betsy’s still continuing Latin chant rose to a climax, and Connor saw her magic roar through James and sweep out again like a tornado. It came through the gash on James’s arm for a road. It was a golden tornado, and it held the broken, black bodies of insects in itself. Connor curled his lip. *That was a dirty thing Lucius did. And coming here to offer my blood and give James a chance to live was the right thing to do.*

He should stare at his cell walls for many more years before he dies.

Betsy waved her wand a few more times, then nodded briskly to the Aurors. “We’re done. You can take him back to the Ministry now.”

James tried to struggle as they lifted him, but one of them muttered an efficient Stunning Curse, and he collapsed. Connor was glad. He didn't want to know what the man who was once his father would have said.

Liar, whispered his conscience.

But Connor had done enough of what it wanted for one day, so he ignored it.

Harry had a new tactic for facing his mother. He had sunk his emotions to the bottom of the Occlumency pools, then muffled the pools in dense fog, then draped soft cloth over that, until the only feeling left near the surface of his mind was a kind of vague compassion. He would have stopped to help a dog dying in the street with that kind of emotion. He was ready when the Aurors opened the door and ushered him in to face Lily.

Snappe had offered to come with him. Draco had demanded to come with him. Harry had refused both. He would have Aurors for companionship and protection, in case Lily tried something desperate, and he doubted that either Snape or Draco would be able to control the impulse to snap at his mother, which would only distress her further.

Draco had had a long, raging argument with him. Well. A one-sided, long, raging argument. Harry had sat there and calmly stared at him. Then Draco had stormed out, and come back later with his face tear-stained and lain down stiffly to go to sleep with his back to Harry. Harry had talked to him calmly enough the next morning about Lucius, and the difficulties his going away like that had left Draco in.

There were burdens that were other people's to carry, and some burdens that Harry could help support. And then there were tasks that he had to perform on his own.

The cell was utterly plain and bare. There was a bed, and a toilet, and a table that Harry knew held the trays of food the Aurors brought Lily. And there was nothing else. No books, no *Daily Prophet*, no portraits. The prisoners were expected to lie on their backs and stare at the ceiling until they went mad, apparently.

"Here she is," said the male Auror who'd come with him, quite unnecessarily, in Harry's opinion. And then they shut the door and stood in front of it, and left Harry there with his mother.

She'd changed, of course, growing paler, but not much thinner. Her green eyes held a dull gloss to them. When she sat up and stared at him, Harry wasn't sure if she really saw him. The Aurors had told him as they descended into Tullianum that his mother had suffered from Dumbledore's *Capto Horrifer*. The Healers had worked with her for months before they'd been satisfied that she was sane enough to endure moments alone without babbling at herself and tearing at her skin.

She whispered, "Harry."

Well. This is progress. She hadn't tried to run screaming from the room yet, which Harry had thought she might do, given how afraid of his magic she had once been. He nodded. "Lily," he said. "I came to heal you. The Healers talked to you about that, didn't they? About the curse Lucius cast on you?"

She nodded rapidly, too long, and then stopped herself with an equally senseless, abrupt jerk. Her eyes wouldn't stop traveling over him. "And you're going to heal me," she whispered. "And you're not a Dark Lord."

"No, I'm not." Harry had known she might want to talk about personal things. He had decided to keep his answers as short and soothing and noncommittal as possible. He squinted, and a dark crust of magic slowly formed around her. "Can you move towards the head of the bed, please?" he asked, gesturing with one hand. "That way, I can see how the magic winds around you more easily."

Lily scrambled across the bed, still staring at him. "And you have a second hand now," she said.

"Yes," said Harry, and resisted the temptation to say that Death had given it to him. He was not going to speak about anything personal with her. Why should he? He would hardly tell someone else who commented on his hand, someone who didn't know him, the truth, and that was the position where Lily stood in relation to him now. He studied the dark crust of magic again, and then nodded. If she were still a witch, this would have been difficult, but there was no magic anywhere on his mother except for that one edging. Harry didn't have to untangle it from under any other power. He just had to swallow it.

"You've become a new person," Lily whispered. "Does that mean that you have changed in regards to me?"

Harry could feel the Aurors stirring uneasily. They were supposed to protect him if Lily made a physical attack, but he thought Scrimgeour had also told them to beware a mental assault. Once again, he was grateful that Snape and Draco weren't here. They would already be trying to drag him out of the room.

"No," he said, and opened his gullet.

The moment he did, Lily screamed, and cowered back against the pillows, wrapping her arms around her head.

Harry sighed and glanced at the Aurors. "What do you think I should do?" he asked, carefully closing the *absorbere* gift. "She appears to be terrified of my swallowing magic even though she has none to lose any more."

"We can hold her flat," offered the bulky female Auror, whom Harry thought looked like Millicent's third cousin. She eyed Lily as if she would enjoy gripping her wrists and holding them above her head.

"Not that, if possible." Harry shook his head a little. "Perhaps I can persuade her." He faced Lily again. She had pulled her arms down and was regarding him over one of them. "I'm not going to drain your magic," he said, making his voice as soothing as he could. "You're not a witch. You can't lose it to me. I'm only going to try and pull out a curse that would cause you pain in the future."

"I—I might let you do that." Lily gave another shy rabbit-nod. "If—" And she broke off and bit her lip.

"Yes?" Harry leaned forward encouragingly. "What is the matter? What would you like?"

"For you to talk to me while you do it," Lily said.

Harry swallowed a curse and stuffed the anger back into the Occlumency pool. *Fuck*. Well. He had the feeling Lily knew exactly what she was doing. He had disappointed her by refusing to engage with her on a personal level, so she would ask for that as a price for good behavior.

Harry shrugged, and told himself he was empty of feelings for Lily. He would talk to her, if that was really what she wanted. She had not asked anything terrible so far.

"Lie still," he said, and once again, fixed his attention on the dark crust. Lily still jerked, though this time it was before he opened the *absorbere* magic. Harry thought she couldn't feel it; she was probably judging when he opened it by how intent his expression had grown.

She asked, "Where is Voldemort now?"

"Wounded," Harry murmured. He pulled, and the first part of the curse flaked loose and flew towards him. He grimaced. It tasted even fouler than some of the Death Eater magic he'd eaten almost a year ago. "I cut a hole in his magical core last year. He's hiding somewhere, and he hasn't dared a strong strike in nearly a year. All his Death Eaters are dead except the ones who became my allies, and Indigena Yaxley and Evan Rosier."

Silence, and he had the feeling she was staring at him in shock. But he refused to look at her face and confirm that.

"I never knew—" Lily whispered. Then she cleared her throat, and said, "Did Connor help you?"

"Yes." Harry cracked the crust in a weak place, and grunted in satisfaction as the larger piece tore loose and soared down his throat.

"How did he help you?"

"By using his compulsion on a group of Death Eaters bringing in a tank of sirens. They would have compelled most of the people in Hogwarts otherwise, and Merlin knows what Voldemort might have made the hostages do." Harry squinted, and finally picked the second loose piece of the curse off. This bit tried to escape him, as if the Dark magic knew what he was doing and didn't like being swallowed, but he snatched it and dissolved it. His own boundaries expanded a little. This was an unexpectedly heavy meal, but Harry rejected the idea of closing the *absorbere* gift now and letting it digest this. He didn't want to spend that long in the cell with Lily because—

Well, just because, that was all.

“I want to know more,” Lily coaxed. “Are you any closer to fulfilling the prophecy? Have you used the training I gave you to help you do it? Have you thought about whether we were right, after all, to train you the way we did?”

“No, yes, and I don’t know if you were right or not.” The rest of the curse, unfortunately, showed no sign of weakening just because Harry had found weak points in the other pieces. Calling on it was like stepping on a thick cake of ice. He had to stamp several times before cracks raced through it, and it seemed as if he might be able to follow the cracks to the center and pull the shards off completely.

“Harry. Look at me.”

Sighing, Harry met her eyes.

To his dim surprise, hers were large and glistening with tears. “*I did* love you,” Lily whispered. “When nothing changed, when even after that horrible vision you didn’t come and kill me—and then I found out Albus had sent the vision—“ She caught her breath with a sob. “I’ve had a lot of time to think, Harry. I think that, perhaps, I didn’t express my love for you in the right way. But I didn’t *know* that for certain. Perhaps the good we did you outweighed the evil. I didn’t know it, because you wouldn’t come and talk to me.”

Harry frowned slightly in exasperation. She had a right to ask healing from him, even comfort if she was so afraid of his *absorbere* gift. She didn’t have a right to ask for anything else.

He tore through the rest of the curse, sending his magic running through the cracks in the black crust. It responded, flickering and rippling up and down, and then came loose. Indigo flakes raced towards Harry, who caught them by stretching the “mouth” of his gift as wide as he could. He swallowed the putrid mess, trying not to grimace.

“Harry,” Lily whispered.

He was occupied in settling the newly absorbed magic in his gut, and didn’t respond.

“I wish things had been different,” Lily said, her voice thin and reedy. “I wish I had been able to express my love in a way that would have helped you with future battles *and* kept you strong. I wish I had known what the prophecy really proclaimed, that you were the Boy-Who-Lived. I wish I hadn’t needed to lie to Connor. I wish Albus had been a different sort of man. I wish I hadn’t lied to James, either. I think I even regret that the training I gave you was—well, it could be called abuse.” She leaned forward. “But to know that, I need to know how much it’s helped you and how much it’s hindered you. Will you come back and talk to me again, Harry? Will you tell me that?”

Harry hesitated. *Has she changed?* It sounded as if she’d reconsidered some of her thoughts, at least, some of the bone-deep beliefs she’d always taken for granted. And she was asking for a relationship with him, a new kind of foundation reared on burned and salted ground—

And what if I don’t want to make the effort to build one?

Harry stopped in his effort to take a step towards her. His heart beat loudly in his ears, and a rent in one of his Occlumency pools had sent a few emotions bubbling towards the surface.

I don’t want this. I don’t give a fuck if she’s changed. It’s too late. I just want to go on and live my life, my life where she’s a stranger to me, and has no part in my standing or falling.

He tied up the emotions then, before they could get out of hand, and made a cold little bow to Lily. Then he turned for the door.

“Harry?” He heard the sheets rasp under her fingers as she scrambled to the edge of the bed. “*Harry!* Please, just tell me, the answer to that one question. Has it helped or hindered you more? Do I have to call it abuse?”

Oh, how part of him longed to turn and shout at her, screaming that *of course* it had been abuse, that she was blind to imagine otherwise, that once again she was stumbling along in a labyrinth looking for ways to excuse the unforgivable—

But if he screamed that, that would just prove he hadn’t succeeded in exiling her from his heart after all, and that he should have brought Draco and Snape with him today. And that *wasn’t true*.

So he walked out with the Aurors, and shut the door on her cries, and accompanied them up the main corridor of Tullianum, past

other shut cells of criminals who might be worth a second chance, and might not be.

Maybe he could have something different with her, if he chose to build it. Perhaps they could have a reconciliation, a renewal.

But Harry knew already that ninety percent of the burden would fall on him, and that it would interfere with other relationships in his life which were finally the way he had wanted them.

So he walked out of Tullianum, and left her there.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Seven: Hawthorn, Dragonsbane, and Pansies

Rufus ran a hand through his hair in frustration. Then he tried to smooth it back into place, because it already looked enough like a lion's mane as it was, and he'd slept on it, so that it stood out around his head. He hadn't had time to use hair-straightening charms between the moment that Hope had awakened him with the news and the moment he came through the Floo into the office.

I don't remember May as a month of escalating crises, he thought, and had to stifle a yawn. *On the other hand, I've only been Minister for three Mays. Perhaps the months take turns.*

He sat up then, and took a deep breath. He couldn't afford to wander in mind. He had to be clear and focused to take this problem seriously.

The clipping was an article from the *Daily Prophet*—an article that the *Prophet* hadn't published. Apparently their reporter, a keen young Muggleborn witch with ambitions to become the next Rita Skeeter, had uncovered far different things than they thought she would, and so they'd sent the article on to the Ministry when she finished writing it.

WEREWOLF COMMUNITIES 'LETTING THE DAYLIGHT IN'

Muggle awareness is 'the pack of the future'

By: Irene Fairchild

Fairchild had been assigned to create a report about werewolf packs in London and how well they fit into the wizarding world, as far as Rufus could tell. The *Prophet* had evidently expected a story with some negative anecdotes, some positive ones, and little danger, since they'd assigned Fairchild to write it well before the full moon.

Instead, what she'd uncovered was that werewolf packs in London were making contact with Muggles—especially the Muggle family of their bitten members, and especially adolescents who seemed determined to follow any hint of magic or wonder into dark corners. From what Fairchild said, a few packs, led by alphas who “called themselves after birds,” had even accepted Muggles, biting those who asked.

Rufus did not personally know anyone mad enough to ask for the curse of lycanthropy. He was glad of it.

And the Muggles crossing into the wizarding world...he felt half-helpless in his quest to understand them. Surely most of them were frightened of magic? He only had to read history to understand that, and he *had*, including the pieces they wouldn't teach in Hogwarts because they didn't want to scar fragile young minds. When had Muggle teenagers decided that they *wanted* to know the wizarding world, that they would rather run on four legs and watch people wave wands than watch the telly, or, well, do the other things that Muggles did?

Rufus's headache grew worse when he thought about the international scope of the problem. The other Ministers would be contacting him soon, politely asking why Britain seemed to have a problem keeping the International Statute of Secrecy intact yet again. Harry fighting a dragon above London, two siren attacks up the Thames in little more than a year, and now werewolves. And those were just the greatest violations. There had always been the minor ones, like a wizard losing his temper and casting a hex on a Muggle, or children carelessly riding brooms out of bounds. The Obliviators were always busy.

And the werewolves! *They* knew the rules of the wizarding world even if their new Muggle friends didn't. Why were they doing this?

That, actually, Rufus thought he could answer, and *wished* he couldn't. The werewolves had been ignored and stigmatized and

pushed at and hunted for so long that most of them had formed into a cohesive community, satisfying both human and lupine social needs, and come to consider themselves as apart from wizarding society. Individuals could be attracted by the promise of power or rights into behaving as the Ministry wished, but the packs were much harder to court. Now they did have those rights, at least in law, but individuals were still maltreated, refused Wolfsbane, sneered at, and sacked without warning. And so the packs, with knowledge of the victory that *could* be won now, if they fought hard enough, and the hypocrisy breathed in their faces at every moment, and that old conviction that they weren't really wizards if wizards didn't acknowledge them, would not see much wrong in turning to Muggles. Being persecuted was nothing new to them.

Rufus could understand it. But the idea of it still maddened him.

So there was an international incident carefully deposited in the middle of his desk.

While he sat there contemplating it gloomily, an owl soared through the window. Rufus took the letter from it, wondering. He thought he had seen the owl before, but he received so much post that he could not remember where. At least he knew the owl and the letter it carried were not a threat; there were wards around the Ministry now that examined all birds for dangerous charms and curses.

He opened the letter, and realized it was a response to his request for information from Ignifer Apollonis. If the Liberator was a daughter of Cupressus Apollonis, as Rufus suspected, he wanted to know the plan of the old bastard's house and something about the traps he might have waiting before he entered.

The letter was disappointing, though.

May 16th, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I regret to say that there is little I can help you with. I have not been home except for short visits in fifteen years, and then I was restricted to one of two rooms: the entrance hall or the room where Cupressus habitually receives guests. I agree that the clues the Liberator gives sound like my family, and I do have a younger sister, named Candor, but I do not believe that Cupressus treats her so badly. He focused most of his attention on me. Candor was born five years before I left the family, which would make her young, like your Liberator. But I do not know her, as a person. I have no idea what the day-to-day life in that household is like, and I wish to never know again.

Regarding your other questions, it is true that Cupressus had dealings with the Unspeakables. I believe that they tried to blackmail him, and he resisted. But, once again, I cannot prove this for certain, and I would not trust memories fifteen years old when one is making a raid. I am sorry that I cannot be of more help.

*Yours under the Dark,
Ignifer Pemberley.*

Rufus folded the letter with sharp, angry movements, and made a mental note to tell Hope that the raid would have to wait until they knew there was some reason worth approaching the Apollonis house for.

In the meantime, the werewolf problem waited to be solved.

And Elder Juniper, who was gaining more and more prominence in the Wizengamot of late, hated werewolves.

Rufus wondered which Fate had been assigned to make his life more difficult, and why it had chosen May as the month to do so.

Harry eased gently off the bed. He'd just given Draco a thorough massage—that was much easier to do, now that he had two hands—and left him snoring. Draco had appeared in their bedroom with a headache caused by sorting through the documents Lucius had left for him. Harry trusted that he'd managed to soothe it well enough. Draco didn't even move as he walked towards the door, and Harry shut the door softly so that the noises of the common room wouldn't intrude.

He stood on the other side of the door a moment, considering. It was a Saturday, and no one expected him for classes. It was also a few days since he had healed Lily and Connor had gone to give his blood to James, and both Snape and Draco were slowly calming down and had stopped giving him the looks that meant they expected him to explode at any moment. Harry had tolerated them while they lasted, but they put him on edge.

He knew whom he should go and see. Hawthorn had returned to the Garden a few days ago. But Madam Pomfrey had tried to persuade her to stay longer. When Harry asked her why, the matron admitted that she didn't think Hawthorn was mentally recovered, whatever physical recovery she'd accomplished. Only one of the wounds had scarred after all, one high on her left shoulder that she could cover with the sleeve of her robe. But Hawthorn had still been in a black fury when she departed, helped along, Harry thought, by the werewolf temper Remus had once described to him.

He nodded. He would go and see her, and hope a few days back in her home had done her good. If they had not, well—

He would not see another of his allies lost to the desire for vengeance. He *would* not. It had caused too much trouble already. Deaths, and torture, and the tying-up of various of his allies in other things; Tybalt Starrise was *still* sorting out the legal and social problems his brother Pharos had caused, and trying to decide how much support he should give him in the courtroom and whether he should argue for Tullianum or restriction in St. Mungo's.

The stronger the Alliance of Sun and Shadow got, Harry thought as he started towards Snape's office to inform him of where he was going, the more careful he had to be about this, not less. More and more people watched them. More and more people stood a chance of being affected when Harry or one of his allies did something questionable, and more and more people stood a chance of being those who brought the questions. Harry stood in the center of his own web of influence, and connected to many others. Pluck one strand of a web, and the others vibrated.

He would not try to persuade Hawthorn out of her hatred. He would not try to make it seem as if her losses did not matter. But he would ask questions about her desire for vengeance, and hope that the answers would reveal how very little that desire mattered, against the real scope of things. And he would offer his presence as a silent support.

If Hawthorn would not talk to him, then Harry would simply wait outside the Garden for however long he needed to.

Hawthorn dropped the vial, and it cracked open on the stone floor of her Potions lab. The silver liquid, the result of a good six hours' work on the lycanthropy cure, splattered all over the floor and walls.

She half-shrieked, which came out of her mouth as a howl. Then she sagged back against the wall, her breath slow and steady.

I can't do this.

She couldn't do this. She was trying to forget her desire to hunt down and kill Lucius Malfoy—who had left behind no traces, anyway, and nothing that could be used to track him—by working on something productive, something that would change her status back to a pureblood witch's, and relieve her of the major weakness that Lucius had turned against her in the first place. Once, forgetting such inconvenient, inappropriate emotions would have been a matter as simple as snapping her fingers. Once, she was a self-possessed, self-controlled pureblood, a player of the game.

And now she was a hunter who wanted blood.

The wards twanged, informing her that someone had appeared on the edge of the estate. Hawthorn snatched her wand, secretly glad, secretly hoping it was Evan Rosier. She would fight and destroy him without a qualm. And the hatred would be less overwhelming when she was done, calmer and quieter.

But she froze when she stepped out the front door and saw the figure walking calmly towards her across her neatly tended lawn, already thick with young grass and the shoots of flowers. It was Harry.

No. I don't want him to see me like this.

She retreated inside, and shut the door. She listened to Harry's footsteps come closer and closer until he rapped on the door, instinctively avoiding the parts of the wood that hid traps and wards, and closed her eyes, feeling sick. Why she hadn't told him to go away yet was beyond her.

Of course, part of me is weak. I do want his attention. If I could control my voice when I asked for it, and prevent him from seeing the tears, I might even invite him to come in.

"Hawthorn?" Harry asked, the way he never used to do. He had always called her "Mrs. Parkinson" until very recently. Hawthorn thought she might prefer it now. The formality would have the bracing effect of a chill wind, forcing her to stifle her emotional chaos and act like an adult. "I'm here to speak with you about Lucius Malfoy. May I come in? The wards allowed me to

approach, but they aren't coming down, and of course I don't want to tear them down."

She tried to respond, and the words clogged in her throat like tears. She cleared them out with a cough and began over. "Whatever you wish to say to me about Lucius Malfoy can be said from behind a closed door."

There was a pause, as though Harry hadn't expected that. Hawthorn wondered if he would leave now. He had once been so easy to drive away; he would back off the moment he poked an emotional wound. But this new Harry was—well, more formidable, and less afraid that if he made one mistake, it meant consequences his ally would never recover from.

"Very well, Hawthorn," Harry said, and oh damn him, his voice was still warm and he sounded as if he understood her position. "Madam Pomfrey told me that you left the hospital wing still muttering about vengeance. Why?"

You are not that stupid, Hawthorn thought, as she bolted straight and stared at the door. *I know that you are not that stupid, Harry.*

"Why?" she whispered.

"That's what I said," said Harry. She could hear him arranging himself comfortably, probably folding his arms, and putting up a protective layer of magic around his skin to keep himself safe from wards. "And it's the whole substance of my first question, but I can rephrase it, if you would rather. Why did you leave the hospital wing muttering about vengeance?"

For a moment longer, Hawthorn tried to restrain herself, not to let the full storm of her temper burst on Harry. But this was too much. He knew exactly what Lucius had done to her, he had seen her at her weakest moment in Tullianum, he had helped her through other weak moments when Claudia was murdered and Pansy died, and *he* asked her *this*?

"Because he hurt me!" she shouted, and the words felt good as they ripped free of her, even if she would much rather be shouting them at Lucius. "Because this is the very last insult I can bear! I want to hurt him, to twist his neck until it breaks, to torture him until he knows as much pain as he's given me! I can reach him, or I should be able to, and I can't reach anyone else, and then he *ran away!* Traitor, coward, murderer—"

And the howl broke forth from her throat, streaming up in a prolonged, ululating cry that Hawthorn knew most people on the face of the earth would be nervous about. Even Muggles would shiver and rub their arms at the bloodthirsty call, and this near the full moon, those in the know about werewolves would run.

Harry was not most people. He remained silent until her howl faded, and then said, "May I come in, Hawthorn?"

Hawthorn lashed out. Her nails gashed long cuts in the door, and opened a series of holes through which she could see Harry's face peering in at her. He really was leaning against the doorway, with not more than a foot separating them. And he refused to draw back or flinch when her nails slit the wood.

Damn him. Damn him, damn him, damn him!

Hawthorn wanted someone to hurt. She had passed the line of caring who it was, just as she hadn't cared when she saw the vision of Pansy that Indigena and not Lucius had killed her. She showed a mouthful of teeth, and snarled, "If you come in here with me, Harry, I will cause you pain."

There was another pause, and then Harry, his voice thoughtful, said, "I would like to see you try."

That was too much.

Hawthorn tore the door off its hinges, with that strength she so rarely used but now reveled in, and sprang out. Harry straightened to meet her, and then moved out of the way just in time with a half-dancing step that looked like something he might have practiced in his childhood.

And his face remained calm and mobile and understanding, and his eyes were without a trace of fear.

Damn him.

Hawthorn refused the temptation to attack as blindly and mindlessly as she had with Lucius. Instead, she aimed her wand and cast one of the most irritating blood curses she knew, nonverbally. It wouldn't hurt Harry like the ones she'd used on Indigena, but it would make him feel as if he had ants marching up and down his veins.

Harry deflected it with a lazy wave of his hand and a wandless Shield Charm.

She fell back with a snarl before she could help herself. For a moment, human rationality struggled to the surface. She was facing an immensely powerful wizard, one who could swat her like an insect if he really wanted to. Wouldn't it be better to calm down and not fight him? He wasn't her enemy. And if she gave up the anger and spoke to him, then he might come around to her way of thinking.

But the beast surged up when she remembered that she would collapse if she gave up the anger.

She went back to the attack, calling on the grass to rise. Perhaps she was not quite on Indigena Yaxley's level, but the Parkinsons had once been called "green blood," for the amount of gardening talent that ran in her family. She could and would use the earth around the Garden to hurt intruders.

The ground beneath Harry's feet turned to mud, and he started to slide downward. None of the traditional counters for such a thing would work on this mud, Hawthorn knew, since the earth itself was obeying her, and could not be coaxed back to hardness.

Harry didn't try the traditional counters, which involved drying charms. Instead, he simply left the ground and hovered above it, his magic spreading around him in the shape of luminous wings.

Hawthorn felt the magic in the air, and forcibly restrained herself from charging. She considered turning the rest of the ground to mud, but knew it wouldn't work. There was no reason that Harry had to land any time soon.

Instead, she turned to a curse she had learned from Evan Rosier, but rarely used. That meant she had to speak it aloud, but if it was unfamiliar to Harry, it still wouldn't warn him in time. "*Aer adamanteus!*" she cried, and felt it in satisfaction as the air hardened in Harry's lungs, turning to sharp blades. They would cut through the fragile tissue and skin in a moment, and then sling forward and slit him from the inside out, unless he knew the counter.

One part of her temper screamed at her. Hawthorn ignored it. It felt far too good to release the anger and hatred at last.

Harry closed his eyes in what looked almost like an expression of ecstasy as the blades began to slice out. And then he breathed, and Hawthorn saw that he had turned her weapons into two harmless puffs of air. They danced around his head like smoke rings, and then safely dissipated into the atmosphere.

Hawthorn was restricted to spells, while Harry could use wandless magic. She could not hurt him. It was not fair.

No. There is one weapon you have which he cannot match.

And there was, and she bolted forward, legs coiling beneath her for the leap, claws reaching. This close to the full moon, a werewolf's claws could scar even in human form. And she wanted to scar *something*, hurt *something*, tear *something*, and the people who were justified targets of her vengeance were all too far away.

She felt herself leave the ground. She saw the moment when Harry hung before her, face pale, eyes wide and green, and she thought he would allow himself to be gripped, held, ripped, torn, and in the middle of her intense, insane hatred she felt a gratitude that hurt every bit as badly as Lucius's betrayal had—

And then a whirl of magic clasped her and turned her, and the golden wings folded around her, feeling warm and living, the feathers slithering past her face like leaves. Hawthorn fought, crying out.

Harry settled back to the ground with her held in those magical wings. When she would have struggled free, she felt his arms come around her, and instinct and human memory made her hesitate for a single moment.

Then Harry began to sing.

Hawthorn had heard the phoenix voice before. She would never have described herself as vulnerable to it. She had been awed when she heard him singing at Midwinter, but they all had. She would not have given up her vengeance for Pansy if she heard him singing on the Midsummer battlefield.

And she was so tired. Why did she have to be the reasonable one, the witch who bore losses and went on living? No other single one of Harry's allies had suffered as much as she had. She had lost her family to the war. Fenrir Greyback had bitten her. She had been abused and tortured, and had failed to kill her enemies, the one thing that might have eased the burning losses. She had

accepted *Harry* back into her life even though he had killed her husband. Surely she had reached a breaking point of some sort, and ought to be allowed to pass it. Phoenix song should have had no attraction for her anymore, except as a kind of squeaky warbling.

And yet, it was happening.

Hawthorn found a vision forming in her head, fighting past the emotions that plagued her like a chick hammering its way out of the egg. It spread its own glittering wings, and Hawthorn realized she was looking at the aftermath of a battle. It might have been the Midsummer battle, though the vision was so arranged that she could not look behind her and see Hogwarts. There were bodies lying crumpled in front of her, and furrows in the ground coated with blood, and grass trampled and churned to broken earth, and twisted limbs and uprooted plants.

And the sun was rising.

She understood the vision. She was not stupid. Harry was calling on her—the song was calling on her—to realize that no matter how many battles wizards or Muggles fought, the sun went right on rising. The dead were dead, and gone. The living had to keep waking up and going forward, no matter how much it stung. They could not stop in one place and grieve, because *they* were not the dead, and for them it was not over.

Knowing that Harry had reason to understand that intimately made Hawthorn feel no better. She fought against the message, burying her head in her arms and moaning. The vision was inside her head. If she concentrated hard enough, then she could probably make it go away.

But she couldn't. And as the sun rose in her mind, its light caught and glittered on the dew, and the bodies began to vanish, as if someone had done the work of cleaning up the battlefield. The furrows slowly grew a new furze of grass, and the broken limbs became healthy young trees growing where they had fallen, and spring sprang out full blast on the spot. The earth forgot that there had been a battle fought here. And the sun ascended higher and higher, and the song blazed in her ears, demanding her compliance, calling her on.

If she were so weak that she *would* psychologically freeze herself out of life, then Harry would not have bothered. The phoenix would not have bothered. But Harry knew she was better than that, and that was why he called on her to rise. The only law of change was change.

It's not that easy, Hawthorn flung out in her head, as a bitter challenge. *My husband and my daughter are dead.*

And the vision changed, this time showing her the memorial she had planted in her garden, the hawthorn bush with the pansies and the dragonsbane growing around it. She had done this—sworn to remember them, planted living things for them, and then gone on walking down the path. It had been hard, but it had to be done. No one had ever said it was easy, in fact. The world was hard, and cruel. But it had to be lived in.

Hawthorn could, perhaps, have resisted sympathy. She *would* have resisted any vision of suffering equal to her own, which Light wizards in the past had used to try to persuade her that they were just as persecuted and hated as Death Eaters. But this vision of a hard and cruel world answered to her own expectations. The world could be ignored, but it did not cease to exist because one person grieved.

Every objection splintered and smashed against the reality of that song, against the growing need she had to answer it.

And then the song soared back steadily into the world of cruelty's mysteries, and it pulled her with it.

She was crying, the sobs racking her body, tears of fury and hatred burning down her cheeks. And Harry was singing still, wrapping her more with his voice than the hold of his arms, pouring into her ears vision after vision of roads to walk, of hills to climb, of ponds to scramble through.

It did not end until it ended.

And it did not matter how hard the burdens she had to carry were. She was not free to stop living. That was what she earned by being too fearless to kill herself. More life, and all the difficulty of it.

The last vision was of a path leading into a dusky gold sky, storm-colored, with weather Hawthorn couldn't see beyond that—perhaps sunlight, perhaps more storms. The phoenix song flirted its wings and tore forward, ending on a high-pitched, shining note of pure ringing uncertainty.

Hawthorn slowly lowered her hands from her eyes and stared at them.

“Perhaps that has purged it,” Harry said quietly.

And Hawthorn didn’t apologize, because she didn’t think she would know what to say. She simply knelt there in silence, instead, and Harry’s arms wrapped around her, and they were both still, there in the great storm-colored world.

Remus sniffed carefully at the air, and then let his tongue fall out to loll through his jaws. He loved full moon nights now with a heady impatient love he’d never felt when he was part of Loki’s pack. Perhaps, then, the reins of purpose that stretched around his body, Loki’s continual driving goal to win the war between wizards and werewolves, had never let him feel it.

He turned and nudged at the two wolves timidly crouched behind the corner. After a moment, wobbling on their paws like puppies, they trotted around it. Remus licked one face, nipped an ear, and prowled back and forth in front of them, examining them, studying their eyes for some hint of the glaze that would mean the Wolfsbane hadn’t worked.

But it had. And he could forgive them their timidity. They *were* pups, in a sense. This was their first transformation. They had been Muggles until last month, when they had finally convinced Hawk that they wanted the bite, and weren’t content to remain behind in the safehouse while the pack ran. Hawk had bitten them himself, but had waited until the last full moon night of April. He wanted them to have a month to get used to the notion that they would be exchanging one conformation of bone and muscle for another, a month to feel the moon singing in their blood and their senses growing sharper and their world shifting along with them.

The wolf on the right had been a Muggle girl called Georgina. Now she made a lovely fawn bitch, with brown brindles starting low on her sides and rippling over her legs. Her companion, who called himself simply Tal, was a slim black beast, built more for speed than the usual endurance.

And they would both join the bulk of the pack waiting for them, if Remus could only get them moving.

He made his nips fiercer this time, and bit them under their tails. Georgina squealed and started trotting. Tal resisted for a moment more, then tossed his head and tore down the street. Remus loped after them.

He felt the moment when it changed for them. Tal lifted his head and flicked back his ears. Georgina tilted her neck back to sniff the air, then almost sat down on her haunches with the wonder of it all.

Hawk’s howl rose from ahead of them, calling them on, sweeping them up, adding a trill or note for each one of them. He was a good alpha, Remus had found in the past six months, never forgetting a pack member’s name, and treasuring every single one of his wolves.

Georgina and Tal answered, and Remus, too, their voices blending with the voices of the eight other wolves, both the members of Hawk’s original pack and the turned Muggles and wizards and witches of the last few months, who were padding forward now from around corners and up alleys. They would run London tonight, joining with other packs, and the Muggles would be half-sure they were feral dogs and half-sure they were something else. It didn’t matter, though, how long or how far they chased; carefully-placed Concealment Charms, cast before the transformation and scattered around the city, and the werewolves’ sheer speed insured that the Muggles never caught them.

And each day, their world and the wizarding one blended together just a little more.

Remus stretched his legs, and sped past both Georgina and Tal, making them try to catch him. They could try if they liked. Remus fully intended to show them his tail all the way through the run, which was made not for hunting’s sake but for sheer joy.

As he bounded up a street towards where Hawk stood awaiting them on the doorstep of the neighboring pack’s safehouse, the moon briefly blazed out from the clouds overhead, and Remus gave tongue again, in glory and exultation and glee at being alive.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Eight: From Adalrico’s Hand

“Minister. May I speak to you for a moment in private?”

Rufus glanced up casually. He had been expecting Juniper to approach him almost from the moment the Wizengamot had agreed to suspend discussion of the werewolf packs' activities for the day, but he was surprised the man had done so in front of Elder Hollyshead, a well-known rival of Juniper's. *He won't believe that we're in collusion, no matter how much Juniper wants him to.* "Of course, Elder," he said. "Let me finish this conversation, and we can converse here quickly, so that you might get home at a reasonable hour."

Juniper gave a faint, inflexible movement of his lips that could look like a smile, if studied under the right light. "I may have exaggerated when I said that I wished to speak to you for a 'moment,' Minister," he said. "We should adjourn to your office to have our conversation, I think."

Rufus simply nodded and faced Hollyshead again, whose bright yellow eyes darted between them in a reasonable display of suspicion. "Was there anything else that you wished to ask me, Elder?"

The older man—substantially older even than Juniper, treading the edge of ninety—drew himself up with a sudden shake and a rustle of his long silver beard. "No, no, Scrimgeour," he said. "I can see that Elder Juniper has urgent business to share. And my daughter will be expecting me." He patted Rufus's arm and then strode towards one of the private Floo connections that led from Wizengamot members' houses to Courtroom Ten.

Rufus faced Juniper again. "I don't see anyone else who wishes to talk to me, Elder. Shall we go?"

They started out of the courtroom together, but were necessarily somewhat separated by the Aurors who came up to walk between them. Rufus wondered if Juniper's slightly narrowed eyes were a result of the fact that Rufus felt he needed protection to walk back to his office, or because he had underestimated the Aurors' loyalty.

That was somewhat comforting, Rufus thought, as he placed a hand on his hip in the small gesture that soothed his bad leg. The worse the news got, from the other Ministries and the Wizengamot's insistence that he "do something" about the werewolf packs, the closer the Aurors seemed to bond to him. It wasn't just those who had always been loyal, like Hope and Wilmot. Some Rufus had never known to do more than grunt and nod when he issued an order now noticed when Percy was a moment late to the office or when Rufus's leg hurt especially badly.

If it comes to a coup, at least I know the Aurors will not join it.

Then Rufus shook his head sharply. He couldn't afford to think of such a thing, to prepare for such an eventuality, when there was no sign that anyone else was. Otherwise he would strike out with violence long before anyone else dreamed of it. There had been no violently overthrown Ministers in the last hundred years. That was a record worth preserving. They could cast him out by a vote of no confidence, or try to limit his power if the pressure from the public and the other countries grew intense, but they would not try to murder him.

Perhaps. Not if the Aurors are not with them.

Rufus put such thoughts away when he entered his office and saw Percy rising to his feet, his arms full of paperwork. "Sir," Percy began, and then paused, blinking a little at the sight of his visitor.

"Elder Juniper and I have some things to speak about in private, Percy," Rufus said smoothly, and gestured to the door. "Now, I know for a fact that Auror Arrow will give you another Stealth and Hiding task tomorrow. Why don't you go and practice for it?"

Percy was not stupid. He put down the paperwork, nodded, and made his way to the door. He did pause on the way out and stare hard at Juniper. Rufus blinked. The gaze was more like one of the adult Aurors' than he would have expected. Though Percy had not finished his training, he had their full sense of stubbornness and protectiveness towards the Minister, it seemed.

The door clicked to, and Rufus lifted his wards. Juniper twisted his lips in a small smile as he sat down in the chair in front of his desk. "You have him well-trained, don't you?"

"I'm the one who saw his potential and brought him into the Auror program," said Rufus, which neatly elided the issue of influence and how close he actually was to Percy, and leaned back in his own chair with a contented little sigh. His leg did hurt more lately. A sign of advancing age, he knew, and potions could only do so much to quell the pain. "Now, Elder. I noticed that you didn't speak up much in the Wizengamot's debate. Given your well-known feelings on werewolves, I was wondering why."

"Perhaps I felt that nothing anyone else said could fully express the magnitude of my thoughts on the matter," said Juniper. The smile had fallen away from his face, and his hands made slow movements that reminded Rufus of someone braiding a rope. "Yes,

I hate werewolves, Minister. But if I thought they could contribute to the wizarding world I love and have fought so hard to preserve, then I would welcome them in regardless.”

“And?” Rufus asked levelly. He made sure his hand had a clear path to his wand, and told his thoughts to be sensible and calm.

“It is my considered, carefully weighted belief that werewolves cannot contribute to that world.” Juniper stared at him. “It is, in fact, my belief that the inclusion of werewolves in the wizarding world, the attempt to give them equal rights, actively harms it.”

Rufus took an entertaining moment to imagine what would have happened if Juniper had said that to Harry instead of him. He wondered if Juniper would still be shaking in his chair from the cold of the ice that would have coated the walls from Harry’s temper.

Unfortunately, he was not Harry, and could not rely on glares and powerful magic to make his point. He had to settle for raising his eyebrows, and sitting there with them raised, until Juniper flushed very slightly and glanced away.

“So you’re against giving rights to people who are human for ninety percent of the year,” said Rufus. “Fascinating, Elder. It’s no wonder you haven’t spoken that opinion in public yet.” It would be political suicide to do so. Many people still didn’t support werewolves, but carrying out certain actions in private and speaking the words aloud were two completely different things.

“If it were only those werewolves who register and accept Wolfsbane, and otherwise live like wizards?” Juniper shook his head, his jaw clenched. “Then I would not have a problem with it. But there are the packs, Minister, and the packs are the ones letting the Muggles into our world, according to that article. They define themselves as a different culture, and independent of our laws. Separating ourselves from them would be no more than doing what both sides want.

“Unfortunately, it’s not that simple, not when their telling Muggles about us can expose *wizards* to danger as well. So I suggest, Minister, that we make telling such secrets punishable with the rescinding of their rights, including access to Wolfsbane. Werewolves who can demonstrate that they’ve never engaged in such behavior will of course continue to receive it.”

“And so you’ll turn some of our people back into ravaging monsters, and encourage attacks like those happening last year, for the sake of making a point?”

“There is no other way to get through to them, Minister.” Juniper leaned forward. “They’re not normal wizards anymore. They’ve cut themselves off. I’ve studied the way a packmind works. It binds the members of the pack together, and makes them consider those people and *only* those people as mattering, as worthy of mattering, as important. That means that an alpha won’t care that he’s putting people outside the pack in danger. He might even let someone close to him run without Wolfsbane if she wanted to. They truly *change* when bitten, Minister.”

“I’ve heard that before,” said Rufus. “From Amelia Bones, in the full extremity of her cowardice. And I will not be swayed on this, Elder. The werewolves received their equal rights because they were willing to fight for them, and because Harry was willing to fight for them, but it is to the Ministry’s shame that they were not granted for so long. They should have been granted *at once*. We should have treated house elves better than we did. Goblins, too, and centaurs. I *will not* allow such disgusting ideas to make a comeback, as long as I sit in the Minister’s office. *Get out.*”

Juniper rose slowly to his feet, never taking his eyes from Rufus’s face. Rufus simply looked at him. He thought Juniper probably expected him to be red-faced and blustering, but instead he was pale, and had not felt so cool-tempered in a long time.

“As long as you sit in the Minister’s office,” Juniper repeated thoughtfully. “That may not be long, you realize.”

Rufus lifted his head and let his teeth show, and even his wand, peeking up in his hand over the edge of the desk. “Has no one told you that it might not be the most intelligent thing in the world to make such threats, *sir*?”

The amusement vanished from Juniper’s face, and he leaned forward. Rufus brought his wand up further, but Juniper showed no sign of intending to attack him. Instead, he stared, and spoke again, his words slow and careful, heavy, as if he were imploring Rufus to believe him.

“I act as honestly as I can, as often as I can,” he said. “I know what I love in the wizarding world, and stand for. I know it’s not popular to feel that the core of our world are those wizards who have done the most to keep our traditions alive and our people safe—the Light purebloods. Nor is it popular to dislike the *vates* and feel he has gone too far in trying to grant rights to magical creatures, rights that come at the expense of wizards’. But I do feel those things, and I will say them. And I will continue to fight for the center of the wizarding world, the part that *must* survive, no matter what others may think of me for it or what words I need to use in public.

“Neither do I make threats, Minister. I am only warning you that discontent against you runs deep. Some of that comes from the Ritual of Cincinnatus, but even more comes from the way you’ve dealt with the *vates*. Someone should have taken the boy in hand the moment the abuse by his parents was discovered—and we have learned that you had access to such information more than three years ago, when the boy’s mother applied for guardianship of him after being stripped of her magic. You did not investigate. The matter was left to rest, and it should not have been. What it has led to is an image of you under Harry’s thumb.”

“And why is that?” Rufus asked. He was not entirely sure that he could trust what Juniper was telling him. On the other hand, the Elder’s reputation for honesty was well-known.

“Because you bowed to his rebellion,” said Juniper quietly, “an open use of illegal force against the Ministry. Because you have made an effort to pursue and prosecute criminals who were linked to Harry in some way; the trial of his parents should have taken longer to arrange than it did. Because your glancing the other way, and the tampering with paperwork to keep him free of his parents’ custody, has been noted.” He hesitated a long moment, then shook his head. “Look here, Rufus,” he said, dropping all titles. “I don’t want to see you gone. I find you more reasonable than most of the people who might take your place. But neither can I commit to following a Minister who follows someone else.”

“I have never done so,” Rufus answered, knowing his voice was thick with passion, and not caring. This conversation would damage Juniper as severely as him if Juniper put it in a Pensieve and showed it to others. “I have always done what *I* feel is best for the wizarding world. It’s a fact that the Ministry has had to spend the last fifty years dealing with British Lord-level wizards, since Dumbledore defeated Grindelwald and showed his full power. We botched it during the First War. This time, we have to steer a course between shoals. I will give Harry an ear. That does not mean I give him my hands, my back, or my brain.”

Juniper contemplated him in silence for a long time. Then he said, “But you may believe the Ministry’s good coincides with Harry’s.”

“Because it may. It often has, given the way Harry reasons and argues.”

“And sometimes we may need to disassociate ourselves from him, if only to protect our own interests.” Juniper shook his head, and his eyes had gone dark again, with a warning that Rufus had to wonder about. Did it actually match what he was saying? “You may *believe* as you like, Minister. But, at times, you may need to *act* an independent course from Harry, if only to prove your independence.”

“And I do not believe the werewolf issue is one where I need to do so, or could give a convincing performance if I tried.” Rufus folded his hands on the desk in front of him and stared at Juniper. “You may depart now, Elder. It seems as though we have little to say to each other.”

“I think you value some of the same things I do, sir.” Juniper still stubbornly lingered. “You value the continuity of tradition in the Light, and the way that Light wizards have traditionally supported something far greater than themselves: the peace and safety of all wizarding Britain. We have sometimes operated on an ethics of sacrifice, yes, but we have proven as ready to sacrifice ourselves as others. I wish you could take that into account, rather than simply assuming that our voice is one among many, of no greater account than another. You are sworn to Light yourself, and are part of that proud history. You know what we have done.”

“And sometimes, failed to do,” said Rufus, thinking of Dumbledore, thinking of the way that Light wizards had also refused to release their house elves because doing so would lose them status or convenience. “Light does not mean good, Juniper. I would have thought you would understand that.”

“In this day and age, it does,” said Juniper. “We are the only defense against the coming storm.”

“If a storm is rising,” said Rufus, “we will need Harry to fight it.”

Juniper did not speak again. He merely bowed, eyes still dark, and then turned and swished through the door.

Rufus took a deep breath and sat back. His head was pounding, and his belly shook, and in general he felt half-hollowed.

He stood, and did what he always did when he felt this way and was alone: began to make himself a cup of tea.

“I didn’t say that I disagreed with you,” said Draco, looking as if he were fighting hard to keep his temper. “I just said that now might not be the best time to demand equal rights for children like Jacinth, Harry.”

“I don’t see why not.” Harry finished the letter, looked it over carefully, and then nodded. He’d explained the situation, giving enough generalities that anyone reading the letter could guess what it was about, but none of the specifics that might have led to Lazuli’s arrest. He tapped the letter, and it began to replicate itself with a calm crinkling and folding of paper. One copy would go to every member of the Wizengamot. “If we wait and wait, then who says that a better time will ever come?”

“Yes, but the werewolves?” Draco leaned back against the pillow with a groan. “I just think you should wait until the Wizengamot’s not so agitated, Harry. They’re still debating whether they should pull the concessions that they granted the werewolves after the rebellion, you know that.”

“Of course I know that.” Harry left the letters to their self-copying and stood, crossing to Draco so that he could drop a kiss on his cheek. Then he nudged him over. Draco fell with a surprised grunt, and Harry started massaging his shoulders. He had found in the past few days that it tended to neutralize Draco’s objections as well as relaxing him enough for him to sleep. “But they should know that if they do that, I’ll just begin another rebellion.”

There probably wasn’t a touch in the world that could have kept Draco relaxed through that. He stiffened, then rolled out from under Harry’s hands and reached up to clasp his wrist. “Harry, you wouldn’t.”

Harry looked at him calmly. Draco had lost all sorts of arguments to him in the last week. That was because, this time, unlike the argument they’d had over the thestrals, Draco didn’t have a legitimate personal objection to Harry’s behavior. He could only try to persuade him, and usually Harry had thought out his reasoning already. So Harry looked at him patiently, and looked at him calmly, and Draco had come to give up within a few moments of staring.

This time, though, his hold on Harry’s wrist only tightened. “You can’t,” Draco whispered. “Damn it, Harry, I don’t want to lose you.”

Hmmm. That isn’t something he’s said before. “You wouldn’t lose me,” said Harry, gently stroking his palm with a fingertip. “Why would you think me more likely to die in this second rebellion than the first?”

“That’s not what I meant.” Draco heaved himself onto his knees and shifted his hand so that Harry couldn’t move his finger anymore. “Harry—the political climate is different now than it was before the rebellion. People are warier of you, because now they know you might break from the Ministry openly, whereas before they could never have suspected it. I don’t want to lose you to the passion of the fight.”

“I still don’t know what you mean.” And Harry didn’t. His puzzlement increased at the desperation in Draco’s eyes. Draco and Snape had become more and more worried over him in the last few days, and Harry couldn’t figure out what he was doing to make them so fearful. If he knew, then he would stop it.

Draco swallowed several times before he spoke. “I—Harry, you’ve been so *intense* these last few weeks. You’ve done what’s needed when it’s needed, I can’t deny that. But I’ve never felt like you were with me the way you have been at other times. I always felt like you were either thinking about me or thinking about something else. Never just lying beside me in the bed, at home in your own body.”

“Oh.” Well, that made sense, Harry supposed, in its own way. He hadn’t often had so many concerns continuing at one time.

Or he hadn’t been so good at balancing them before. Harry thought that was more likely the cause of Draco’s worry.

“You’re used to seeing me more obsessive, on the edge of collapse, or throwing myself into one crisis,” he said, and leaned forward to kiss Draco’s nose. “So you’re waiting for the collapse to come, aren’t you?”

Draco’s face turned red.

“I don’t blame you,” Harry told him cheerfully. “I *have* done that. This time, though, I promise, I’ve learned my lesson. The minute you see me doing something self-destructive, you have my permission to tie me to the bed and sit on me until I listen. All right?” A soft rustle behind him let him know the letters had finished replication, and he rolled off the bed to take them to the Owlery. A side effect of having to use Levitation Charms for so many months was that he’d grown very good at them. He could easily have the letters surround him in a floating halo now, which would take up a little more room in the corridor but be better for the ink.

“Harry...”

He glanced over his shoulder. Draco was biting his lip, staring at him in the same desperation. Harry settled the irritation that wanted to rise. He'd just figured out what was going on. That didn't mean he could expect Draco to smile at him and let him go off without a concern. "Yes?"

Draco stretched out his hand, then let it fall and shook his head. "Come to me if you want someone to talk to," he said.

Harry nodded. "Of course. You would be my first choice for most things, Draco, even before Snape or Connor." He tried a sunny smile, wondering if his expressions hadn't been bright enough to reassure Draco.

If anything, that only increased the sharpness of his stare. Harry ended up shaking his head in bewilderment and escorting the letters towards the Owlery. He would do what he could to ease Draco's preoccupations, but it seemed that no amount of reason would soothe them entirely. Probably Draco just needed time, to see that Harry had endured day after day without falling apart, and he would relax as the unusual became routine with the passage of time.

Then he switched his mind to thinking about the probable reactions to his letters. He smirked a bit. Not good, but Lazuli had told him that she'd talked to other parents she knew of, both Light and Dark, who had half-human children like Jacinth, and they were ready for him to move now, to let the wizarding world at large know about them. If someone made lucky guesses and tried to question them, few—except those like Lazuli, who had slept with species it was illegal even to speak of—would deny it. They were still gathering strength, but their storm was ready to burst on the wizarding world at any moment.

Besides, Harry thought the Wizengamot's distraction over the werewolves might actually serve him well. Split their attention onto two fronts, and they could concentrate less on either taking packs' rights away or prosecuting the parents of children who were not half-Veela.

Sometimes things changed slowly, and suddenly they came to a sudden crackling burst of growth. Harry was used to them both. He thought it was about time the wizarding world had a chance to get used to the latter.

Draco worried his lip between his teeth and stared at the canopy of their bed. He told himself he was worrying too much. He told himself that his political instincts were not infallible—not yet—and that even if Harry was making a mistake with these letters, it would not cost him every ally he had. Too many of his allies had blemishes themselves, in the eyes of wizarding society. Why would a werewolf or a former Death Eater assume she couldn't fight next to Harry because he was supporting a parent who'd slept with someone nonhuman to sire or bear a child?

It isn't that. I know it's more than that. I know that Harry, for one thing, still hasn't talked to anyone about what he feels for my father, or what he did to heal his mother—and now that Joseph has gone back to the Sanctuary, he may never talk to anyone.

Except that that wasn't true, either. Harry had talked to Hawthorn Parkinson about her grief; Draco knew that. He had talked to Snape when nightmares plagued him. He had certainly heard Draco's side of the story about Lucius often enough in the last few weeks.

And as for what Draco most wanted to know, it showed no sign of tearing Harry apart, and he seemed honestly puzzled when asked questions about his mental health. Draco thought he knew Harry well enough to tell when he was hiding something. He was not hiding anything about Lucius or his mother, not this time.

I really don't understand. Maybe I am just overprotective of him.

And then Draco paused, having a sudden idea about what he might be able to ask for, what might help him find out if Harry's reactions were honestly changed or if he was ignoring his feelings again, perhaps with the same use of Occlumency he'd tried in Woodhouse. The best part was, he didn't need to ask for this gift for another ten days or so, which meant that he had time to observe Harry's reactions and decide for himself whether Harry was faking it or not.

Satisfied, Draco closed his eyes and lay as if asleep, though he listened for a sound of Harry's return.

Harry stood waiting quietly in Blackstone's entrance hall. The house was dim, as though too much light would be an insult to the Dark family who lived there. Or maybe that was just to emphasize the paintings on the walls. Harry could make out figures, twisted limbs and beckoning hands and smiles, but not whole bodies. The effect was rather striking. He walked towards a painting that claimed it was called "The Procession of Death" on the plaque beneath.

“Harry. Thank you for coming.”

He turned. Adalrico stood behind him, in the entrance to what Harry assumed was a study. He was trying to smile. It didn't work very well.

“You asked me to, sir.” Harry moved a few steps forward, never looking away from Adalrico's face. He wasn't using Legilimency, but perhaps the piercing quality of his gaze was still too much for Adalrico, who abruptly turned away from him and retreated into the room.

“Won't you come in?”

And he did, though he still tried to tell from Adalrico's shoulders and spine what the matter was. Why would Adalrico have invited Harry to his family's home and then be upset when he arrived?

The study—for so it was—was also dim, the walls decorated in gray and black, the carpet a dark red that almost swallowed the firelight. Adalrico settled heavily into a chair in front of the hearth. Harry stood across from him until Adalrico gestured him to be seated, and sat only on the edge of the cushion. He had the persistent feeling that he would have to move sharply in a moment.

“I mean you no harm,” said Adalrico tightly, eyes focused on the flames. “It is rather an insult to act as if I do, Harry.”

“You are not acting normally, either, sir,” Harry said, deciding that now wasn't the time for the name “Adalrico,” no matter how he thought of the man. “Forgive me for expressing honestly how I feel.”

Adalrico took a deep breath, and leaned over to pick up a glass jar from next to the chair. Harry kept a close eye on the contents as Adalrico turned it idly back and forth. It looked like a collection of black flakes. Ashes? Perhaps, but Harry would not wager on that, especially once he saw that Adalrico, for all his toying with the jar's lid, didn't remove it.

“These are the last Black Plague spores that I created for Voldemort,” said Adalrico abruptly, looking at him.

Harry hissed before he could stop himself. The disease had claimed an enormous toll in lives during the First War. If anyone had actually been able to prove that Adalrico had created them of his own free will and not because he was under Imperius, then he would still have been in Azkaban when Voldemort rose again.

“I haven't used them,” said Adalrico, staring at the jar. “But I have wanted to use them, several times, in the years since his fall.”

“Especially on the Starrise estate, sir?” Harry asked sharply.

Adalrico looked up, caught his eye, and reacted badly to whatever he saw there, shoulders stiffening. “You know my grievance against the family,” he said. “What Pharos Starrise did was outside the bounds of all proper decorum. I had a *right* to be offended and angry.”

“You did,” Harry agreed. “You also had a *right* to think about what it would mean to act against Starrise, the family of which Tybalt is a part. Tybalt is also a part of the Alliance, and acting against an Alliance comrade is punished by a draining of magic.” He heard his voice grow sharper and sharper, but he did not care. “I have had one weakness, one betrayal, among those Dark wizards closest to me, sir. I will not tolerate another.”

“I said only that I have wanted to use them. Not that I had.”

“And you will give them to me so that you are not tempted to use them again?” Harry held out his hand.

Adalrico looked away from him.

“Why show them to me, unless you intended to hand them over?” Harry pressed, suddenly understanding Adalrico's nervousness in a new light. He had called Harry here to present the spores to him, Harry was almost sure, and then changed his mind. But by then, it would have looked extremely suspicious to tell Harry not to come, not when he hadn't given a reason in the first place. “*Sir*. I know that you have changed. I know that you resent the Starrises, with good reason. But if you allow those feelings to influence you into acting against people who have never done you harm, then you cannot be part of this Alliance.”

“And if I had used those spores only against Pharos?” Adalrico asked. “If I had never told you about them?”

Harry felt the atmosphere in the room shimmer and grow darker. Almost certainly, Blackstone's wards were responding to their master's mood. He called his own power, and the air draped around his shoulders grew into a serpent, which lifted its head, hissing lazily. The Many snake around his throat also stirred and inflated her hood.

"I would have recognized the signs," said Harry, unmoving, deepening and tightening the ice he'd locked around his more volatile emotions. "I studied the First War, sir. I know that this kind of weapon is too dangerous to be unleashed again. Someone in the Ministry could have studied it if you used it against Pharos, and sooner or later it might have emerged on a battlefield. If you use it, I will stop at nothing to drain your magic."

Adalrico stared at him, eyes reflecting a depth of hatred Harry had never seen him show before. He knew none of it was directed at him, but that didn't diminish his own stare. If Adalrico couldn't obey the rules, he could damn well leave the Alliance. Harry wasn't going to entertain another serpent in the breast.

And then the moment passed, and Adalrico lowered his eyes and looked away from him. Harry breathed carefully, not moving any other part of his body, and both his black snake and the Many cobra held still, waiting for his command.

"I—I'll give them to you," Adalrico whispered, and waved his wand to Levitate the jar of spores over to Harry. "But that doesn't mean I have stopped hating Pharos Starrise. It should be my right to put an end to him."

"You can't," Harry said, catching the jar and nodding his thanks. The lid was sealed with a powerful locking charm that, so far as he could tell with a short inspection, hadn't been tampered with. "Perhaps if he had attacked you in a place other than the Ministry, yes. But he's in Ministry custody now. Try to murder him, and you'll be arrested."

"You could change things so that that was not true," Adalrico suggested, voice barely above a murmur.

The black serpent reared, hissing. Harry said quietly, "Never ask me something like that again."

Adalrico looked away from him.

Harry waited to see if he would say anything else, but minutes passed, and nothing happened. At last, Harry stood, and dismissed the black snake. It did not go easily. He must have been angrier than he knew.

"I still care for you, sir," he said. "Even if you had never been my ally, I would value you as Millicent's father. And you have helped me in the past. But I *will* not tolerate this stupid striving after vengeance that damages all of us. Pharos Starrise didn't learn that lesson in time. Don't let him drag you down with him."

He walked out of Blackstone, and Apparated back to Hogwarts, where he stood some time on the path back from Hogsmeade, breathing the spring air and staring off into the Forbidden Forest.

Then he crouched down and carefully called intense heat to destroy the glass jar and the Black Plague spores inside it. He burned them so hot that neither spores nor fumes could escape into the open air. The glass turned to slag, the spores to less than dust, less than ashes.

And then he had to pause to renew, once again, the deep ice at the back of his mind, which had filled his mind with clarity for the past few weeks and helped him get what he needed to get done.

I will not use such foul weapons. I will not permit Adalrico to kill Pharos merely to satisfy his lust for vengeance. There are some things I will not do.

And then those concerns retreated like the scrim of oil they were. It had nearly happened, but in the end it had not. And if Adalrico had not given him all the Black Plague spores...well, Harry would trust him until he had proven he could not be trusted. But he would watch him a little more closely from now on.

He walked calmly towards the castle, already reviewing what he needed to do next in his head.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: Purple, Silver, Green

Severus was adding a drop of unicorn's tears to the green potion when he felt the pain flare up in his left arm. Carefully, he tapped the vial to get the last of the tears out, then set it down and turned to fetch his cloak and mask. The burning grew worse in his arm,

but not so bad that he could not function. His Lord knew that he needed some extra time to get beyond the wards so that he could Apparate.

Just as he made his way towards the closet at the back of his office that led to a tunnel, which itself led out onto the grounds, someone knocked on his door. Severus groaned and turned. It *would* be his luck that some member of his House needed help or comfort now. Quickly casting a Disillusionment Charm on his robe and mask, and keeping a stoic expression on his face that belied the burning coming from his left arm, he opened the door.

Albus stood there, his face taut with excitement. "Severus," he whispered. "You must come with me. The Order has received intelligence from one of Voldemort's victims that he is ready to begin a raid in Ireland. We will be Apparating there to stop him."

Severus concealed another groan. That was, very likely, the raid in which he was supposed to be participating.

He held up his left arm in silent answer. Albus's eyes narrowed at it, then at him.

"This raid will be on homes with defenseless Muggle families and children, Severus," he said. "I am afraid that I must ask you to come with us this time. Conceal your face, but do not add your wand to the other side."

Severus's consternation enabled his thoughts to soar above the pain. There was a time when Albus would never have asked him for that. Since he assumed his little spy was loyal to him, he would have trusted Severus to avoid casting curses at Order members, and to avoid any killing that was not absolutely necessary to make a point in front of another Death Eater.

Now he didn't trust him to that extent.

Perhaps he has not trusted me since the graveyard. It would explain why I didn't know anything about Connor Potter's training or location.

His eyes on Albus, he made his decision. The burning in his left arm was growing more urgent, but only slowly so, like acid constantly replenished with stronger and stronger forms of itself. First it would eat skin, then flesh, then muscle, then bone. But he had time.

And he had a pawn he could sacrifice to insure that Albus would think about other things in a short while, and suffer for binding him like this.

"Very well," he agreed, and Albus beamed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Splendid, my boy! We'll be Apparating from the gates in a few moments." And Albus turned and strode away.

He trusts me a little, then. His mistake.

Severus bent and slid his wand over his left wrist, invoking the communication spell that Charles Rosier-Henlin had taught the Death Eaters a week ago, when he'd finally, finally been persuaded into coming to the Dark Lord's side. "My Lord," he murmured, and heard the intense hissing of a snake rise. "The old fool commands my presence on the phoenix's side of the raid. I will work what havoc I can there, and return to you as soon as I can."

There was silence for a moment. Then his Lord's voice said, "Go, Severus, faithful servant." Severus felt the intense thrill at the sound of his own name that he'd felt since he followed Voldemort's advice and started thinking of himself by his first name again instead of his last.

And the burning in his left arm stopped.

Severus shook his head and blinked. *He must trust me indeed, to put off showing his displeasure while I do this task for him.*

That only increased his determination to make his absence from his Lord's side worthwhile. He strode towards the gates, his mind racing as he sought for the best way to do what he wanted and make Albus pay.

And then he paused in mid-stride, his whole body shivering with a dark delight.

He could not—

Could he?

He had not tested all the limitations on his potions. What he wanted to do might be possible, but there was a stronger chance that it was not. And he did not want to embarrass himself by failing.

But if he did it carefully enough, no one else would ever know, and he could keep any failure to himself.

Severus nodded, and sped up, arriving at the gates at the same moment as Minerva. She gave him a narrow-eyed look, then stepped forward and received the vision of the field in Ireland from a tap of Albus's wand.

Severus did the same thing. For a moment, he was close to his old master, and could meet those blue, twinkling eyes that did their best to see into his soul. But Severus had been Occlumens enough to fool a more powerful Legilimens for years, and he did not flinch away from that gaze.

Albus smiled at him, then tapped his head and sent the vision into Severus's memory. Like the other Order members, he Apparated.

He easily ignored the carnage around him, the blood, the broken limbs. There was a time he would have found it troubling, when he still believed that the Death Eaters should have some grace that the other side did not. Now, he realized that the only grace or beauty anyone brought anywhere was what he carried with him, and he and his Lord did enough with contributing beauty and grace to the Dark. At times, in particular moods, Bellatrix or Evan helped too.

They were helping now, torturing a Muggle woman between them, sending her reeling from one pain to another. Severus reveled in the screaming, and felt a moment's urge to protest when Minerva mercy-killed her.

Then he remembered his plan, and felt his mouth move in a deep smile. He turned and fixed his gaze on James Potter. He'd had to overcome his cowardice, because Albus insisted that every member of the Order of the Phoenix be a fighter, and currently he was dueling with two Death Eaters who were backing him towards his wife and son. Connor Potter led them, of course, because he had to, the intermittent flashes of spells catching his heart-shaped scar and making it gleam as if filled with blood.

Severus concentrated. He'd fed James the silver potion months ago, but it should still be vibrating along his veins, the liquid equivalent of the Imperius Curse, enabling Severus to command him.

Come here.

James turned and lurched like an automaton away from the two Death Eaters, and towards Severus. His opponents paused, momentarily confused, and then turned and shrugged and found other targets.

His old rival halted in front of him. Severus took a deep breath of satisfaction, and then held out his wand and cast an illusion of the Dark Mark on James's left arm. It wouldn't hold up to testing, and would not enable the man to feel a summons from the Dark Lord, but in a moment's glimpse, it looked quite convincing.

"Go," he said quietly. He would have loved to send James after his son, but his Lord had been explicit: no one was to kill the boy but him, and the Dark Lord had not yet appeared on the battlefield, though Severus knew he was close and watching. "You know who to aim for."

James nodded, his hazel eyes full of steel and dreams, and then turned and lurched forward. In a few moments, though, he was walking smoothly, his Auror training and the intense duels of the past few months sharpening his stride. He ducked and weaved past the Order members, and came up close behind Connor Potter, whose spells, Severus had to admit, were effective at blasting his enemies away. They were Death Eaters Severus didn't care about, though, so they were no great loss.

James halted in front of Lily, and held up his left arm so that she could see the Dark Mark. Her eyes widened dramatically.

Severus was sure a lull fell over that part of the battle, so that everyone near could hear James say, "*Avada Kedavra.*"

The green light struck his wife. She slumped. For a moment, James stood blank-eyed, staring.

And then his son hit him, screaming, casting Cutting Curses that he shouldn't know over and over, slicing his father's body apart, sending blood to cover his robes, and then his mother's corpse, as James slumped on top of Lily's body.

Severus released his control, so that no one could find any trace of his mind in James's, and then turned and faced the east, knowing instinctively that his Lord was there at that moment. Voldemort's gleaming red eyes met his.

His Lord was pleased. A hissing voice whispered his name over and over in his ears. "*Severus, Severus, Severussss...*"

And he, who had survived to serve two masters and then chosen the best one when he could no longer be a double agent, revealed in it.

Best of all was the tragic look in Albus's eyes as he wrapped his arms around the Potter boy and tugged him away from his dead parents, forcing him to face his oncoming doom, his destiny.

Severus woke with an edge of gladness and joy still riding his mind. He did not remember the dream any more than he usually did, but he was just as glad to have dreamt of something bright instead of dark for once.

He checked the potions. The purple one was finished completely now, and had been for some time, simply shimmering in its cauldron and now and then uttering a slow bubble like swamp water. The silver one had a light, misty cloud above it, one ingredient reacting with another. Severus waved his wand and dissipated the cloud, then set the cauldron to slow simmering again. He planned to ask Harry if he could use the potion on him soon, since it seemed that there were once again wounds in his son's mind, and this should work to cure him.

The green potion—

Severus shook his head with a faint, fond smile. He could not wait until the green potion was ready.

The world lurched suddenly, and Snape put a hand to his head, feeling slightly ill. Had something just happened?

Nothing more than the departure of his mood and a more normal one asserting itself, he supposed. Euphoria never stayed long with him. He scowled as he remembered thinking about the wounds in Harry's mind. They had almost certainly been caused by contact with his parents again.

Determined, this time, to see into the bottom of Harry's mind and find out just how much he was hurting, Snape stalked out of his offices. Harry had been behaving *too* well these last weeks. It was time to see what that kind of behavior was costing him.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Eighty-Nine: Luna's Gift

Luna slipped her hand gently out of Padma's and stood. They had been studying for the length of time it would take hippogriff teeth to break apart in salt water. That meant that Luna had to go now, and hunt the object that hated the whole world.

"Luna?"

Padma was looking at her with a worried expression, but she had no reason to worry. Luna was walking down friendly stairs, and by now all the portraits and the other wary objects in the castle knew her and would watch out for her. Even if Luna fell out of sight of a thing which could talk to humans, the things that could see her would talk to the portraits, and the portraits would talk to someone else. Luna was carefully guarded as she had never been before, which was good, because Luna found it as hard to talk to other people sometimes as if she were made of stone herself.

"I'll come back when the moon-glass is full," she promised, and flicked her wand at an hourglass that stood on their table and would brighten as the moon arose. The hourglass came to life at the enchantment, singing out gratitude for being used. Luna liked the moon-glass, but she did wish it would be quieter sometimes; it was so loud it drowned other voices out. She kissed Padma and made her way through the Ravenclaw common room, pausing at the door.

The door was telling over the tales of its opening during the day to itself, since it didn't expect any more visitors. To many doors in the castle, curfew meant the time they wouldn't be opened any more. But Luna had to open it one more time. Luckily, the door of the Ravenclaw common room was cheerful and liked to add to its tales. She slipped through with murmured thanks, and heard the count begin again behind her as she started towards the Headmistress's office.

As she walked, she expanded her senses beyond her head like a lion's mane, or a pair of ruffled and pricked ears. She could do

this, now; it was new, but it was useful. She would use it to hear the voices of distant objects, and those which normally never spoke even to her unless she directly asked them: the solid, sullen foundation stones, the tapestries whose tempers changed with every passing breeze, the lintels whose oldest grief was at being thought of merely as part of the doorways.

She was trying to hear the object that hated the whole world. It should be somewhere nearby. The other times she'd felt it, it was always in the Headmistress's office, and even if it moved, the way she thought it did, then it should leave some ripples of its passage behind, dark tales incised into the walls.

She was going to find it. The library tables had overheard Harry muttering to himself the other day about dangerous objects, and surely that was the most dangerous object in Hogwarts.

A stone complained when she stepped on it. Luna knelt, stroked it, and then rose and went on her way, feeling its contented purr roll along in the floor beneath her, sending other stones into a paroxysm of contentment. That made her walk a little more joyous than it might have been.

“Sit down, Harry.”

Harry took a seat in front of Snape's desk, keeping his eyebrows politely raised. His guardian's looks had sharpened today, away from the worry that he'd seen in Draco and towards anger. Harry was sure he must have made a mistake in Potions class or elsewhere to earn that fury, but try as he might, he could not remember it.

“Yes, sir?” he asked.

“How many times have I told you to call me by my first name?”

Harry cocked his head. *Maybe that was my mistake?* Snape had spoken to him in Potions class today, and Harry had responded with a “Yes, sir,” but most of the time Snape didn't want his first name used in front of other students anyway. If Harry had thawed his resentment, he might have felt it then, because Snape had given no sign that the name-use he expected of Harry had changed yet again.

But the resentment lay deep in the icepack at the back of his mind, so he said, “Sorry, Severus. What is it?”

Snape sat in silence for a few moments more, as if considering how best to phrase matters. Then he leaned forward and said, “Harry, I notice that you still have not undergone a breakdown of the kind I would have expected when you learned about Lucius Malfoy's betrayal.”

Harry smiled proudly. *Oh, that. Well, at least I can tell him he doesn't have to worry anymore.* “No, I haven't,” he agreed. “I've managed to change things, Severus. My reactions are my own to control now, and I'm no longer obsessing over my latest failure the way I used to do. Draco talked to me about the same thing. I've managed to do most of what people asked me to in the last few weeks.” He heard a sturdy pride in his voice. After a moment's consideration, he dismissed it as a harmless emotion. It could stay there.

Snape's frown only deepened. “I can only guess, Harry, that your arrival at this unusual emotional state is achieved through use of Occlumency pools, again,” he said, his voice heavy with disappointment. “I cannot permit that to continue. You *will* allow me to examine you with Legilimency and start up a slow process of leaking through those pools. If you think we cannot permit you to have a collapse about Lucius, still less can we permit the kind of complete breakdown that you had to go through in Woodhouse.”

Well, I should have known that any unusual behavior would only worry him. He's never been one to believe in the first signs of my healing, unless he was the one who prompted them. Harry nodded, and leaned forward. “Of course, Severus. I know I'm not doing anything wrong, with Occlumency or otherwise, so you can look at my mind.”

Snape blinked, obviously caught off-guard. That increased Harry's hope, a little. Snape was relying on past patterns of behavior to assume things were wrong. When he saw how different things really were, he would have to admit that this time, the past patterns of behavior were completely destroyed.

Of course, Harry knew that Snape probably wouldn't like the image of the ice at the back of his mind that kept his emotions in stillness until he needed them. His particular prejudice against them would be that they were solid encrustations in Harry's mind, and Snape didn't like solid encrustations; he had distrusted Harry's box long before it caused trouble. Snape held to the old view of mental control, that an Occlumens had to embody his emotions in some fluid construct like wind or water, or else he would go

mad. But Harry had encountered a book in the course of his reading about some way to get around Unassailable Curses that suggested that was not true. Solid images could work, as long as they were solid images that could change. Ice was ideal, since it could melt and flow into water, a fluid container, and freeze again to keep the emotions out of the way.

But Snape probably still wouldn't like it, even if Harry was able to show him that it worked. So Harry would just not show the ice-banks to him. He would go on for a few more months and demonstrate to Snape how well it worked, without a breakdown, so that he would have to admit his fears had been for nothing, the way he wouldn't do with only a few weeks' evidence.

And to reassure Snape that everything was fine, he intended to use another trick he'd learned from the book about Unassailable Curses. Once, wizards had believed that intense mental concentration on the condition that allowed one to break the Unassailable Curse—for example, thinking like a member of one particular family if the Curse said that only a member of that family could pass the barrier—would work. It hadn't, but the method those wizards worked out was useful to other arts of mental control. So Harry conjured up a curtain of normal emotions and floated it in front of the icepacks as Snape gently blew into his mind.

The Legilimency examined him quite thoroughly. Harry let him see the pools and all the normal areas of his mind, the great steel skeleton covered with budding leaves. The ice was at the very back of his thoughts, curled around the tree's roots, where Snape would only have expected to find unconscious impulses and half-formed desires anyway. The screen of emotions gave the impression that that part of Harry's mind was absolutely normal, unfrozen, untainted.

The wind blew out again. Harry opened his eyes, and smiled into Snape's perplexed face.

"Do you see, Severus?" he asked, keeping himself from formality just in time. To him, "sir" *was* a more affectionate term of endearment than a first name. He called both his parents by their first names now. He might think of people however he liked, by surname or title or first name, but what he called them face-to-face was a different matter. If Snape had allowed the formal distance between them to persist, an expandable space that Harry could retreat into or come back from as he had need, then Harry thought he might have felt even closer to him than he did now. "I'm fine. I just managed to tell myself that I couldn't break down right now, that people needed me, and so I kept the balance."

And that was true. It was what had decided him on using the ice, which he'd already half-toyed with the idea of doing, but had given up when he realized that he'd need access to all his emotions during the month of April and the Walpurgis ritual. After that, though—well, Draco had been so upset, and Hawthorn had been so upset, and the Ministry was in flux and in chaos, and it would have been so easy to add to Snape's burdens, too, if Harry were not watching out for that. So he slid the emotions into the ice, and waited to tell people until they would have to admit how much more efficient this was, and that it worked for him. He could still retrieve the emotions whenever he liked. He wasn't the cold monster he'd been for the majority of his first two years at Hogwarts. But he was in control of them and how he expressed them.

He thought this perfectly fine.

"I had thought," Snape said at last, "that you were upset from the encounters with Lucius and your parents."

"Upset for Draco," said Harry truthfully. "Upset for Hawthorn. And I wish someone else could have healed Lily. But that didn't happen." He shrugged, and sat looking earnestly at Snape.

He supposed it might be that earnestness that worried Snape and Draco. He couldn't help it, though. His freezing of his emotions had cleared his mind wonderfully. He could *think ahead* now, and forestall hunger by seeing when he would need to eat, and forestall sleepiness by resting. And since he knew exactly when he needed to do certain things, he freed more time for unexpected crises. This was the way he needed to function, he thought, the way a leader would have to be able to: ready to deal with whatever arrived suddenly in his life, and able to keep the rest of his life foaming about, attending to others' needs.

"I have a potion," Snape said quietly, "that I planned to give you, Harry. It would have healed any gaping wounds left in your mind from your emotions. But now..." He cut himself off and shook his head. "It seems I was mistaken."

"You were," Harry agreed, with a small smile. "But pleasantly mistaken, which is unusual, and good when it happens."

In the end, Snape had to let him go. Harry hummed under his breath as he walked towards his bedroom. One Wizengamot Elder, Hollyshead, had already written back to him in disbelief, demanding how he could want to let wizards and witches who slept with nonhumans "evade their responsibility to the magical community." He listed several points about how wizards were dying out, and *more* of them should be marrying and having children with humans, not less. Few people would want to marry the half-human children of such unions.

Harry knew exactly how to answer that letter, thanks to the ice. Before the ice, it might have made him so upset that he couldn't

think.

He wondered, for a moment, what would happen if months passed and he showed Snape and Draco how he had coped, and they still hated it, still insisted that he should feel every spontaneous emotion that came along.

Well, then I can show them I'm just following the lessons that Joseph taught me, he reasoned. He taught me to take some time for myself and do what I wanted to do. And this is what I want to do, and it helps other people, and it doesn't hurt me. I don't see how they can really object.

Luna arrived in the Headmistress's office and stood still for a moment, gazing around. It was late enough at night that the Headmistress had already retired to bed. Luna could see the gleam of her fire under the door on the other side of the room, and hear the soft clucks of the pieces of wood talking to each other, arguing good-naturedly about who had been the most interesting person to watch sleep in the bed.

No wards spoke at her arrival; the walls and the floors knew Luna, and they would get in the way of the wards and keep them from responding when it was necessary to let her slip by. Luna appreciated the gesture, and she thought Headmistress McGonagall would, too. She didn't deserve to be disturbed, not this late, when she had the problems of a massive school to take care of. And things always grew worse near the end of the year, Luna knew, even if she didn't quite understand why. Students kicked stairs more often, and threw books across the room. Padma had tried to explain that it had to do with exams. But Luna didn't think that could be it. One studied, and one got good marks—most of the time, if one was in Ravenclaw—or one didn't. Who would worry so much about it?

She stood in the center of the office and turned in a circle. It hadn't changed since the last time she saw it. Bookshelves stood along the walls, still communing busily with them; the Headmistress had moved them in only a little more than a year ago, and it took wizarding furniture a long time to become acclimated to a new position, let alone an entirely new room. Luna didn't dare think about Muggle furniture, which she had heard was shifted around almost from moment to moment, and without the use of magic, so that it often collided with numerous rugs and bricks. A perch sat in the middle of the room, and sang of the phoenix gone last year. The Headmistress's desk hulked, thick with locks and wards and its own importance. The Sword of Gryffindor hung in a glass case on the wall behind the desk, more dull and unresponsive than most of the others; Luna knew that happened with magical objects who had once seen a life of excitement and service and were now relegated to museum pieces. It had taken forever for her to persuade her father that his little belt knife, with a hilt rumored to have been forged by Merlin himself, would much rather hang on his belt and be used to cut paper occasionally than stay above the mantle and never do anything.

But nothing in the room felt like an object that hated the whole world.

Luna shook her head slightly. She hadn't felt the object here all year. When she had felt it before, though, the night she had come to tell the Headmistress what the chairs said about Gilbert Rovenan, it had been unmistakable, a flare of dark loathing. But Luna hadn't known until she left the office that it was *in* the object itself. And then she thought the Headmistress knew about it and had attended to it.

She should have remembered that other people didn't listen, except for Harry, who sometimes listened to magical creatures. If you didn't have arms and legs, most wizards disregarded you.

She moved forward and began to examine the walls, running her fingers lightly over them, trying to find some hint of a crack or a seam where the object could be hiding, and trying to attract the walls' attention to talk about the present instead of the past. It wasn't easy. This was an old, proud room, and prone to ignoring people who weren't part of its history.

Snape paced back and forth in his office, deep in thought. Part of him was adamant that he should have forced Harry to take the silver potion—the part that thought there was something off in the picture of Harry's mind. But his son was happy, and healthy, and mentally sound. He should have rejoiced in the news, not been sure that it meant something even more wrong.

A sharp knock sounded on his door. Snape turned, arrested. The person had knocked on the part of his door that had no wards, and only a few people in the school could see spells well enough to do that. He doubted Harry would have come back so soon, or that Minerva would be walking around Hogwarts this late at night.

“Come,” he called, lowering the wards with a few waves of his wand.

Peter stepped into the room, his face haggard. Snape examined him in some concern. It was not a surprise that their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher should be able to see his wards, of course, or use a charm that would make his face look normal to even determined observation. But Snape did not like the fact that Peter's face appeared to have increased to three times the number of shadows he'd last seen it covered in.

"I've tried to stave off the dreams by telling myself they're just images of a time long past, and they can't hurt me," Peter said, his voice raspy. "But I can't do it anymore. I need some Dreamless Sleep Potion, Severus. Please."

Snape nodded and went to his shelves without complaint. He would hardly refuse potion to someone who looked like that.

"What kind of dreams are these?" he asked over his shoulder as he blended the powder with water. He generally kept Dreamless Sleep in a powdered form, except for the supplies stored in Pomfrey's hospital wing. Dreamless Sleep was one of the few potions students would sneak into his offices to try and steal, otherwise. But few of them were good enough at Potions arithmetic to know exactly how much water and powder they needed to mix together, even if they did surpass his wards. "I know you were troubled by nightmares earlier in the year."

"These are nightmares, and worse than nightmares," Peter said. "They're—they feel like the meditations of another part of me, a part that never left Azkaban, and where the Dementors stayed for years longer than they really did. I sit in my cell, and relive my own happy memories, and get angrier and angrier. But this time, there's no phoenix web to break. There's just my rage and hatred against my former friends to stew in. I loathe it. It's terrible."

"You should hate them," Snape murmured, studying the level of liquid in the vial with a practiced eye. *There, that will do.* He carried the vial back to Peter rather ceremoniously. "What they did to you was inexcusable."

"Not unless I decide it is," said Peter. He looked longingly at the potion, but did not swallow it immediately. He knew better; he would collapse on the floor of Snape's office. "They're a part of my life that's over and done with. Good night, Severus." He turned towards the door.

Perhaps it was the first name. Perhaps it was a real longing to know how the rat had accomplished it. Whatever it was made Snape call after Peter. "How did you do it, Pettigrew? That letting go of your hatred, your reversion into a simpler frame of mind?" He wasn't quite able to keep himself from sneering out the words, but he told himself he had a right to sound like that. This man had been one of his four tormentors in school, and then by all appearances a traitor to the Order of the Phoenix, one who had received only a bit more punishment than Snape for deeds far less laudable. Snape still did not really know him, or at least did not know this calm, patient man as a continuation of the bumbling, sycophantic boy.

Peter glanced back at him. "I asked myself what I would rather live for," he said simply. "Vengeance, or possibility. And the Sanctuary helped, too."

Snape curled his lip.

"I know that you don't think it did," Peter said. "Of course, I actually talked to a Seer at first, instead of simply suffering through the dreams. And, when I did, I came to realize that I blamed my friends less with every passing day. First, I was set on helping Harry, and if that involved bringing my friends and Dumbledore down, well, fine, but they weren't the reason I was doing it. And then I helped kill Sirius because he committed suicide with my wand, not because I wanted him dead. And then I went to the Sanctuary to heal, not primarily to hide from the Aurors. I made all those decisions with someone innocent or myself in mind, Severus, not an enemy. I think that's the problem with too many Dark wizards, really. You let your enemies rule your life."

"I know that you're still bitter, Pettigrew," said Snape stiffly, not liking the implied rebuke in Peter's words. *The Light-Declared rat would tell me how to live?* "I've seen you show it."

"Yes," Peter said, "but it's one emotion among many. It doesn't control my life." He lingered, eyes on Snape, saying without words whom it *did* control.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Get out."

Peter went.

Snape paced in a circle for a moment, then turned restlessly towards the door. He should patrol the dungeons anyway, a task that he never quite entrusted to the Slytherin prefects alone. And if his footsteps happened to carry him to Minerva's door—well, she was one of the few people in the school whom he felt comfortable asking for advice. If she did not sleep yet, he would ask more of her.

Luna was surprised, but not startled, when she felt the gargoyle leaping aside in obedience to a human voice. Of course someone might wish to visit the Headmistress now, and most people couldn't simply sympathize with the gargoyle's loneliness and ask it to move aside that way. There were a number of professors in the school who had the password.

Luna moved out of sight behind the Headmistress's desk. The wards flickered out and then came back again, stronger, concealing her presence. The locks whispered welcomes to her in voices like little squirts of oil. Luna asked each of them about their tumblers, and listened intently. Perhaps a tumbler in a lock was the object that hated the whole world. But as each lock reported back, she had to give up the idea. No, they would know. Most objects knew the insides of themselves much better than wizards gave them credit for, even complicated ones like watches.

The door of the office opened. Luna looked up and saw Professor Snape coming through, his face set in a scowl. He glanced around, saw the empty and dark office, and hesitated.

And then the object that hated the whole world was there.

Luna opened her eyes wide, but stood still so that it wouldn't notice she'd noticed it. She didn't think this object realized she could listen, or it would have hated her more than anyone else. Instead, it spat passion like venom at Professor Snape, who didn't notice, of course.

No. Wait. It is not angry at him. It is angry at part of him.

That didn't really make sense. Luna had the impression like a hazy bar of shadow wavering away from a light source; it existed, but it wouldn't stay still, and it wouldn't let her get a good grip on it. And she couldn't poke her head out from around the desk to see what had changed, how the object had arrived, because then Professor Snape would see her, and she would get detention, and have to spend it hurting poor defenseless cauldrons by scrubbing them too hard with a wire brush, or drowning the stones in the entrance hall that didn't like to be drowned. Besides, she didn't think the object had suddenly scuttled into the room; Professor Snape would have seen it move and hit it with a spell. He was paranoid like that.

So she remained still, analyzing her impressions, trying to understand. She had to concentrate through the voices of locks and desk and stones and walls and bookshelves, and it reminded her of trying to understand why human things mattered; it was so hard.

Then Professor Snape turned and left again, obviously having decided against knocking on the Headmistress's bedroom door.

And the object that hated the whole world left, too.

Luna carefully put her head out from around the desk and looked about. Nothing had changed. When she asked the floors, nothing had come up through them. When she asked the ceiling, nothing had come down through it. When she asked the walls, they complained of the weight of the bookshelves, but admitted nothing had crawled through them.

It was all very perplexing.

Luna left at last, because the moon-glass would be shining soon, and the office had no more tales to tell her. She asked the stones in the school to watch out for something crawling through them, though, or to tell her tales of abandoned rooms where powerful magical objects might lie. She wanted to help Harry. He listened, too.

"Through the front door, sir?" Hope's voice was low and tense with excitement.

Rufus nodded, and briefly gripped her shoulder. The Auror grinned at him, and then slipped around the side of the house. Rufus went back to studying it, the Apollonis estate, lying far too still and peaceful under the moonlight.

The Apollonis estate, and the home of the Liberator who had helped Harry against Falco Parkinson, if his speculations were correct. And *certainly* the home of a man who had had artifacts the Unspeakables had seized in his home.

Hope had brought him the evidence just that morning, waving it proudly around her head. Someone had misfiled the record and done all they could to prevent it from being found short of destroying it, but Hope had finally discovered it. Yes, there had been

an Unspeakable raid on the home of Cupressus Apollonis years ago, and many magical artifacts had been carried away during it and taken to the Department of Mysteries. But one had been returned to its owner: a narrow coffin-like box, just big enough for an adult wizard or witch lying with arms folded to his or her chest. The box had preservation spells on it, ones that would keep the prisoner alive and breathing and fed and watered, and also prevent him or her from breaking out.

That's the Liberator's means of confinement, Rufus thought, exultation moving through him like oil as he read the paper. *And a law was passed a year later that made that kind of thing completely illegal for anyone to use on a human being. We have a reasonable enough suspicion to raid.*

He had brought several Aurors with him, all Light-dedicated. Apollonis was fanatic enough that he was likely to have wards around his house that might destroy Dark or even undeclared wizards.

Hope was spreading around the back of the house, with Berrywise, and Percy shifted from foot to foot behind him like a small boy who had to go to the loo, and other pairs of Aurors were approaching from the sides. Rufus intended this to be a small enough raid that, if they really did find nothing—not that he thought they would—it wouldn't make headlines, or leave much evidence. They would step in quickly, arrest the bastard who'd been abusing his daughter, free the Liberator, and leave.

Rufus stamped his foot, and felt a savage grin break loose across his face as if in response to the movement. *Merlin*, this felt good, to be in the field again, to be doing something concrete, instead of having to negotiate with the Wizengamot through delicate mazes of influence that might change any moment, and might result in any one of them seeing him as under Harry's thumb. And thanks to Harry's bold, very nearly Gryffindor declaration of political war in favor of half-human children, the headache and the situation had both built to a slow boiling point. Any moment the cauldron would overflow, but there was no saying when.

He'd needed something like this to get him away from both the Wizengamot and Harry for a time.

He saw Hope's signal from the back of the house. She and Berrywise had examined the wards and found nothing they could not overcome, then.

Rufus nodded, and signaled back, waving his wand in a way that made an Augurey's call rise from it. Then he strode towards the front door, Percy tagging along at his heels.

There were wards on the front door, but most of them, as Rufus had surmised, were directed at Dark magic. He used *Alohomora* to attack the lock, and, when spells rose to protect it, used a special version of the Confounding Charm that old Head Auror Samara Deronda, who'd been killed in the First War, had developed to use on protective spells. The spells tried to deal with what seemed to them to be multiple unlocking charms, and in their dazzlement forgot about protecting the handle itself. Rufus worked through a few more minor wards, and flung the door open.

Cupressus Apollonis was waiting there to meet them.

Rufus leveled his wand at him. The old wizard's eyes widened a fraction, but otherwise his perfect, polished expression never faltered.

"What is the meaning of this, Minister?" he asked. "Why did you invade my home this late at night?"

Rufus suppressed the nasty impulse to ask if he would have been any more welcome if he'd raided during the day. "I have reason to believe that you're abusing one of your children, Apollonis," he said, and cast a time-delaying charm, then whispered the Manacle Curse. A pair of shackles formed in the air in front of him, gaping, awaiting Apollonis's wrists, but not darting forward quite yet. "A young daughter. You have a young daughter, don't you? Younger than Ignifer Pemberley?"

He had the satisfaction of seeing wounded pride touched to the quick in Apollonis's eyes, then. But he fought it well enough, and said, "In this house we do not speak her name. But I have a young daughter, yes. Candor. If you *dare* accuse me of abusing her —"

"We have reason to believe," said Rufus, as Hope and Berrywise entered through a side door, herding Apollonis's wife Artemis in front of them, "that you have shut her in a Confinement Box. We've received letters whose provenance matches this house too closely to be coincidence. Your daughter has used those letters to be a shining light on the blemish of your honor. And use of a Confinement Box on a human being is highly illegal, Apollonis, as you know."

The old bastard just stared at him, too shocked to utter a word. Rufus felt satisfaction slice him like a knife again.

"Mother? Father? What is it?"

Rufus turned. A young witch with tumbling golden curls, who looked about twenty-one years old, was entering from yet a third direction, escorted by two of his Aurors. She had blue eyes, not the yellow more common to Light pureblood families, but otherwise she looked much like Rufus had pictured her. She was certainly frightened enough.

“Candor Apollonis?” he asked.

Her gaze shot to him, and she nodded.

Rufus drew another breath. “The Liberator?”

And her face returned blackness.

Rufus frowned. *She’s probably frightened that her parents will punish her.* He shot a glance at Cupressus and Artemis, both of whom were standing quite still. “You can speak freely in front of them, Candor,” he said. “No one will hurt you.”

“You’re not here to take us to prison?” Candor’s voice was small.

“Of course not,” Rufus said. “We want to free you, and to insure that you realize you have a home and friends in the outside world. Your parents won’t be able to abuse you again, I promise.”

“They’ve never *abused* me,” said Candor, her eyes flying wide. “What are you talking about? What do you mean, freeing me? Who’s the Liberator?”

“If you had listened to me, Minister,” Cupressus Apollonis said, his voice low and ugly, “you would have had time to hear me say that I sold the Confinement Box six months after the outcast’s miserable departure from this house. I have not owned it for nearly as long as Candor has been alive.”

Rufus glanced back and forth between both of them. *They are lying. One or both of them. They must be. I cannot—I cannot have made a mistake.*

Hope caught his eye. Rufus nodded to her. “Will you agree to take Veritaserum?” he asked Cupressus.

The old bastard lifted his head proudly. “In the name of the Light, I have nothing to hide.”

A tense silence succeeded that announcement, while Hope fetched the vial of Veritaserum from her robe pocket and carefully placed three drops on Cupressus’s tongue. Candor said quietly that she wanted some, too, and so Hope crossed over and fed it to her. Rufus clenched his hand on his wand, and tried not to feel the wavering certainty behind every Auror’s eyes except for Percy and Hope.

“Have you ever abused your daughter Candor?” he asked Cupressus, when the usual test questions to establish known facts like name and location had passed.

“No.”

Rufus hissed between his teeth. “Have you ever locked any child of yours in a Confinement Box?”

“No. No Light parent would do such things to his children.”

“Have you ever tried to support the Order of the Phoenix? Or Falco Parkinson?”

Cupressus actually laughed at that one, despite the numbing effect of the drug. “No. Why would I want to?”

Rufus turned to Candor without answering. “Did you ever write me letters under the name of the Liberator?”

“No.” Candor’s eyes were wide, unfocused.

“Did you ever suffer any abuse at the hands of your parents? Father or mother?” Rufus glanced at the silent, watching, white-faced Artemis.

“No. Never.”

And that was it. That was over. He'd botched things. And badly.

Hope, nearly as pale as Artemis, caught his eye again, and mouthed *Obliviate?* Rufus considered it for a moment. He knew his failure would be all over the papers in a few days if he did not.

But his own morals made him hesitate. He'd *Obliviated* Wizengamot Elders into thinking they'd voted for him to assume absolute power during the Ritual of Cincinnatus, and he'd promised himself solemnly that that was as far as he would walk down that particular slippery road. Could he justify going farther now?

"Don't worry about it, Minister," said Cupressus, his voice icy, but full of absolute truth. "There are wards on this house which prevent me from forgetting anything which happens inside it. I promise you, no Memory Charm will work. The walls and the doors themselves would tell me if I forgot something so important."

Rufus turned to face Cupressus, his heartbeat hollow and fast. The Light wizard's yellow eyes were narrow, and the hatred in them was very terrible.

"I shall not forget this insult, Minister," said Cupressus, the effects of Veritaserum already passing from his voice. "Never."

Rufus inclined his head and wheeled around to leave, calling his Aurors to him with a lift of his hand. There was nothing else he could do. Berrywise let Artemis's arms fall with a slightly lost expression, and the other Aurors who had been standing behind Candor followed him.

"What will we do now, sir?" Percy asked softly as they came out onto the lawn again, under the moonlight that no longer seemed as bright as it had just a few minutes before.

Rufus stared at the sky. He could hear Cupressus telling his wife he wanted to firecall someone in the moments before the door closed.

He sighed. "Go back to the Ministry. Put up with it." *Suffer it, as I surely will have to when the news gets out.*

Perhaps I should have left the Liberator's rescue up to the Liberator herself, as she begged me to do.

But the idea nagged at him. All the information they'd had access to fitted Apollonis so *perfectly*. If not him, then who?

Aurora stirred up with a half-shout when her Floo connection opened. She'd fallen asleep in a chair in front of the fire, and her neck was sore and one arm asleep from her leaning on it. She shook it out now, and waited for a familiar face to appear, half-knowing it must be bad news. No one ever firecalled in the middle of the night for any other reason.

However, the face that formed in the fire was only vaguely familiar. *Cupressus Apollonis*.

Aurora stared for an impolite moment before she found her tongue, and knelt down to be more fairly on his level. "How may I help you, sir? It's an unexpected pleasure to have you contact me, but I fear, from the time, that nothing good has happened to you."

Cupressus gave her what was not a smile so much as a baring of teeth. Aurora knew it could not be directed at her, though. She had not stepped, even obliquely, on the interests of Apollonis. She waited.

"Madam Whitestag," Cupressus said after a few moments, "the Minister has...made a grave mistake with me and mine. And not so very long ago, Harry *vates* made his third grave mistake with me. The first was taking a child I have sired away. The second was accepting the support of families sworn to me. The third was publishing private correspondence. Now the Minister has made me lose what little faith I still had in Harry's allies, and he said enough to convince me he was acting with the *vates*'s support and cooperation." He paused.

"And?" Aurora prompted, hardly able to believe what this sounded like.

"I find myself much more minded to join the alliance that you and Elder Juniper are weaving between you." Cupressus fixed her with a direct stare. "There are particulars to be worked out. But not the fact of my allegiance."

Aurora caught her breath, and smiled. *Sometimes, perhaps, good news does come in the middle of the night.*

~*~*~*~*

Interlude: The Liberator's Tenth Letter

June 1st, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

I am so sorry, sir, that I wasn't able to give you the right combination of clues as to where I was! I heard about the raid on Cupressus Apollonis's house; my parents were so outraged that they talked about it in front of me. Of course, my father noticed I was listening and gave me one of his dark glares—he believes he must intimidate me at all times, and now he's even right about that, while before this a reminder or two was enough—but he wasn't that serious about it. They are worried. They think that the Ministry has turned against Light wizards, and they may be next on the list of raids or arrests, for all they know.

Since Cupressus Apollonis did not specify what he was accused of in the papers, except child abuse, I don't know what clue you might have followed to him. Please, though, sir, don't worry about me. I am very nearly ready to leave this place. I think I may have been able to figure out where the Ministry is from here, given memories of an Apparition I remember my mother taking me on when I was very young. If I'm right, then I'll go west when I leave the house. And after that—well, I have magic. I have a wand, though I've rarely been allowed to use it. And since I'm leaving forever, I'll risk breaking into the cage where my mother usually keeps it.

So many risks are changing me. I feel like Princess Black, with the whole world open before me. But instead of my husband dying, it's my fear that's perished.

I trust you, sir. I know I can come to you and you'll grant me sanctuary. I would be a little awkward going to Harry, and I don't know where Hogwarts lies anyway. But I'll send you another letter in a few days, when I'm ready to leave.

No more clues, though. Please, sir, don't embarrass yourself for me! Such risks could cost you your office. The wizarding world needs you in power. Harry needs you in power. I need you in power. We all need you, so that we can survive the coming war.

A few days more, and all changes. I am so nervous, so excited, with my heart beating in my throat. A new spring is beginning for me, even though the world's spring is almost done.

Yours,
The Liberator.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ninety: Learning to Relax

Draco leaned his elbows on the table and studied Harry through the corner of his eye. Harry was reading a letter that had come in by an official Ministry owl that morning, his face grave. Naturally, of course, most of the people at the Slytherin table were trying to see over his shoulder, including Millicent.

Draco wasn't. He was observing the way Harry's face changed instead, how his grave expression melted in a few moments. He tucked the letter into the pocket of his robe where he usually kept most correspondence, and nodded at nothing, and went back to eating.

"What was the letter about, Harry?" Millicent asked. Draco wondered if he ought to despise her for showing her eagerness like that, but he couldn't, not really. If she hadn't asked, someone else would have.

"What letter?" Harry raised his eyebrows.

Millicent laughed, and so did most of the other Slytherins, assuming that Harry was trying to make a joke. And a moment later he laughed with them, and shook his head, and said, "The Minister. Private business, I'm afraid. If it wasn't sensitive news, like the color of his pants, then be assured I'd tell you."

That won him another round of snickers, and Harry turned back to his breakfast, a half-smile lingering on his face that dropped

off almost immediately.

It was a small incident. But it gave Draco another piece of the evidence he needed. And if it didn't set the hot anger boiling in him that the thestral incident had, it conjured an icy, needle-sharp anger, which seemed to go in through one of his ears. He sat back and controlled his breathing as best he could.

Harry, of course, even when suppressing his emotions the way Draco was now *certain* he was doing, was unfairly good at noticing other people's. "What's the matter, Draco? Did something fall into your breakfast?"

"No," Draco breathed, eyes focused on the wall over Harry's head. "It's nothing for right now. Ask me later."

Harry bit his lip, then nodded. Already his face had lost its look of concern. He touched the parchment in his pocket instead, and seemed to be thinking about whatever the Minister's letter had said.

Draco sat back, and plotted his line of attack. He *could* move now, point out that Harry's Occlumency, or whatever it was, was interfering with his daily life. It wasn't much, but even a tiny lapse of attention could be enough to condemn them all if this happened in the middle of war.

Or he could wait for a few days, and then ask Harry for what he'd always planned to ask. He was going to be seventeen on the fifth of June, coming of age in the wizarding world. The gifts presented on a wizard's or witch's seventeenth birthday were traditionally some of the richest he or she would ever receive, so what Draco wanted from Harry wouldn't be out of place.

Or he could do something else, so that he would know exactly how to phrase it when it came time for his birthday.

Draco decided on the third course of action after thinking about it for a short time. He and Harry had Defense Against the Dark Arts today, and Professor Pettigrew was mostly kind and understanding even to the students he caught sleeping in class. Draco wouldn't pay for inattentiveness there the way he would in Transfiguration or Potions, or even Charms, where almost all their work was practical now.

Defense it is.

Wherever he went that day, walking from class to class or sitting in the Great Hall or working on homework in their room during one of their free periods, Harry saw Scrimgeour's words in the morning letter floating in front of him.

June 1st, 1997

Dear Harry:

I am sorry to have to ask this of you, especially when my own faults have added to the weight of your burden. But I must. If I do not, then we are risking political disaster now or very near in the future.

I will ask that you hold off on your campaign to make other wizards aware of half-human children and how common they may really be, under the glamours, or even under human skins that hold permanent Transfigurations. At the moment, this is throwing the Wizengamot off-balance, giving them another issue to consider when they are already fully occupied with the werewolves and with what they see as my incompetence and my favoring of Dark or undeclared wizards over Light. And it is leading to a paranoia that is linked to and feeding off the kind they feel for werewolves. Werewolves can be distinguished by certain subtle signs if they have borne the curse long enough, and there is always the ultimate test of locking them in a room on the full moon if one must know, but half-human children are savagely protected by their parents, and sometimes they may not even know they are half-human. They could be anyone around us. That has prompted the Wizengamot towards fears that anyone and anything—forgive the phrasing—could be an ally of yours, but look like an ally of theirs.

I do not say that you will never be able to win rights for half-human children. But it will need to wait until the issue with the werewolves is settled, which may be some time. Every emissary we have sent to the packs has returned with the message that they are only interested in listening to wizards who have sworn to the Alliance of Sun and Shadow. This, understandably, is making the Wizengamot more upset.

I believe I made the mistake I did with Cupressus Apollonis because I wanted so badly to win a political victory, one that would prove my fitness to be Minister, which my enemies are now questioning, beyond a doubt. I slipped up through overtiredness and over-eagerness. No one can be perfect, of course, but a Minister must come as close to it as possible, and surely a vates cannot be far behind. Please, Harry. I ask for more time both for my own sake, so that I may more fully acknowledge and repair my

error, and for your own, so that you do not fall into the same trap I did.

*Yours,
Rufus Scrimgeour.*

Harry had to admit he would have been happier with a more definite date and time. “Someday” had been the one word that showed up the most often in correspondence with centaurs, with goblins, with werewolves, with nearly everyone in the magical world who was not a Light pureblood or halfblood. “Someday” the Ministry would alter the laws that forbade Muggleborn wizards and witches’ use of magic at home during the summer, even to save lives. “Someday” the werewolves would be acknowledged as full partners in human society, and “someday” the Wizengamot would consider certain cases that could have made the difference and set precedents. This was looking like another case of “someday.”

But it was not fair to put Scrimgeour on edge, either.

Worry and anger tried to rise, especially when he considered that he had made Scrimgeour’s situation worse without knowing it—and he should have known it, should have been able to study it. But he hadn’t, and now *this* had happened.

Harry shook his head a bit and drained the emotions off, locking them back into ice where they belonged. He absolutely must have a clear mind to deal with this, or anything he did would just worsen the situation again.

“Perhaps you would like to come up to the front of the classroom, vates, and practice your Transfiguration skill on this chair?” Henrietta’s sharp tone let him know that she’d noticed the headshake.

Harry produced wry amusement in himself and rose to his feet, coming forward. He had to change the chair into a fly—hard on almost all levels, since it was not only the Transfiguration of a nonliving object into a living one, but a considerable difference in size. And almost none of the students actually *knew* what a fly looked like, how the legs and jaws bent, at least until Henrietta made them sit down, use magnification spells, and study the results. Harry hoped that he remembered just how the mandibles fitted together, how the wings were supposed to align over the back, and what the buzzing noise it made when it flew was like.

He faced the chair, and though he intoned the incantation Henrietta had given them aloud, he was forcing his magic through different channels, above and beyond the spell. He *wanted* to change this chair into a fly. He made that the goal of his desire, and sent all his focus towards that.

Halfway through the spell, he realized he was thinking about how to answer Scrimgeour’s letter again.

And then he realized that he’d frozen the determination he needed to send the magic to one place, changing it back into ice, and leaving a great deal of loose, unfettered power hanging about in the classroom. The power darted in random directions, great wheels of yellow-green lightning that were not deadly until they touched something, Harry thought, but which he couldn’t rein in yet.

He hesitated, trying to decide which emotion would be best to deal with this, trying to unfreeze and unlock it.

“*Vinculi!*”

Henrietta’s magic swept through the room a moment behind the Imprisonment Hex, jumping like a well-trained dog to capture Harry’s magic in its mouth. She was nearly as strong as Snape, and the Imprisonment Hex had been designed to allow a much weaker wizard to contain powerful magic, as long as it didn’t have a directing will behind it. In a moment, Harry’s dancing pinwheels slowed, and then bumped together until they coalesced into a yellow-green fog. Henrietta waved her wand, never taking her eyes from Harry, until he was able to hold out a hand and call the loose magic back to him. He could feel his cheeks flaming; a small leak had burst from the ice at the top of his packed emotions, and embarrassment had trickled out.

“Class is dismissed,” Henrietta said.

There was a wave of wondering half-protests; Professor Belluspersona had never dismissed class for a magical accident, and even when Peeves got loose in the room, she had only marched them into another and begun again. This time was different, though. Harry knew it from the way her eyes focused on him.

“*Dismissed*, I said,” said Henrietta, and then people began standing, picking up papers and books and turning towards the door, not willing to stay near their intimidating professor if she actually wanted them gone. “Except for you, *vates*,” said Henrietta, in a tone that made Harry stand right where he was, his head lowered. “But that *does* include you, Mr. Malfoy.”

Harry glanced up. Draco was lingering near the first row of seats, staring at him with an expression somewhere between betrayal and disgust. Harry looked away again, and then Draco was gone, striding out of the room with quick, sharp movements. The door shut behind him with an expressive bang.

“Now,” Henrietta said into the silence, “I have only seen a wizard lose control like that when someone else cast a curse that suppresses the will at him. *Imperio*, I might say, and you could lose your will.” Harry cringed, and took a moment to realize she had not actually cast the spell. Henrietta’s face remained blank. “Or you might have done it if something suddenly distracted your attention. But no, a mere distraction would not have let the magic go that formless. It would have wavered, and the chair would have changed into *something*, even if it was only a rabbit. I want to know what happened, Harry, and I want to know right now.”

Harry wondered if Henrietta was simply that good at scolding, or if it came from the fact that he’d never really suffered an admonishment from her before that he had to take seriously. Botching a spell in Transfiguration was one thing; he could study and learn how to improve, and he hadn’t botched much since he started learning the right way to use Lord-level magic, around and outside the spells. But this—she sounded as if he had done something that hurt or offended her personally.

And the ice wasn’t working anymore. Already, some had melted to release more emotions into his thoughts, shame among them.

Quietly, Harry told her about the Occlumency techniques he’d learned from the book on Unassailable Curses, how they weren’t supposed to be dangerous unless one never unfroze the ice, and how he’d assumed that everything was working well. He kept his eyes focused on the far wall. He didn’t quite dare to meet her gaze, which was judging in a way that he’d only felt from Millicent before. This was one of the few times when Henrietta really had seemed like Adalrico’s second cousin.

Henrietta stood when his recitation finished and walked across the room, studying one of the pile of books she’d brought with her that morning. Then she fetched it and came back to him. Blinking, unsure, Harry accepted it. *Why would she be carrying an Occlumency book to a Transfiguration class?*

He understood when he looked at it. It wasn’t an Occlumency book at all. The cover showed a witch who looked rather like Professor Trelawney, except intelligent, holding a mirror in which was reflected a witch holding a mirror, and then a smaller one, and then another, and so on. The title proclaimed it *The Changes of the Mind*.

“I began to study this when I became interested in mental Transfiguration,” Henrietta said, voice almost without inflection. “It is still a new art, but it is bound closely to Occlumency and the other mental areas of control, to the actual changing of a target’s mind. And there are chapters that discuss exactly what may happen when someone tries to change his or her mind after years of abuse or torture. The author is from Africa. They deal with their victims of war and abuse more rationally there, I have heard.”

She tapped the book. “If I am not mistaken, the page you want is 238.”

I don’t think she’s mistaken, Harry thought, as he flipped the book open. Henrietta’s memory was prodigious; she had astounded her students before by being able to remember who had had trouble with what spell back at the beginning of the year, never mind just a week ago.

Page 238 began in the middle of a dense paragraph. Harry skimmed it, and found what he assumed Henrietta wanted him to see at the start of the next one.

One must be careful with some of the more unusual Occlumency techniques—for example, the use of ice, or of the Circling Gyre—in people who have suffered mental and emotional abuse. Such abuse often includes the suppressing of emotions. It is enough to create an addiction to their suppression when a victim is also trained in Occlumency. Fluid containers and the usual practices still work well with them, but they can and will seize opportunities with the less common techniques to push their emotions ever further away. And this can be disastrous, because unusual techniques require close attention, not simple use, for up to a year, until the Occlumens has truly mastered them.

Harry lowered his eyes. “I honestly didn’t know that,” he said.

“I know you didn’t,” said Henrietta, and took the book away from him. “That’s the only reason I’m not escorting you to the hospital wing now, or to St. Mungo’s.” She studied him for a moment more. “Am I right in saying that this is the first time that’s happened? What technique were you using?”

“Ice,” Harry said. “And yes. The determination slipped away in the middle of my casting the spell.” He stared blankly at the chair he should have turned into a fly. He thought of what would have happened had it been a charging Evan Rosier, and shivered.

He heard a rustle of robes. Surprised, he turned back to find Henrietta kneeling in front of him. She was so tall that even on one

knee, her eyes were still almost level with his. She grasped his chin and tilted it up.

“If you were anyone else, then perhaps you could train in such techniques and use them to help instead of entrap yourself,” said Henrietta calmly. “As it is, you will not have the time. You must unfreeze the ice, Harry.”

Harry hesitated for a moment.

“I am *not* going to compromise on this,” Henrietta said, misinterpreting his silence. “Or I *will* tell Snape. I love you as my leader, Harry, but I will not protect you when I think you are doing something stupid.” She gave a sharp, shark’s smile. “Even your Unbreakable Vows could not guarantee you a *tame* Slytherin, you know.”

“It’s not that,” said Harry. “I wanted to ask if you would accept a vow from me. Since you’re under vows yourself—“ he held Henrietta’s eyes for a moment more, to acknowledge what lay between them “—I can think of no better oathkeeper. Snape and Draco will yell at me, and they’ll be right to do so. But they would not believe a promise at this point, and they wouldn’t punish me in the ways they would need to even if I broke it. I know that you can believe it, and you will punish me if need be.”

Henrietta’s eyes had brightened, the way they always did when he paid sustained attention to her. Harry sucked in a breath through his nose, and reminded himself that he had made her this way. If that caused him unease now, well, so be it. He ought to feel unease when reminded of what he had bound Henrietta to.

“What is the vow, Harry?” she asked. “And what consequences are acceptable?”

“If I do this again,” said Harry, “and by *this* I mean the suppression of emotions, not the use of Occlumency, in any form, then you have my permission to cast pain curses at me. I won’t fight back.”

“How many pain curses?”

“Five.”

Henrietta nodded. Her expression had gone almost dreamy now. Harry wondered if anyone else in the Alliance could have stood in the room with her and not been disgusted. But she and he understood the bargain, and that was all that really mattered. His dealing with Henrietta had always had a different footing than his dealings with anyone else in the Alliance.

“Make the vow, Harry. I want to hear it in a non-conditional form.” Henrietta’s hand tightened on his chin.

“I swear never to suppress my emotions in such a fashion again,” Harry said steadily. “Not with unusual Occlumency techniques, not with usual ones, not with spells or potions. The consequences of breaking this vow are five pain curses to be cast by Henrietta Bulstrode, and which I will not defend against.” He felt he should use her real name for a promise as solemn as this, and he could not imagine that someone was listening outside the door; Henrietta’s wards would have caught them.

He threw the force of his magic behind the words, and though they did not bind the way an Unbreakable Vow would have, he felt them settle around him, a steel cage. Harry took a deep breath and shook his head. *I ought to be able to give an ordinary promise and mean it, but I’ve tried that and it doesn’t work. So we’ll try this. Needs must. What I did was stupid, but I thought it would work. I don’t think this is stupid. Time will tell if it is.*

Henrietta released him at last, and moved away. “You’ll come to me at once if you need help or a reminder, Harry?” she asked in a clear voice.

Harry nodded. The grip of the promise was still tight on him, rubbing like iron bars along his ribs. It felt more comfortable than he would have suspected. *Well, why not? I agreed to it of my own free will. And I know what happens if I break it. It’s like the vow I swore to help the werewolves. You can’t really argue with your blood turning to silver in your veins.*

“Now, go to your next class.”

Harry nodded to her. “Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t let it happen again, in my class or any other. That will be my thanks.”

Harry gathered his books and left the room. He met Draco waiting down the hall, but Draco immediately straightened up and tried to pretend he had only been lounging there by coincidence. Harry gave him a small smile.

In the back of his mind, he imagined a sun, shining with all the fierce determination he'd lost when the focus of his mind changed from the Transfiguration. The icepacks began, slowly and steadily, to melt.

Draco did as he had promised himself, sitting carefully back in his seat in Defense while Professor Pettigrew gave a dire warning about the theory that would occupy most of the exam. He didn't need to worry about that. He knew most of what they'd studied this year already, thanks to books from the Malfoy library, practice in the dueling club with Harry, and research he'd done for other classes.

Now, what he needed to do was look into Harry's mind and see how he was repressing his emotions.

He was now sure that it was happening, given the incident in Transfiguration (and what had Harry been *thinking*? True, undirected magic really couldn't hurt anyone the way a curse with force and will behind it would, but it could have had any number of random and embarrassing effects). He didn't know what to make of the small smile Harry had given him as they walked to Defense Against the Dark Arts together, or the fact that Harry had more emotion in his voice when he answered Pettigrew's questions than he had seemed to have in the last few weeks.

He was determined to find out, though.

His possession had grown stronger and suppler the more he used it, rather like a muscle being exercised. And Harry's mind had been familiar to him since the very earliest days of its use, when he had let Draco possess him to learn. Now, Draco easily drifted past Harry's shields and into the back of his mind, looking for a sign of suppressed emotion or a mind teetering on the edge of madness.

He saw ice.

He saw the sun melting the ice, and as it trickled free and broke back into water, sensations of emotions came with it, ones that Draco recognized from the time when he'd still had empathy. Cold winds of shock, the heat and pressure of anger, the purling sunlight of pleasure, the prickling claws of irritation, were running into the soup of Harry's mind and adding their living presence to what had been far too much calm, ordered blankness.

Draco felt his own stunned surprise, and, a moment later, felt Harry's awareness of him.

Harry didn't try to force him out of his head. And why should he have? Draco asked himself a moment later. He had done nothing wrong. Or, rather, Harry had done something wrong, by freezing his emotions, which meant that Draco's small sin of transgressing the boundaries between their minds was really not a sin after all, only the measure he had to take to be sure Harry was all right.

Harry felt that justification, too, and tolerated it. He showed Draco more and more images of ice melting, the sun blazing, his mind growing thicker and stronger with the addition of the emotions. He showed Draco, without words, the promise he had made Henrietta Bulstrode, deliberately thinking of the images and the vow.

Draco didn't think there were any circumstances under which he would have allowed Henrietta Bulstrode to throw five pain curses at him. But if anyone did deserve them for all the trouble and pain he'd put others through by suppressing his emotions *after he'd promised not to do it anymore*, then it was Harry.

He drifted back into his own body, and opened his eyes, and waited until Harry turned to look at him. Harry did so, his eyes calm as they met Draco's own. He knew what he had done, and he was sorry for it. Draco could yell if he wished, but that wouldn't change Harry's mind substantially. He was already slowly reintegrating his feelings—the best way to do it, so that he wouldn't have a breakdown like the one he'd had in Woodhouse—and had promised not to do it again.

This time, Draco thought the promise might hold.

He leaned back, and gave Harry a little nod, and decided to rework his notion of what he would like for his birthday.

Harry chewed the base of his quill, and carefully arranged phrases in his head. He had quite a bit of correspondence to write that evening, both to Scrimgeour and to the parents of children like Jacinth, warning them why their struggle might take a little longer. He thought most of them would be reasonable. If the choice was between fighting now and helping to oust a sympathetic

Minister, or waiting and giving that Minister a chance to find his feet again, Harry knew which he'd choose, and which Lazuli Yaxley would choose, and which most of the people who had been in contact with them so far would choose.

He simply needed to avoid "someday."

"That's another thing you didn't do when your emotions were frozen."

"Hmmm?" Harry glanced around at Draco, not sure what he meant.

"Chew on your quill." Draco watched him with an expression of satisfaction as supreme as if he, and not Henrietta, had been the one to show Harry the truth. "Just like fidgeting in place, or daydreaming. Your mind was so clean and inhuman that you didn't do the little things that make you human."

Harry nodded. "I know."

"*Why* did you lock your emotions up this time, Harry?" Draco leaned forward. "I think I've heard all your other justifications, but not this one."

Harry set the parchment and quill aside for a moment so that he could totally focus on Draco. "I'd been considering it for a while," he began. "And now, of course, after that passage Henrietta showed me, I recognize that as an excuse for what I wanted to do anyway. After Lucius, I didn't want to suffer my own pain while I helped you through your own, or Hawthorn through hers. And when I went to heal Lily, I warded myself so entirely that almost no emotion got through. It seemed best to adopt a variation of that, once I left her cell."

"Seemed best." Draco shook his head. "I think you're the only person in the world who would believe that, Harry."

"Yes, well." Harry thought about that, then plowed through the next words. "I'm always going to have scars from my abuse, Draco. I think my mistake this time was assuming they were so healed that my new desire to suppress my emotions couldn't *possibly* have anything to do with my other attempts to do so. It did, and I should have realized that. If I keep in mind that the past happened, instead of putting it away, then maybe I do stand a chance of realizing this when it next tries to happen."

"You promised that you wouldn't suppress your emotions any more." Draco had a line between his brows.

"*That*, I did," said Harry. "But that's one specific action. There are other things I could do that might be just as damaging, and would be a result of my wanting to escape fully feeling, and which wouldn't violate the spirit of the vow I made to Henrietta." He squeezed Draco's hand. "That's why I rely on you and Snape to speak to me when you notice something odd about me."

"It's bloody frustrating when you keep insisting that nothing is wrong," Draco grumbled.

"I know," said Harry, and leaned in to kiss his cheek. "I know that I'm bloody frustrating, and the fact that you love me anyway says an awful lot about you, Draco. And about Professor Snape. And about Connor." He serenely ignored the face Draco made at the comparison to his brother. "Maybe it will be better now that I'm going to try to think about the past, and wonder if a new action that sounds absolutely wonderful to me has a connection to the past."

That decision hadn't been easy. He'd faced it early this afternoon and forced himself through it. He couldn't undo the past, couldn't make what had happened to him solely a source of strength any more than he could make the centuries house elves had spent under wizards' webs into a learning experience. They had *happened*, and though his own experience had been of significantly less duration and significantly less damaging than the elves', it was as unchangeable. What Harry could do was watch for its echoes rebounding into the future and close them off when possible.

So my parents aren't strangers to me. I'll never visit them, never see them again, won't give them a second chance to establish a relationship with me, but I can't pretend they never existed. And the fact that I was—abused—he still disliked the word—happened. And not all the effects it had on me are positive. I'll just have to think about that, integrate it in with all the rest.

Maybe that was what had been hardest. At one point, during the months when he'd talked with Joseph especially, Harry had come to think he would reach a time when he could integrate all aspects of his present life and past, including his vates work and his relationships with Draco and Snape and his bond with Connor and his politics and his battle with Voldemort and his memories, and be at peace. And now, every time he thought the integration was complete, there was another shard to be added. He didn't think the peace of completion would ever come.

Well, of course not, he thought, and the emotion behind this thought was a gentle, wry self-deprecation he hadn't felt in a while. *It*

would be too simple otherwise. And I'm not destined to lead a simple life.

Rufus stretched his arms until they cracked. Then he sipped the last of his tea. Then he signed his name to several small requests for funding that were usual in the Ministry, down to the regularity with which they arrived on his desk.

The whole time, Harry's letter sat in the middle of the desk, and mocked him.

Rufus would have laughed at himself for being afraid of an envelope and parchment, but he had seen what they could carry. It was a piece of parchment, and no official announcement, that had authorized the Aurors to use Unforgivable Curses for a short time during the First War. It was a letter that had told Rufus he was now Head of the Auror Office. It was a newspaper article, an unpublished one even, that had prompted this latest crisis with the werewolves.

But no one was in the office with him, and he did need to know what news Harry had sent in response to his request to delay for a short time on fighting for the rights of half-human children. He slit the envelope open, slowly, and as slowly drew out the letter folded inside.

June 1st, 1997

Dear Minister:

I agree that with the rest of the wizarding world boiling right now, I may have chosen the wrong time to press forward with this campaign.

Rufus closed his eyes tightly, and tried to prevent tears from falling, which told him, once again, how overtired he was, how much he had needed to hear some news like this. Then he let out a long, slow breath and continued reading.

I have sent letters to my allies telling them the truth: that I feel moving right now will cost us an ally and win us no friends. It is up to them to accept this or not. Some may choose to act without me, bringing petitions or challenging the laws. But I think most of them will agree to stay quiet. They know how vital a friendly Minister is to the success of this particular fight. Unlike the centaurs, whose choice it is to live without the wizarding world or within it, these allies of mine all have human parents, or at least human relatives. They wish to be able to stay in our world. They would also like to show their faces freely, that's all.

Distance yourself from me in public and in the Wizengamot, if you must. I ask only that you do not turn "someday" into "never."

Sincerely,

Harry vates.

Rufus sighed. He felt as if he had lived through a bad dream, believing it to be reality, only to wake and find out it was only a dream after all, and he could put those concerns away.

Then his mouth worked up into a smirk he could feel. If anyone had been in the office besides him, he felt sure they would have been flinching, or asking questions.

As it was, now that he had the time and freedom to maneuver, he knew *exactly* where and how to hit Juniper's groundswell of support in the Wizengamot. The Elders were clinging to Juniper not because he was their only choice, but because he was the one who was saying what they wanted to hear, and he had a fallow political reputation, vaguely good in many people's eyes, not prominent. Now that he was finally choosing to move, their impression was one of power on the rise, having gathered itself by its long dormancy.

Rufus intended to show them that his power, the active and real one, the one present on stage during the great events of the last few years, was the one that would truly rise in a wave, and knock Juniper and his supporters off their feet.

It was done.

Indigena glanced around in satisfaction. The last wards were set on her Lord's new home. Spells would twang an alarm if anyone approached within a mile who was not loyal to Lord Voldemort. It had taken Indigena quite some time to figure out how to hook the wards to true thoughts, and not to something physical like the presence of a Dark Mark on one's arm, but she had found a way at last.

She looked once more at where her Lord was resting, and shook her head. Falco, might he be the plaything of the wild Dark for the next century, had done a good job carving this place, at least. Tunnels connected three large chambers, one meant as a throne room—currently the resting room—of Voldemort, one meant as a meeting place, and one that Indigena thought would work well for torture, given all the channels carved in the floor to carry liquid. Packed earth made all of those, though her tendrils had found every small hole in the dirt already.

Other, smaller rooms would hold prisoners, or work as bedrooms. Indigena had already claimed one of them for her own.

The wards twanged.

Indigena spun and stretched out her arms. Her plants surged up around her, vines running through her hair and plunging into the ceiling, walls splitting apart as her roots urged them to the sides, the rose around her left wrist rearing and ready to spit its deadly poison. Together, they dragged her straight through the roof of the burrow and out into the open light. Indigena rose, circled past the remains of a shattered wall, and leaped over other chunks of rubble to stand facing the east, where the disturbance had come from.

She saw what it was soon enough. He approached openly, not trying to conceal himself. Indigena gripped her wand tightly, though she had to admit not even a barrier of thorns would have kept her entirely free from fear, given the madness in his dark eyes.

“Why are you here, Evan?” she asked.

“To look,” Evan Rosier said, folding his arms. “To see the place where you tried to put a cage around me.”

Indigena raised her eyebrows. *His madness has advanced.* “That was near the Riddle house, Evan,” she said gently. “This is my Lord’s new lair.” She moved her wand in an absent circular motion, wondering if she could begin the golden bridle spell without Evan noticing. Her Lord, for whatever reason, wanted the madman among his hands and feet. They would have to bind him somehow.

“I used the wrong verb tense,” said Evan, and laughed at her. Indigena thought it was the kind of laughter a rabid dog would issue, could it do so. “I have a habit of doing that.”

He leaned nearer, his face friendly and full of cheer. “You should have killed me the first time you met me,” he said. “It would have saved you a good deal of trouble.”

Indigena cast the first binding curse, but Evan had already leaped. Never mind that the wards were supposed to prevent Apparition away from her Lord’s sanctuary unless Voldemort had given his permission to that person. This was Evan. His magic largely did what it wanted, and always had.

She stood there, shaking, and closed her eyes. She would not let one man who made it his business to unsettle people unsettle her.

A few more days. A few more days, and then you can move. That will rid you of some of this nervous energy.

In the meantime, she would garden. That always relaxed her.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ninety-One: The Old Light

Rufus had made sure he slept well. His mind was as clear as it was likely to become. He had talked with Percy quietly as they went to Courtroom Ten, not about what had happened the last time they were there, Unbreakable Vows and Unspeakables and the Ritual of Cinnatus, but about the progress of his training. Percy, though inclined to squint at him at first as if he thought there must be something wrong for the Minister to take an interest in an Auror trainee, was describing it with enthusiasm now.

“And then they said that the trainees who had a difficult time lying down behind the walls and casting curses could get up, because it was their turn now—“

Gryffindor. Pure Gryffindor, every inch of him. It didn’t surprise Rufus a bit that Percy preferred being in battle and casting curses to lying down behind a wall and doing so in safety. He might change his mind if he were ever in a real battle, since the walls would keep not only him but the comrades he would care about safe.

And then Rufus remembered that Percy had already been in a battle, the one in the Ministry two years ago where he had stepped in front of a curse to save Rufus's life.

Well, I was wrong, then. Pure Gryffindor, plain and simple.

The Aurors waiting as guards on Courtroom Ten opened the door for them. Rufus could see their slightly wary gazes. They were weighing him, trying to decide how much gravity he had this morning, how much force to pull the rest of the Wizengamot towards him. Since the mistake with Cupressus Apollonis, a few of the Aurors who had more political ambitions than the rest were beginning to distance themselves from him. Personal loyalty could not stand against loyalty to family for most purebloods and even halfbloods, as Rufus had reason to know.

He smiled at them. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said crisply. "A good day for the Light." And he strode past them, not even his bad leg troubling him much this morning. He'd soaked it last night in a long bath full of the potions that the Healer he'd seen sixteen years ago, just after he received the wound, recommended. He didn't usually do it because it took three hours to bring a little relief, and besides, the wound was a badge of honor. But for today, when he wanted to look as though he controlled the British wizarding world—as he still did, as they hadn't yet said he didn't—he'd bathed it to make sure he would have *no* trouble walking.

A tide of speculation was already rising behind him, then, and he added to it when he appeared in the gallery of Courtroom Ten and walked to his place beside Griselda Marchbanks. Usually, Rufus had waited in the bottom of the chamber, near the place where prisoners sat, to escort the werewolves who spoke to the Wizengamot in. Most of the Elders were only willing to hear them if they had a guarantee of their good behavior from the Minister himself.

Now there were no more petitioners to be heard from. The Wizengamot was going to put the werewolf crisis to a vote today, if Rufus had anything to say about it, or at least make sure that this did not continue for much longer. He needed either enough Elders to secure the vote or enough to make sure his coalition did not crumble between now and the next session.

So he took his place among them again, as an equal, and he could tell it affected them, to see his confident stride and set face. He took the seat next to Griselda, and nodded to her and a few other Elders who regularly followed her, but let his gaze skim coolly over everyone else. He could feel Percy, who'd followed him in to serve as an attendant and secretary if necessary, holding in exultant laughter.

"Good morning, Rufus," Griselda said, her voice so soft that even magnifying charms would have had a difficult time bringing it to anyone else's ears. "What has cheered *you* up so efficiently?"

"Good morning, Griselda," Rufus returned. "You'll see in a short while, when everyone else does."

She sat back in her chair and looked thoughtfully at him. Rufus knew she was wondering at his refusal to tell her ahead of time. Besides being the friend of the southern goblins, she was his friend in her own right. Why would he want to keep a secret from his closest allies?

Because nothing must be allowed to go wrong, old friend, Rufus thought, while he sat back and kept his gaze as smooth and assessing as a hawk's. *You would probably be able to look surprised when I told you about Harry's letter, but I will not take the chance. The expression of surprise must be genuine, and if someone asks you later whether you knew what I was going to say, you must be able to say no.*

Today, we begin on a new footing. And there might be a few even of my friends reluctant to follow me onto the ground I'll propose. Well. That is as it must be. But in that case, I will not give them special consideration.

He watched the last few Elders come into the room. Some of them were exchanging looks and mutters with each other that were probably the results of growing coalitions, or small, fragile alliances against Juniper. Rufus found himself more and more amused as moments passed, and Juniper still did not appear. It was unlikely that he would be late this day of all days. He would wait until the moment the meeting was supposed to begin, and then arrive, drawing all eyes to him.

And sure enough, that was what he did. He came in clad in a dark cloak that wrapped his robes so closely one would have thought it was December instead of June. Rufus had made a private bet with himself that Juniper would wear special robes for this special occasion. He wondered if he were right.

Juniper handed the cloak to one of the Aurors waiting next to the door, who didn't look as if he relished being made into a house elf, but could hardly protest a gesture like that from an Elder of the Wizengamot. Then he strode into the middle of the gallery

towards his seat, which was just a bit left of center, his chin uplifted.

Rufus nodded slowly. Juniper's robes were red, with a golden bird imprinted on them in the colors of wavering flame. It was not a phoenix, as the stylized flames around it showed, but a firebird, a much older symbol. The firebird had longer legs, and its specialty was its dance, as the phoenix's was its song. Once, in the darker ages when there were no Ministries and records were uncertain, Light wizards bearing the firebird symbol had been the ones who preserved history, the ones who defended the defenseless, the ones who fought back Dark wizards who would have made slaves of both Muggles and their own kind.

It was really no surprise that Juniper was choosing to ally himself with that tradition. In his own eyes, he *was* the continuation of that tradition, one of the few wizards who cared about what happened to the world he'd grown up in, and which he still valued.

Rufus had studied some history of his own, though. He knew there had been Dark wizards in the ranks of the firebirds. He knew that one way the Light wizards had finally settled the slavery disputes was by binding magical creatures to do the work instead. It was suspected that that was the reason house elves had been bound, though details on their webs were sketchy.

The firebird stood for Light, for grace, for an old and proud set of customs that worked at making the wizarding world better. It also stood for exclusion, for cutting out, for oppression of others as long as those others weren't part of the group the firebird wizards had sworn to protect.

It stood for sacrifice.

Rufus had spent enough time cleaning up the mess that sacrificial ethics had made of the wizarding world. He wasn't about to let it start again.

He rose and extended his hands with a slight bow. Juniper, who had opened his mouth to make an announcement, turned to face him with a small blink.

Rufus caught his eyes, and let his own opposition and pride and merriment shine forth.

Juniper's head lowered slightly, and his face darkened. Rufus made his smile just this shade of mocking, and then turned to face the rest of the Wizengamot.

"Wizards and witches of the Wizengamot," he said, "gentlemen and ladies of the British wizarding world." He turned his gaze back and forth, regular as clockwork, making sure to encompass them all. "We have heard a great deal about tradition in the arguments set forth in the last few days. We have heard that it is tradition to make sure werewolves cannot harm others, instead of good sense. We have heard it is tradition to keep our world secret from the Muggles, while forgetting the historical pressures that led to the decision. And we have heard that the core of our world is humanity for a very good reason: because it is tradition. I see that Elder Juniper has come today wearing another nod to the old allegiances.

"I am here today to tell you that our traditions are fossilized, and have not dealt well enough with the vast changes our world has undergone in the last few years. Law, history, custom—all those are good things to keep in mind. But we must also be mindful of the new, and able to face challenges we have never met before. All laws, all incidents of history, all customs, were new at one point in time. And now it is our turn to make new ones that our descendants will follow."

He saw faces brighten across the gallery. They were willing to listen, if he could only convince them that he was worth listening to. And he would. He had promised himself he would, and his conviction throbbed in his voice. If he could sound convincing, then at least some of them would be more open to his proposal, whether or not they chose to follow it in the end.

He caught Juniper's eye, and thus saw the almighty scowl the man was throwing him. Rufus smiled sweetly back, and swept into the second phase of his speech.

Narcissa appeared, and staggered. She had visualized the desolate heath properly, but not the exact section of slope where she had Apparated. She caught herself and turned, wand out, ready to defend herself against a series of wards or a guardian beast. She was almost sure that she would have to, given where she was.

But the bleak country around her remained silent, without even a trace of singing birds. The sun tried to catch on the withered grass and rough hill-slopes, but there was nothing to attract its reflection or make it want to shine. Narcissa shook her head and lowered her wand. She did not put it away. That would be foolish, considering where she was.

She turned again, and the house was behind her, looking remarkably similar to the old picture she'd found.

She moved a step forward, and then paused as conflicting emotions filled her. They could hardly help but be conflicting. Her husband was in that house, and the last time Narcissa had seen him, she would have lived perfectly well if his magic had been drained from him.

Now, though, nearly a month had passed, and he had not ventured out of the house or made any other stir. And Narcissa had discerned for herself where he must be, remembering the estate he'd once spoken of which his ancestors had warded so that only one of the oldest living generation of Malfoys could enter it.

And—well. Draco would have been horrified to hear this, but her relationship with Lucius was different, family pride or no family pride. He had disgraced the family. But while Draco looked on him as a disappointing Malfoy, Narcissa, who had not been born to the name she carried, looked on him as a disappointing husband. He was not the man she had married.

Not exactly. The final gesture he had made, leaving the Manor and most of the properties to Draco, showed that he had a trace of that man left in him. And Narcissa had fallen in love with Lucius over years, while Draco had known his father from the time he was born and come to accept and love him in a different way. Narcissa's bond with Lucius had more to do with choice and free will.

This was not another chance, she reassured herself as she walked towards the house. This was another look. If Lucius could not change, she would leave, and not look over her shoulder again, because there would be nothing there to salvage. But she had not had enough time to be *sure* he could not change.

Her mother's voice scolded her in the back of her head, telling her that marrying for love was a dangerous idea. Narcissa ignored it. Her mother had taken the same view of Andromeda's marriage, and her sister was happier with Ted Tonks than Narcissa had ever seen any pureblooded witch who'd done her duty by the family be. Their own rigorous training could not make up for a life lived almost without emotion.

Narcissa had been lucky in that her duty and her heart led her to the same place. Now, when they had apparently split apart, she thought she at least owed her heart a last glimpse.

She was about twenty feet away from the house when the door opened, and Lucius stood there, waiting for her with an unsurprised look on his face. Other than dark circles under his eyes that indicated a lack of sleep, he also seemed unchanged.

"Narcissa. My darling." He stepped away and made a deep bow, sweeping his arm past himself. "Do come in."

"I wish you to tell me, any of you," Rufus went on, his eyes burning over the wizards and witches who stared at him, "when we last confronted a Lord-level wizard the age of the *vates*. For that matter, when did we have a *vates*? When did we learn that our own past wrongs—the house elves, the centaurs, the goblins, the werewolves—could have voices and come back to haunt us? When did we last learn that a wizard many of us had trusted to be a Lord and leader was a child abuser? The best of us, committing the worst crime our world can imagine?"

He paused, and waited for an answer. *This* was the risk that he was taking, and which the other members of the Wizengamot might not follow him into. As they grew older, many wizards grew more conservative, prone to insisting that the way they knew was the only way. The training in pureblood dances that many of them underwent only made it worse. The pureblood dances made one strong—Rufus knew, having learned many of them himself—but they did not often make one flexible. Someone shaped by a certain set of rituals, Dark or Light, was shaped to fit only one world.

And perhaps, at one point in time, that world had been the only one that existed, the only one that a Wizengamot member needed to concern himself with. But that was not the case anymore. Rufus did not think it had been the case for the last hundred years. And he burned now, himself, at the thought of all that time lost. The Ministry could have been a beacon of progress and *true* Light. They might not have had to put up with idiots like Fudge.

But he could not change the past, and that included his own mistakes. He could only leap into the future.

"We have never learned anything like that," said Griselda, her voice strong. Usually, she relied on softness to make her point, causing others to lean forward to hear her, but this time her words carried through the courtroom.

Rufus smiled at her. She had chosen to trust him. And since she was over a hundred and sixty years old, many of the Elders would

remember that she had lived through events that were only ancient history to them.

“That doesn’t mean it’s right to abandon tradition in our response,” said Elizabeth Dawnborn, a fussy Elder, younger than most, but with a very metallic approach to the way the Wizengamot should do things. “We might not have had a Lord become a child abuser before, but we’ve had child abusers, and we’ve had Lords. Why not deal with them in that way, Minister Scrimgeour?” She frowned at him, and rearranged her robes around herself with a little jerk. “Why did you allow the *vates* to kill him and not be arrested for murder?”

“Ask anyone who was in the Ministry that day,” said Rufus gently, which only made the bite of his next words worse. “Ask anyone, Elder Dawnborn, and he will tell you of the horrors of *Capto Horrifer*. The wizard who would use such a spell has passed the limit that most criminals, even child abusers, never cross. He cares only about hurting others. And Harry was the only one who could stop him.”

“It seems,” Juniper said, interposing himself with a quiet, casual grace that Rufus had to admire, “that you are determined to have exceptions for your pet *vates*, Rufus, whether or not they make good sense, whether or not he actually does anything to benefit the wizarding world.”

Rufus felt his eyes kindle with delight. In Juniper’s anxiety to make his point, he had not chosen his words carefully enough. “Why, Erasmus,” he said, dropping the title, as Juniper had done to him. “I thought I was *his* pet, that he pulled *my* leash, and not the other way around. Or do we take turns kneeling and barking?”

That was a risk, in a way, reminding the Elders of Juniper’s accusation. But it also pointed up the contradiction that lay in Juniper’s words, and let none of them escape it.

And, a moment later, Griselda let out a shout of laughter, which led the common reaction.

Rufus held Juniper’s eyes through the chuckles, and saw the pale skin flush. He had made a mistake, his most critical one in several days, but he might be able to regain his footing if Rufus would just let him.

Rufus did not let him.

“And that is the problem we need to solve,” he said, swinging away from Juniper and letting his passion swell his voice. He was doubly glad he had taken the bath of potions for his leg last night. It enabled him to stride back and forth rapidly, an impressive figure, rather than limping and reminding everyone of what he had lost in the First War. “We are trying too hard to approach the *vates*, and the changes he brings along with him or inspires, through old metaphors. He must be a pet of the Minister. No, he must be a Dark wizard, even though he is undeclared, and even though we profess to value the allegiances of other wizards when they make them, including statements of bowing to neither Dark nor Light. No, he must be only an abused child, though the Wizengamot itself condemned his parents to Tullianum, and want to treat him like an adult otherwise. No, he must be an enemy of the state, though he has shown himself willing to negotiate when necessary.

“I propose a new set of metaphors, witches and wizards. I propose making a treaty with the *vates* as if he were the Minister of another country, recognizing him as an adult before he turns seventeen, and appointing him the liaison between the Ministry and groups such as the werewolf packs.”

That made them erupt, as Rufus had known it would.

Narcissa lifted her head. “I am not stupid, Lucius,” she said quietly. “I know the house will not permit anyone not of the elder Malfoy blood to enter it. I don’t fancy being thrown on my knees for you to laugh at.”

“My dear,” Lucius said, and lounged against the doorway as if lounging were an art, “when was the last time I *laughed* while you were on your knees?”

That one, Narcissa had to admit, *I stumbled right into*. She kept her head up and watched her husband, noting the exact position of his wand hand. Nonverbally, she cast the incantation that would tell her where any wood on his body was. It couldn’t catch all weapons, of course, since it would miss metal blades, but it would reveal the hiding place of a wand.

She blinked when she realized that he carried no wand at all, that it must still be inside the house, and stared at him.

“I don’t need a wand to talk to you.” Lucius studied her from behind a strand of blowing blond hair, and spoke the preposterous

sentence with easy confidence.

“You could not know that,” said Narcissa quietly. The silence around the heath and the house seemed to absorb any words she might have spoken anyway, even if she had shouted. She wondered if it was the effect of spells, or if perhaps the Malfoy ancestor who had built this house here had chosen the place for its quietude. “I might have come prepared to kill you, Lucius. You embarrassed your family, which is my family by right of marriage, and cost your son’s partner and allies.”

“My son’s partner and allies are not my son,” Lucius said. “And you are not my son, either, Narcissa. You are my wife. What we have between us is connected to what we have between us and Draco, but not the same. You know that.”

“Need I remind you that I chose Draco the last time you gave me a choice?”

“I did not give you a choice,” said Lucius. “I made the choice myself, and thought to inform you. That was my mistake, Narcissa.”

Narcissa stiffened slightly. That had indeed been what offended her the most about the way Lucius handled Draco’s disownment. He had not asked her advice, nor even listened to the few slight hints she tried to give him about the building conflict between him and Draco. He had simply signed the documents and assumed she would agree. She had thought, when she Apparated away from the Manor after their duel, that that was something Lucius would never realize.

But he had realized it, and that made him infinitely more dangerous.

As well as more attractive.

Narcissa felt suddenly as if she were back in the heady first days of their courtship, when every encounter with Lucius had the thick excitement of a lovers’ meeting, and the tension of a battle. Neither of them backed down from the other. Show a weakness, and the other would bite in an instant. She had won some battles and lost others. But she had grown, almost, to think during the last year that Lucius would never win again.

I deserve to lose this one, then, for being that stupid. But the competition is not quite over yet, because he does not know everything.

“I gave Harry my permission to drain your magic.” Narcissa made sure to empty her voice of emotion, and Lucius’s leg twitched the tiniest bit. “Draco agreed to the same thing.”

“You did not want me dead,” said Lucius, “but alive and a Squib. Did you not think I would prefer to be dead, Narcissa?”

“Lucius, dear one,” said Narcissa, with a faint sigh and a fainter smile, “you did not listen to me. *Drained of magic*. You would not be a Squib, but a Muggle, the way that Harry’s mother became.”

This time, it was Lucius’s lips that twitched, giving the round to her.

“As for what you preferred,” said Narcissa, “no, frankly, at that point in time, it never crossed my mind, Lucius. You had betrayed one of our allies and put your son and your leader in a horrible position. You had embarrassed the Malfoy family name. I was more concerned with the possible shame and degradation you had left behind you.”

“Ah.” Lucius tilted his head and let his eyelids slip to half-mast. “And you have come to find out why I did it, Narcissa, and to scold me for it if possible.”

“I prefer the term *show you your mistakes*.”

Lucius nodded. “You would. The simple reason I did it, Narcissa, was to maintain my life and my power in as good a state as I could leave them. Betraying Parkinson helped to provoke Harry into a course of action I hoped would be easier to control than his career throughout September, and it removed the Unspeakables from blackmailing me—I imagined. And my son should be able to survive on his own, without my support, and without being judged by my shadow. If he is, then he has not yet achieved the independence and the political recognition that he needs to make a difference in the world, and he is still only ‘Harry’s lover,’ not ‘Draco Malfoy.’ This served as a test of Draco, in the long run, to see how well he would adapt—a more controlled and less dangerous test than many I could have devised.”

Narcissa thought for a long, fleeting, wild moment. She could accuse him of not wanting to test Draco at all, of getting caught up by events, but he had rewritten similar circumstances in his mind before. He could deny it and claim that he had intended this

“exam” for Draco from the beginning. He might even believe it by now, the way he believed *he* had been the one to provoke Draco into challenging him for his confirmation as magical heir.

So she took his words instead. With Lucius, it was always better to do so. “So you maintained your life and your power, Lucius? Is that all?”

By the flare in her husband’s eyes, he saw the trap then, but Narcissa was speaking too fast for him to forestall her by interruption.

“How pathetic.” Narcissa gave him a steady gaze, raking him up and then down. “How pathetic that you wished simply to remain as you were, instead of pushing forward, Lucius. Did you not once tell me that you wanted to become more than you were, and that was the only reason worth risk-taking?”

He bared his teeth at her, mask cracked for the first time since the conversation had begun.

Rufus waited to see who would speak the first question. Really, he would be disappointed if it were not Juniper. He should recover quickly enough to head the pack.

“What is the meaning of this, Minister?” And sure enough, that was Elder Juniper, his voice calm and cold and utterly in contrast with the warm promise of the firebird on his robes. “Do you really think the *vates*, who has reminded us often enough that he is independent of the Ministry, will agree to become a liaison for us? When he is already pushing forward the campaign to give halfbreed children rights that their inhuman instincts should deny them? The *vates* is a child, a dangerous one, with a sense of impulse but no sense of pacing or the rights of others.”

Erasmus, Erasmus, Erasmus. Rufus stifled the temptation to shake his head in sorrow at the Elder’s fumbling. *You have just said many things that you should not have.*

“Owls fly faster than words, Elder,” he said, and unfolded Harry’s letter that he’d received yesterday evening, tapping it with his wand. A neutral voice began to read Harry’s words out loud, confirming that he knew the fight for the rights of half-human wizards would take some time, and that he was willing to wait. Rufus kept his eyes on Juniper all the way through the recitation, and saw his face turning steadily whiter. By the time the words finished, Rufus thought it was all Juniper could do not to twitch.

Rufus lowered the letter, and said calmly, into that dazed silence, “Harry *vates* does not walk independently of the Ministry when he does not have to. He let a hunting season be proclaimed before he chose to oppose us with violence on behalf of the werewolves and shelter fugitives, despite the oath that said his blood would turn to silver if he did not openly help them. He refused the Order of Merlin at first because he felt he did not deserve it. When he did accept it, it was only reluctantly and with assurances that he *did* deserve it.” Rufus felt a pang of regret at that. As much as that trait of Harry’s was helping him right now, it was one he would rather Harry did not have. “Now he has agreed to step back and wait on a cause that’s very important to him. Does that sound like someone who will refuse to work with us, to obey the laws? Does that sound like an impulsive, hotheaded child who cannot control himself? Does that sound like someone who would, in fact, refuse to be our liaison with the packs?”

Silence answered him, and then Griselda Marchbanks. “No. It does not.”

“It really doesn’t.” That was Daisy Longchamps, an Elder who had followed Juniper, but whom Rufus often trusted to see good sense. It just had to be shoved in her face first. She spoke reluctantly now, but with a set determination to her jaw that said she wouldn’t back down.

“No. It does not.” Rufus cocked his head like a bird at Juniper, who was looking considerably paler now. “Nor does it sound like someone unworthy of the extra autonomy I propose to give him, especially when he will be seventeen at the end of July. What he sounds like is a unique person, the first *vates* anywhere in the world. I would have Britain *honored* by this distinction, Elders, not confounded by it. Right now, we are easy targets for international criticism. But the other Ministries, the other wizarding communities, do not have our problems. Very smug they can be, resting on their laurels and congratulating themselves on their belief that they would deal better with a *vates* in their care.”

He spun away and lifted his hand, the one not holding Harry’s letter but his wand, high. “But suppose we show them that not only do we have a *vates*—he was born in our country and no other, he is British, he is *ours*—but we can work with him, use his goals to make our community better, our laws more just, our people more forward-looking? They will have egg on their faces for laughing at us then. Instead of claiming they could do so much better, they will have to do that much better, and without the luxury of a *vates* who will work with them.

“We can gain our prominence back with this change, as we will gain so much else. I can see objections rising that treating with Harry as we would a Minister will weaken our position—“ that was the next thing Juniper would have said, Rufus just knew it “—but *I* say that we can hardly be weaker than we are right now, when we flounder and scrabble madly in our indecision about the werewolf packs, and a sixteen-year-old wizard outdoes us in maturity.” He waved Harry’s letter again.

“I do not except myself from blame. I have made mistakes. I have had Light wizards believe that I am not their friend for accusing Cupressus Apollonis of child abuse, and, as Harry says, I am aware that I might be forced out, as much for making this suggestion as for anything else.

“But I say to you that I am ready and willing to make amends for my mistakes, and this declaration is the first step. It seals and strengthens our bonds with our *vates*. It grants a concession that is hardly a concession, given how close Harry is to wizarding maturity already. It gives the werewolves what they have asked for—a speaker who is sworn to the oaths of the Alliance of Sun and Shadow, who originated them, in fact—and demands they prove that they mean what they say about dealing with us. It determines our course, and gives our allies the potential to be strong, or falter because they are not strong enough, not because we made them falter.” He paused, and flashed a smile around the room. “It makes us look *damn* good.”

The laughter broke out again, led by Elizabeth Dawnborn this time, who stood up to clap. A few witches and wizards followed her, then more, until ten of them were standing. It was a start, Rufus thought, his heart pounding with excitement, especially since some of those standing had been Juniper’s most noteworthy allies.

“Minister,” Dawnborn said, her eyes flashing with that same contagious excitement, “what you say makes sense. And I would much rather have this move into the light of day. I am sick of debating about the packs and chasing the same words around again and again. I wish others to *know* what I am doing, where I stand. An official announcement will have that advantage as well as all the others you named. I support your proposal.”

Ah, the honesty of the Light. Rufus was pleased. Dawnborn had an allergy to sneaking around and hiding and keeping one’s affairs private which was common to many of the old Light families. She had been Light-sworn since she was nine, a Gryffindor in Hogwarts, and well-known as an advocate for wizards and witches whom the laws had hurt before she became a Wizengamot Elder. Moreover, she was younger than most of them, and more likely to be won heart and soul by a passionate speech.

Glancing around the room, Rufus could see that it wasn’t that way with all of them. Some would hesitate, and not commit fully in heart and mind until they saw if this worked. But all of them could catch the mood of the room now. Opposing Rufus in public at this moment was political suicide.

I wonder if more of them will go along because they think they must, and everyone else believes in what I am doing, than will go along because they believe in what I am doing?

It was a most amusing thought. Of course, the biggest test was yet to come.

Rufus turned to face Elder Juniper. “Elder Dawnborn has been particularly eloquent in her appreciation of my efforts,” he said. “Your thoughts, sir?”

“You do not have a right to call me pathetic,” Lucius said, his voice drained of emotion, but full of clenching teeth. “Or what are *you* doing here, Narcissa, seeking a husband you claim has embarrassed the family?”

Narcissa cocked her head. Some of the funniest moments in her marriage—not necessarily the best, of course—came when Lucius insulted himself without realizing it. “Lucius,” she said.

“*What?*” That was a hiss. If Lucius had been a cat, his ears would have been pinned straight back against his head.

“You do realize that you have just called yourself a pathetic quest object, don’t you?” Narcissa kept her voice gentle.

Lucius opened his mouth slightly and raised a leg as if he would step forward. Narcissa tensed, the situation returning to her in a rush. If he came out on the heath, out from under the protection of the wards, she would be obligated to at least try to bind him and take him back to Hogwarts so Harry could drain his magic.

The thought that she wouldn’t try very hard flashed through her mind, but she caught and slaughtered it. She *would* try. She might have come to visit Lucius, but that was a very far cry from letting him escape, or even duel her. She had made her choice. Draco and Harry had her loyalty and her love, Lucius only her love.

Luckily for both of them, Lucius halted where he was, his head lowering slightly so that his blond hair fell across his face. Narcissa waited, her fingers clasped along her wand like twigs.

“If I built it back up again?”

Lucius’s voice was so soft that Narcissa almost could not hear him. “What did you say?”

He stared at her. “If I built it back up again?” he repeated, insistently. “If I built a reputation for myself? There are still Ministry contacts that answer to me, and not to Draco—personal favors I did for them, and which I am owed, that have nothing to do with the Malfoy line. And there is—there are compensations under the pureblood rituals for what I did to Parkinson. She is not compelled to accept them, but she is compelled to at least listen to me, or betray her own honor.”

Narcissa controlled her breathing, but it was hard. Nothing Lucius ever did had so deeply shaken her. For him to adopt the position of petitioner was—unheard of. Even with Harry, he had always arranged matters so that he was not simply apologizing or making amends, but performing another step in the truce-dance, or doing something else that reminded the “wronged” party of their fundamental equality.

Narcissa knew the apology rituals. There was a reason they were rarely used. They simply required more humility than most Dark purebloods had.

“You didn’t give Draco this house,” she said. “You didn’t give Draco the whole fortune. Some Galleons were missing, transferred to a separate account a few days before you signed those documents.”

Lucius’s eyes flared with triumph, and something more than that. Pride in her, Narcissa realized, pride that she had figured it out. “Yes.”

“You intended to use this as more than a place to hide from us,” she murmured. “You intended all the time to build your reputation back up, and to approach us on a more equal footing when you’d made yourself indispensable again.”

Some strong emotion was moving in her, like a current of dark water. She would call part of it love, and part of it hatred, and part of it surprise at Lucius’s sheer audacity. The rest was not safe to name.

“Always.”

She watched the proud line of his throat, the flash of his eyes, and knew that part of her would always be in love with this man, no matter what he did, no matter what words or disloyalties passed between them. And she could not condemn that part. It was reality that it existed. No one ever got anywhere by fighting reality.

“I cannot answer your question,” she said. “About what would happen if you built it up again. Because I do not know if that’s possible. I do not know if you could cause Draco and Harry to forgive you, or make matters up to Hawthorn Parkinson for almost killing her and bringing up the memories of her daughter again as well as betraying her to the Unspeakables.”

Lucius didn’t flinch when she listed the wrongs done to Hawthorn. Of course he did not. Narcissa knew he did not regret them.

Selfish bastard. Malfoy. Lucius.

“And if I did?” he asked. “If I showed you that it is possible? Would you give me a fair hearing, Narcissa?”

A moment passed, of wind and silence and the desolation of the heath.

“I would,” Narcissa said, and for a moment she let tears show in her eyes, vulnerability to complement the vulnerability that Lucius had shown her with his bowed head and soft voice. “You know I must, you bastard. No proper witch could ignore someone so strong and so beautiful.”

She reveled in his self-satisfied smile. She had wanted to see it again. They were both yielding to each other: she promising to reconsider him, he admitting that he cared enough about her and Draco’s opinion to try to do this.

The dance is not ended. I do not think it can be until one of us is dead.

He did not speak again as she stepped back and Apparated away, but he did kiss the back of his hand to her. Narcissa saw him,

and carried the gesture with her into darkness, and then the bright, quiet beauty of Silver-Mirror.

What else could he do?

He must say one thing, for all that it screamed and scraped against his instincts, for all that he had come into Courtroom Ten intending to say something entirely different.

The firebird was warm on his back. The ghosts of Light wizards past watched him, judging him under the eye of history, the only judge who was always correct, who was all-knowing.

And Erasmus Juniper had to raise his eyes to Minister Scrimgeour's and agree that, yes, his proposal sounded like one that would work, and would offer all the advantages he had promised.

Watching Scrimgeour's eyes kindle was like a punch to the stomach. But he had endured worse political defeats. What he had never done, he thought, was to lose a contest like this when there was so much at stake—possibly the very future of Light wizardry and the traditions it had preserved down all the centuries.

He waited in silence while the Minister made another speech, extolling the virtues of his proposal, and then called for a formal vote. Given what he had done beforehand, calling on them to make their opposition or agreement clear, it was self-evident that his proposal would pass, and it did, with only a few of the bravest abstaining.

Erasmus would have abstained, but he knew it would make him look like a sulky child. Therefore, he voted to tie that irresponsible child to the Ministry, and Scrimgeour thanked him with a smile too real to be sincere.

After that, there were only a few moments before he could escape from the chamber, retrieving his cloak from the Auror on the way. The robes he had intended to wear as a sign of triumph, emblazoned and blazing with the firebird, now seemed more like a sign of shame.

He Floored back to his own home, and spent some time standing in front of the hearth, his head bowed, deep in thought, one hand braced on the flat stones of the wall. He had to calm himself down before his afternoon meeting with Aurora Whitestag and the other members of the budding alliance, when he would have to warn them about this setback and explain the effect it would have on their future actions. One thing was certain. A good portion of their support in the Wizengamot was gone.

Desperation wouldn't leave that easily, though. It bubbled and flowed and collected along his spine, clinging in large gobs to the walls of his stomach. Controlled breathing did no good. Counting to ten in all the languages he knew, the languages of other countries and the subject magical creatures, did no good.

And why should it? Didn't this situation *deserve* a reaction of panic, of desperation? And few people would give it one.

Of course, Erasmus thought, few people understood what was at stake.

Not even Aurora Whitestag and the allies she had helped to gather truly understood, though Erasmus thought Cupressus Apollonis might come close. They did not know that Light wizardry was dying, that too great a departure from their traditions could easily mean that they would never have those traditions back.

Erasmus spelled off his robe and set it to floating in front of him, where he could gaze at the dazzling firebird. Done in shades of gold that became red near its body, with a long red beak and legs and a dull scarlet eye, it danced above depictions of wizarding buildings throughout the ages. So those wizards who had borne the symbol had danced about something lovely and fragile, the flame of honor, of bravery, of true goodness, always guarding and tending it carefully lest it go out in the winds of wickedness.

They had had a point, Erasmus thought. Even when the Ministry was built, even when Light wizards came to dominate Dark in Britain's wizarding community through a series of Ministers who were *all* Light, with every Dark Wizengamot Elder or Lord falling into the traps of corruption and slavery in the end, the thing they guarded was still a shimmering and fragile flame. Not all the structures and strictures in the world would protect a living thing from dying if someone crept through the bindings and poisoned it.

And that had happened. The Ministry had become an institution. Wizards who should have known better had let their Declarations to the Light become routine. Dark wizards were allowed to go free and avoid paying for their crimes, including torture, rape, and murder, because they had money.

And now the very species that those ancient Light wizards had bound, in the sure and certain knowledge that someone must be at the bottom in any society, were breaking free, and threatening to smother the last gutters of the flame that were left. The Grand Unified Theory was the tool in their arsenal meant to turn wizard against wizard if the accusations of cruelty towards magical creatures didn't work, meant to make them doubt themselves and the blood and the heritage that had always singled them out and made them special.

Erasmus had built on perceptions like that as he rose, seeking out people who felt the same way he did, and could have the same passionate conviction to the cause of goodness and Light, the same desire to protect what was innocent and pure in their world.

But few people were used to that level of committed thinking. Few felt the eyes of their ancestors on them all the time. Indeed, the people who seemed to do so were most often Dark purebloods, and of course they would not hesitate to bribe and flatter and corrupt their opponents. That was in the best family tradition of Dark wizards, after all.

Erasmus snorted, and swung, his robe floating behind him, to eat lunch and dress for his meeting with Whitestag and her supporters.

Well, he would show others that level of thinking. Whitestag and the rest thought they were using him. He was educating them in the meanwhile, making them shed their small perceptions and rise higher, showing them that the real danger of the *vates* lay in the real, beautiful things he would kill in the rush to strive after some vague vision of "betterment."

This was only a small setback. Erasmus did not intend to allow that torch, passed from generation to generation and still ablaze with love, honor, and tradition, to go out.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ninety-Two: Lie In My Arms This Night

"Parvati, we have to get—*ah*—"

Parvati shut him up by leaning in and snogging him thoroughly. Connor gave in and wrapped his arms around her, more than happy to be a few minutes late to Charms if it meant that he got to kiss her a bit more, and hear the very interesting sound she made when he shifted a bit closer to her, like *this*—

Of course, Parvati, the tease, backed up and left him that way, with a small smile flirting at the corners of her mouth. Connor growled and reached for her again, but Parvati said innocently, "We'll be late to Charms if we don't hurry, Connor," and dashed down the corridor as if she were as intent on making good marks as Hermione was.

Connor took a moment to rearrange himself, including straightening his tie and murmuring a few useful charms to cover up the marks Parvati had planted all over his neck. It wasn't every day that his girlfriend grabbed him where he was waiting outside Potions for Hermione, hurried him into an alcove down the corridor, and settled in for some serious snogging. Apparently, Parvati had seen something in Divination that made Professor Trelawney praise her and give thirty points to Gryffindor. Connor never *had* got to ask what it was, because it was a little difficult to ask complicated questions when his tongue was in Parvati's mouth.

To be fair, it would have been a little difficult to ask complicated questions when his tongue was in anyone else's mouth, either. But since his experience with other people's mouths was limited and Parvati wouldn't take it kindly if he were to experiment, Connor decided that he wouldn't mention that thought to her.

Honestly, said the prim Hermione-voice of his conscience. *Snogging in the dungeons like a pair of teenagers.*

We are a pair of teenagers, Connor answered the voice with satisfaction. It tended to shut up in the face of common sense, which even Hermione could recognize, and it did so now.

Connor checked himself over one more time, knowing by now that he *would* be late to Charms, but not caring. He'd received a kiss from Parvati *and* managed to do it in the dungeons without Snape or the Slytherins catching them *and* shut the annoying voice of his conscience up. Life was good.

At least, life was good until he passed the door to Snape's office, which, unusually, stood half-open. Connor *had* to pause and investigate that, didn't he? *Anyone* could have got in if the door was half-open, or anything. Hagrid had been talking about trying to raise manticores again lately. One could have wandered into Snape's office and stung him, and then Connor could rush in and heroically save him.

Then he listened to the voices that were coming through the door, and his grin disappeared.

“Explain to me why you were smiling during Potions today,” Snape said, as if it were something he had a right to demand.

Harry’s voice was soft and wary. Confused. Connor had heard him like that before, when Harry tried to placate him in the midst of a temper tantrum. It was a tone he had *really* hoped he would never have to listen to again. “But, sir—”

Snape actually growled. Connor drew his wand. *I don't care what he is to Harry, guardian or foster father or whatever part he's playing in this twisted little game. I don't trust him. I don't even trust him the way I trust Draco. If he hurts my brother, he's going to get hurt.*

“Severus,” Harry corrected, with that little sigh in his tone that meant this was something that happened often. “I thought you would be happy. I was using a rare Occlumency technique to keep myself from feeling most of my emotions, but Professor Belluspersona caught me and made me stop.”

I'll just bet she did, Connor thought smugly. The Transfiguration Professor was the sternest teacher in the school. And better her than Snape to catch Harry in the middle of something like this.

“You should have come to me,” said Snape, his voice going quiet and strained. Connor would have felt sorry for him if that were possible, but five years of horrible treatment in Potions class because of who his father was had left their mark. He didn’t, not really. “I would have been happy to help you with Occlumency, Harry. It is much more my expertise, and she could have easily damaged you, poking about in your mind.”

“She didn’t poke about in my mind, Severus,” Harry hastened to reassure him. That made Connor grind his teeth, how eager Harry seemed to assure Snape that his mind was Snape’s private and internal sanctum. *Stubborn, greasy git. Can't he just be happy that Harry's smiling again, without worrying about how it happened?* “She discovered it from my behavior, from undirected magic in Transfiguration. And she made me promise not to do it again.”

There was a silence. Connor recognized it as a waiting silence. He frowned and tapped his wand in the crook of his arm. *What can he want now?*

“You have made that promise many times before, Harry,” Snape said, with a voice like a building thunderstorm.

“*I know*,” Harry snapped, and for the first time Connor could hear annoyance, tension, in his tone. “This is different. This was a vow. If I don’t keep it, then she punishes me. And the punishment is one that wouldn’t hurt me as much as it would hurt someone else, but it’s humiliating, and it would mean I *failed*. That’s the reason I asked for it. I promise you, Severus, I want to avoid the failure that would come with another suppression of my emotions. And I did promise her in such a way as to cover the suppression of all emotions, not just with the technique I was using. I used ice, but—”

“You used *ice*?”

Connor had heard enough. He recognized the sound that followed Snape’s exclamation, which was a long stride forward. He just *knew* that Snape would grab Harry in the next moment. He’d already crossed the distance that separated them.

He burst in through the door, aimed his wand, and flung the spell that Peter had taught him last summer with all his strength. He’d been quite excited and proud of it, and couldn’t wait to show it to Harry, until he found out Harry already knew it. But that didn’t mean it couldn’t be useful now, especially since it was a Light spell, and Connor was good at those.

“*Aurora ades dum!*”

A sunburst of light opened inside Snape’s mouth, spreading to encompass his eyes and blind him. With a yell, he fell back. Connor used the chance to put himself between the greasy git and his brother, half-choking on a battle cry. He couldn’t decide whether the name of Lux Aeterna would be appropriate to shout here or not.

“*Connor!*” Harry said in a horrified voice, and shoved at his shoulder blades.

Connor paid him no mind. If Harry had really wanted to hurt him, he would have used magic. And he had heard a soft *clink* as Snape fell. That was more important than his brother’s whinging on about what he’d done to the professor.

With a sense of absolute, confident righteousness, Connor aimed his wand at Snape’s right hand, which was caught halfway up to

his face, as if he knew that wiping at it wouldn't take away the blindness. "*Accio* potions vial!"

Snape's hand opened, and a vial soared out of it and into Connor's palm. Connor grabbed it the way he would a Snitch, and turned it around, staring. The potion pressed inside it wasn't one he recognized—of course, he didn't recognize most potions—but he was certain he would have remembered if he'd seen it before. It was thick, and silvery, and clung to the glass like Parvati tended to cling to him when they were absolutely certain they were alone.

"See?" he said, turning it around and holding it up to Harry. "He was going to force this down your throat."

Harry gave him a withering glance. Connor had predicted that he would. "He was *not*."

"Why don't you ask him?" Reluctantly, Connor turned around and performed the counterspell on Snape, so that the light of the Dawn Summons stopped blinding him. "He was holding it in his hand. I heard it clink when he hit the floor. Did you know he had it? Do you know what it does?" He again tilted the vial, this time so that Harry could watch the light sparkle off the potion.

"That—" Harry stopped. Connor saw a trace of disturbance in his eyes. He probably still didn't believe that Snape had planned to poison him, however true it was, but he didn't recognize the potion, and that was enough to confirm Connor's suspicions that Snape had been up to no good.

A building hiss made him twist around again, stepping in front of Harry as he tried to get to Snape. Their professor looked half-crazed with anger, blinking and shaking his head like a bear stung by bees, but Connor didn't care. He was going to protect his brother. Harry had done enough of that for him during their childhood. Now it was his turn.

"You realize that you could be expelled for attacking a professor, Mr. Potter?" Snape's voice was not loud, but obviously meant to be cutting. Connor had seen him reduce third-years to tears with less.

Connor was no third-year. "Not if I attacked in self-defense, Professor," he said, and his voice was as cool as mountain snow. *Always stay calm in the aftermath of battle*, the part of his mind that sounded like Peter whispered to him. *Nothing disconcerts your opponents so much*. "Or defense of another. I *might* have been mistaken, of course. I'm sure that you have a perfectly good reason to be approaching Harry with an unfamiliar potion in hand, holding it so that he can't see it." He paused and gave Snape an expectant glance.

"Insolent *brat*," Snape said, giving both words the full weight of his temper. "You will have detention for a *month*. I will arrange it with Minerva so that Gryffindor House loses the rest of its points—"

"We've won the Quidditch Cup anyway, even if we don't get the House Cup," said Connor comfortably, and ignored Snape's furious glare. "I want to know what the potion is. I want to know why Harry didn't know you had it." Harry chose to make things more complicated just then by trying to take a step forward. Connor briefly wrestled with him, and managed to make him stay in place. He and Harry were the same height, but he was stronger, probably because Harry still wasn't completely used to having two hands.

Snape was silent. Connor aimed his wand at him. "We're *waaai*-ting," he said in a singsong.

"The potion is an experimental one of mine," said Snape, reluctantly. Connor thought he was glancing elsewhere to avoid Harry's eyes, not his, but so long as the professor looked properly ashamed of himself, Connor did not care. "It heals Occlumency wounds, like the ones that Harry sustained in his battle with Tom Riddle in second year. I was going to give it to Harry so that any wounds left over from his use of ice might heal."

"Going to give it to Harry?" Connor echoed. "Force it down his throat, more like."

"That's *enough*, Connor."

Harry was using That Voice. Connor reluctantly stepped out of the way, and Harry glared at him for a moment, little puffs of cold air rising from his mouth, before he sighed and glanced at Snape.

"I appreciate your help, Professor," he said firmly. "But I've made the vow, and failing now, suppressing my emotions, would be so humiliating that it won't happen again. I've looked at my mind and had Draco look at it. I have no wounds. I melted the ice in time. I appreciate your *intention* to help me. But force-feeding me a potion is not the way to do it."

I knew that was what he was going to do! Connor folded his arms, letting his wand hang over his left elbow. He fought the urge to crow at the look on Snape's face. It was tormented, confused, as if he himself didn't know what he'd planned. In a normal mood,

Connor might have felt sorry for him, given the noticing that wouldn't stop. But that very confusion spoke against Snape. It said that he *might* have forced the potion down Harry's throat, if it had suited him to do so. He should have just given a denial that he would ever do such a thing.

Harry took a deep, dragging breath, then shook his head. His voice was like river ice in early spring, Connor thought, squeaking and cracking with warmth beneath the surface. "I know you want to help. I'll always appreciate it. And the vow with Henrietta might well be a mistake. But it's my kind of mistake—the kind of vow I couldn't make to you or Draco. But, as you pointed out, I've made those kinds of vows before, and broken them each time. This one—this one, maybe I won't. It's at least different. It's at least worth a try."

More silence. Connor stopped tapping his wand as he watched the two of them. He had the oddest feeling that he shouldn't be here, that he was witnessing something so private it was hurtful.

Snape nodded, once, his eyes on Harry now. "I would not have forced the potion down your throat," he said, his voice soft. "I would have told you what it was and given you the choice before the end."

Liar, liar, Connor thought.

A smile crossed Harry's face, though, making it clear that he accepted that. "Thank you, sir," he said, and Snape didn't scold him for the title he was obviously more comfortable using. Connor thought Snape should never have made him use his first name at all. "Now, I really *do* have to make my way to Charms, but I promise that I'll come back this afternoon, and we can talk about this. All right?"

Snape nodded. The expression on his face made Connor glance away uncomfortably.

Harry turned to look at him then, and shook his head. "Please don't expel him, sir," he said, as if *Connor* were the one who had done something wrong. "He did attack in what he thought was defense of me."

"It *was* defense of you," Connor pointed out.

Harry looked at him patiently.

"I want to know why he had the potion concealed in his hand," Connor said stubbornly.

"Because he wished to help me, and sometimes he doesn't go about it the right way," Harry said, giving Snape a fond, exasperated glance. "And for other reasons that he and I will talk about later." His hand clenched on Connor's shoulder, and he steered him towards the door, then bowed his head and whispered in his ear, though Connor thought Snape could probably hear them anyway. He had such sharp ears that he could hear a bubble popping wrong in a potion. It was only sadism that let him ignore that so that the potions exploded all over the hated Gryffindors instead, Connor was certain. "But thank you for trying to protect me. I appreciate it."

Connor got steered *out* the door, and Harry shut it behind them, then raced him to Charms.

That couldn't erase the incident from Connor's mind, though. Or the fact that Snape, questioned on his behavior, had looked lost, as though he remembered nothing of the last several moments.

Draco could feel a restless, itchy twitching climbing his shoulders, as though *everything* had suddenly become that place in the middle of his back where he could never scratch. Twisting didn't relieve it. Eating didn't relieve it. Rubbing his back against the stone wall, or asking Harry to scratch it for him, didn't relieve it.

He knew what it was, of course. It was the evening of the fourth of June, which made it less than twenty-four hours until the seventeenth anniversary of his birth. He would come of wizarding age, then, and his magic would mature with him. The magic was racing around under his skin, building, needing to be used.

He snapped at Harry a few times too many. Harry finally just stared at him, and Draco left their bedroom to wander the corridors and try to find someone to distract him. A duel would be pleasant, especially since he was likely to be excused any wrongdoing on the grounds of its having exercised his magic.

A shadow showed up in the corridor ahead of him. Draco became alert and pulled out his wand.

Connor came around the corner. Disappointed, Draco lowered his wand. Harry wouldn't talk to him tomorrow if he hexed his brother, and Harry talking to him tomorrow rather needed to happen, if the birthday gift Draco had asked him for was going to come off.

Connor jerked to a stop at the sight of him, and gave an equally jerky nod. Draco raised his eyebrows. Something was off. Connor usually gave him a bit of a glare, if only because Gryffindor and Slytherin were still rivals even if they weren't. But now he only peered past Draco towards the door of the Slytherin common room, as if expecting to see Harry come out.

"How is he?" he demanded.

How is he? Bewildered, Draco ran a hand through his hair, then hissed and wriggled when it felt as if all the hair on his scalp were standing up at once. It probably was, from the way Connor's mouth twitched when he looked at him.

"Just you wait until *your* seventeenth birthday," Draco said sulkily, trying to smooth his hair flat.

"Mine's over the summer, thank you," Connor said cheerfully. "Fewer people to watch and comment on my every move." His smile dropped away. "I want to know how Harry is after that incident with Snape this morning."

Draco frowned. "Incident with Snape?"

Connor's eyebrows would run out of forehead to climb across soon. "He didn't tell you?"

"No, he didn't." Draco shoved away the memory of Harry trying to tell him something during lunch, but shutting up when Draco complained and carried on about his gathering magic and insisted that Harry scratch his back again. "What happened?"

"I heard him and Snape arguing," said Connor. "About him suppressing his emotions and a vow he made to Professor—Belluspersona." Draco was a bit impressed that Connor had the presence of mind to use Professor Bulstrode's fake name even here, even now. "Then Snape took a step forward, and I intervened and cast a spell at him to stop him. Turned out he was holding a silver potion to cure Oclumency wounds. He claimed that he would have given Harry a choice about taking it, but, here's the thing, he held it in his hand, out of sight, and he couldn't answer when I first asked him about what it was and what he intended with it. Harry didn't recognize the potion, either." Connor's hazel eyes were almost amber with fury, as if reliving the incident had caused him to get angry all over again. "I think Harry was going to talk to him later and straighten matters out, but I didn't get a chance to catch him after dinner and ask how that went. So. How is he?"

"Brooding," Draco said softly, now thoroughly distracted from the fact that he would be seventeen tomorrow. "Not as patient as he usually is."

"Damn it." Connor tapped his fingers against his wand. "Even when he isn't suppressing his emotions, it takes a lot to get him that angry."

"Yes."

Draco was going to blame the magic. The magic not only opened new pathways in his body so that it could rush along them more easily—a wizard's seventeenth birthday was the occasion of a wizard's attaining full magical strength—but opened new pathways in his mind, too. That was why he was having these thoughts. He couldn't escape, and it wasn't his fault he had them.

But he was now thinking what an incident like that with Snape would have done to Harry, particularly if they hadn't been able to make the argument up later—and he didn't think they had, from Harry's reaction. And on top of that had been his complaining and his demand for an elaborate spoiling tomorrow.

Damn it.

He had been acting like a spoiled child *again*. It was at least as easy, Draco thought, for him to slide back into that as it was for Harry to slide back into controlling his emotions and being addicted to hiding from them.

Stupid thoughts. Stupid magic!

But the fact remained that he would be a legal adult tomorrow, and a magical one, and he did not want to act like a spoiled child on that day. Some other people did. He had been doing it. Now, he didn't want to.

He had changed his mind on his birthday present, again. He would have to go and tell Harry that.

He was about to turn and head back into the Slytherin common room when he realized that he probably owed Connor thanks, or something of the kind. *Stupid magic, making me think stupid adult thoughts.*

He sighed and turned around. "I'll—do what I can to take care of him," he said. "Thanks for letting me know I had to."

Connor's eyes grew round, and Draco smugly congratulated himself. That had been the *exact* right thing to say, it appeared, in everything from the words to the tone he'd phrased it in.

"You're welcome," Connor said, a moment later, after some more staring. "And do tell me how he feels later. Just don't tell me any details of shagging that you get up to." He gave an exaggerated shiver, then turned and walked back in the direction of Gryffindor Tower.

Not shagging, Draco thought, as he spoke the password and the wall slid open for him. *I don't think that will work this time. I want a way to make us both happy tomorrow, without the confines of a ritual, and without making Harry feel that he has to do something for me or even for himself. Just a normal day.*

That sounds right.

He didn't remember.

That was the most disturbing thing about his conversation with Snape, Harry thought, lying back on his pillow and staring at the canopy of his bed with his hands clasped behind his head. Snape didn't remember picking up the potion, didn't remember deciding that Harry had Occlumency wounds that had to be healed willy-nilly, didn't remember what he would have done with the potion if Connor hadn't chosen that moment to intervene. Harry had talked to him for an hour that afternoon, and they'd used a Pensieve, and still they hadn't succeeded in coaxing any memories to the surface.

And then Harry had called him *sir* again, and there had been a row about names, and Harry had left just in time to receive a letter from Scrimgeour asking him to be the Ministry's liaison with the werewolf packs, and then Draco had demonstrated world-class whinging skills at dinner, but Harry couldn't snap at him because tomorrow was his birthday and Harry knew that meant he wasn't completely in control of his magic at the moment, and everything had left Harry tired and with a headache and the prospect of doing more of this tomorrow.

He'd penned a response to Scrimgeour after Draco left, accepting the new position—what else could he do?—and then lain back and closed his eyes and reveled in a few moments of peace alone.

It couldn't last, of course. The door had to open in a few moments, and Draco had to come back and sit on the bed. Harry braced himself for another outburst of whinging, reminding himself over and over again not to get angry, and not to suppress his emotions. Sometimes, having a sarcastic running commentary in his head could help.

"Harry?"

Well. That wasn't the tone he'd been expecting. This was soft, and probing, as if Draco really cared about what he thought. Harry looked up.

Draco was chewing his lip, looking at him with a more serious and thoughtful expression than he'd worn in—well. Ages. Then he took a deep breath and said, "I changed my mind on my birthday gift."

"Oh." Harry ignored the dull flare of disappointment in his gut. He didn't have to *express* his emotions, even if he had to feel them. And really, attaining legal age in the wizarding world happened only once. He should be willing to do whatever Draco wanted. He would have been happier if he could do it cheerfully, but he just couldn't. He would at least pretend to cheeriness. He forced a smile. "What would you like?"

"A normal day."

Harry blinked. "What?"

"A day when neither of us makes a special effort not to anger the other, *or* to live in each other's pockets," said Draco, staring at

him intently. “Sometimes I think everything is too intense for us, Harry. We have the rituals, and we have days like today where I’m in intense pain and you’re worrying intensely about Snape, but feel you can’t show that to me in case I take it wrong.” Harry started to ask how Draco had found out about his argument with Snape, but Draco was plunging on. “So I’d like just a normal day. Feel whatever you like. Say whatever you like to me, or don’t say it; if you want to keep silent about some things, that’s fine, too. And I’ll try to be normal, too, and respond to you with the maturity I’ve been lacking lately.”

Harry was at a loss for words. All he could really think of to say was, “Draco, it’s your birthday.”

“And this is what I want.”

I don’t trust him to want only that, Harry thought, and was mortified to know that he’d thought it. But it was true. He didn’t trust Draco enough not to think he wouldn’t change his mind and want some more expensive or better birthday present a second later.

He could think that Draco was lying to make him feel better. He couldn’t trust that Draco wanted this.

Draco either saw it in his face, or jumped into his mind and read it that way. He shook his head firmly. “This is the truth, Harry,” he said. “I want—I want to see if it’s possible.” He sounded as if he were groping for words. “If it isn’t, then we’ll at least know that. And if it is, then, well, it’s new, and I’m supposed to have several new experiences tomorrow.”

Harry kept studying him, and Draco’s expression never faltered. He didn’t lean forward and kiss Harry, either, the way that he did when he was trying to persuade him down some new path. He just—wanted, and it seemed like that was going to have to be enough. Maybe it was enough.

Harry nodded, and, cautiously, dropped the burden he’d assigned himself of making Draco’s birthday tomorrow perfect and splendid because he knew Draco would want him to make it that way. “All right.”

“Thanks.” Draco nodded back, then turned to reach into his trunk. “Did you happen to have that book that Peter said could help us with that Defense essay? I’ve gone to the library, and someone else has it.”

“I think Hermione does, but I know the answers anyway,” Harry offered. “I’ll share them with you.”

“Thanks,” Draco repeated.

They started on their homework. Harry fought the temptation to poke at the tentative silence between them, which was relaxing him more than anything else could have done.

I could wake up tomorrow and find that Draco’s changed his mind again. I have to be ready for that.

In fact, the only thing on Draco’s mind when he woke in the morning was the intense pressure in the center of his chest.

He had expected it, though. He lay still for a few moments, eyes tightly shut, gasping in controlled breaths, and waiting until the magic could pool in the center of his chest and start spreading out again. It formed iron molds around his heart and lungs, but it was not nearly as frightening as the Lung Domination Curse had been. He simply had trouble breathing for that length of time, and as each moment passed, he actually grew more hopeful. The longer one had to wait, the more powerful one was likely to become—or, more accurately, the more one’s magic would unfold.

The magic darted away from his lungs in a few minutes, though, and wound through the rest of his body like vines. Draco shrugged as best as he could where he lay in bed. This was a normal day, and he was determined to face what would be normality for the rest of his life with equanimity. *I always knew I wasn’t the strongest wizard in the school. That title was taken long before I had a chance at it. And besides, it’s not how much power you have, it’s how you use it.*

“All right?”

Draco glanced sideways. Harry was propped up on one elbow, watching him. Draco nodded.

“Good.” Harry touched his hair in a good-morning gesture, then slid out of bed and wandered over to use the loo. A ripple of glassy motion followed him. Draco smiled. *Argutus*. The Omen snake had shown up last night and been insistent on spending some time with Harry, who’d argued with him for a while in Parseltongue, or perhaps played; the hisses all sounded the same to Draco. And now he was going in to share the warm water of the shower, which he loved, and perhaps another argument.

It was all perfectly fine, Draco reminded himself sternly. Harry had other people in his life besides him. Even if some of the people were snakes, Draco could give him time alone with them.

Besides, his first gift had arrived.

Two owls escorted it in, one of them real—his mother’s owl Regina, all stern eyes and flashing talons; she had no time for anyone but her mistress, really—and one of them a magical construct created to support the package. Draco relaxed as he saw that the box was the size he had expected it to be. He didn’t need spoiling from Harry. He was going to get quite enough spoiling from everyone else.

He opened the box, once Regina had circled around his head to show her disdain and the magical construct had faded away, and stared. He knew his mother would entrust him with a treasure when he came of age that she thought him too young for at other birthdays, but he hadn’t expected something quite this rich.

He drew it out slowly. It shimmered and flashed, even in the relatively dim light of their bedroom. Draco was not sure if it was gold or platinum or bronze, but whatever metal it was, it was like the sun in water. It was a narrow band of the right size to be worn around the head—a crown, in fact, though perhaps more a coronet, because it lacked spikes and knobs. On the front, where the tip would rest over his forehead, a curved serpent and dog twined together, the serpent made of silver and the dog made of obsidian.

There was a legend that the Black family descended from a royal line, though the historians all disagreed on who the family had been, and most of the time even what country they had ruled. Narcissa had once told Draco there were a few artifacts remaining in the Black vaults that suggested the tales were true. He had never expected to see one, though.

The note in the box took longer to draw his attention, but once he saw it, he understood exactly why his mother had sent the crown to him.

June 5th, 1981

My darling:

I write this note on the day when you are one year old, and I can watch you squirming in your cot, sometimes turning over to watch me. I do not know if you will ever see it. That depends entirely on whether the potential I see in you is real, and not the product of a fond mother’s doting love. If you achieve that potential by the time you are seventeen, you shall receive this letter, and the crown that goes with it.

The crown has been a weapon in some legends, but it is not a weapon of power. It is a weapon of knowledge, always the stronger of the two, and of wisdom. It grants lucid dreams, dreams where the dreamer may play a troublesome situation over inside his head, and see what alternatives lie either way. Since the events happen only in the dreams, you may safely experiment with decisions that you would never make awake.

Do be careful, my dear. The crown offers a sense of safety not often found in this, our tumultuous life. There have been those who used it and simply became absorbed into their dreams, because there, nothing could hurt them. Do not let that happen to you. Use the crown circumspectly and at great need. Take risks when you must. If your ancestors had not sometimes taken risks, I would not exist, and the proud line of Black would not exist, and thus neither would you.

I hope that you may someday see this, that you do not fall short of my expectations.

*Your proud mother,
Narcissa Black Malfoy.*

Draco whistled quietly under his breath, and stared at the coronet. The Dreamer’s Crown. Yes, he had heard of it, and it hadn’t originally belonged to the Black line. It must have been stolen or won or traded long ago; in those days, the pureblood families had been too proud to buy such treasures.

Well, it was his now, and he would treat it with the reverence it deserved. Carefully, he settled it back in its box and started to cast warding spells around it. No one would steal it from him, or wear it without his permission.

Harry kept waiting for—something to happen. For someone to yell at him. For another letter to arrive saying the Ministry wanted him to take up another position that he didn't feel ready or qualified for. For Draco to change his mind and demand attention. Something.

But nothing like that appeared to be happening. No post had come for him that morning at all, and everyone else at the Slytherin table seemed interested in their own affairs. Currently, Draco was taunting Millicent; she had made several guesses about his birthday gift from his mother, and still hadn't approached the correct one. Millicent, who insisted that she must have guessed correctly a few minutes ago, was beginning to flush, while Draco looked more and more smug.

"Sausage," Argutus said, hanging around Harry's shoulder and sliding his head down the side of his neck. *"Remember the important things in life. One of the most important things in life is feeding your Omen snake sausage."*

"You realize that you don't even think they look like crickets anymore," Harry reminded him as he stabbed a piece of one with his fork and held it up for Argutus. The snake bolted it with a delicate combination of grace and haste.

"They don't," Argutus agreed. *"Now I enjoy them for the taste alone, for I am a more refined Omen snake than I was."* He turned his head and ran his tongue along the outer shell of Harry's ear. *"Did I tell you that I met another of my kind in the Forest the other day?"*

Harry blinked. "No."

"I did." Argutus wound his neck twice around Harry's, apparently just so that he could feel the warmth in the hollow of Harry's throat on his soft throat scales. *"I told her about you, and the castle, and how well-fed and cared for I am here. She has no human of her own, either wizard or Muggle. She was jealous."*

"You could have brought her into the castle and shared some of your food and luxuries with her," Harry ventured.

"No. They're mine." Argutus's neck seemed to swell a bit, and Harry realized he was bunching himself as if to coil around prey and crush it to death. That would have been impressive, except that he was rather coiled around *Harry* at the moment. Harry prodded at his scales to tell him so, and Argutus reluctantly loosened his hold a bit. *"I have a territory. All animals have territories; I have heard wizards say so in the wizard language. The castle is mine. Humans can be in it, and owls, and elves, and your Many cobra, and tasty rats. But not other Omen snakes."*

"Just because someone else says you have a territory doesn't mean you have to have one," Harry pointed out, struggling to hide a smile. It continually amused him that Argutus had managed to learn Latin but not English. "It might not actually be an instinct for your kind. In fact, I don't think it is. You choose your own companions, and you choose your own places to live. You could share the castle with someone else if you really wanted to."

"Don't want to." Argutus had never sounded so sulky in his life, Harry thought. *"Mine."* He tapped Harry's temple with his tail. *"Now make your poor, put-upon Omen snake feel better."*

Harry rolled his eyes, and followed the suggestion. And he realized, halfway through the series of comforting hisses that were mostly to appease Argutus's vanity, that he had relaxed, and nothing bad had happened, and they were sitting at the table and having a normal day like any other snake and his Parselmouth.

Lucius's gift came at noon.

Draco had expected that. He'd been born at sunset on the fifth of June in 1980. It would be like his parents to take the other positions of the sun during the day as their cue for sending presents. His mother's had come close to dawn, if not exactly at it. Though Draco had received a small host of cards and simple gifts, such as a roll of parchment from Millicent, throughout the day, his father would choose noon.

Three owls escorted it in through the Great Hall's window. Draco had just recovered from the magic holding his head in a vise, and blood still pounded in his temples, but since he'd guessed correctly about the delivery time of the gift, he'd had time to prepare. He stood to receive it, and ignored the murmurs from the tables. Other wizards and witches had turned seventeen this year and in years before, and they had received gifts like this. Other than for the few pureblood families who declared their coming of age at fifteen, this birthday was always a cause for lavish celebration.

The two magical construct owls vanished the moment Draco's hands touched the box. The real owl folded his wings and sat on

top with a hoot. Draco blinked. Lucius had sent Julius, the great horned owl he used for things like Harry's truce-dance gifts. It was an honor Draco hadn't expected, especially since his recent quarrel with his father. Lucius had done the bare minimum necessary to make sure the Malfoy estate passed on to the rightful heir. A gesture like this was above and beyond the bare minimum.

It also seemed Julius wouldn't let him have the gift until he was satisfied that Draco was worthy of it. He leaned forward, placing one of his talons on Draco's hand hard enough to draw blood, and staring at him with wise, fierce, yellow eyes.

Draco stared back, and kept himself from flinching or reacting in any way at all. He didn't know what Julius was looking for, so he would just have to let him see what was there.

It appeared to work. With a clap of wings and an almost silent leap, Julius wheeled and was gone through the window he'd come in by. Draco looked down and opened the carved wooden box.

Inside lay a knife. The blade had a curious edge, Draco thought at first, twisting and seeming to rise far too high above the blade, but then he picked it up, and realized the supposed edge was actually a shimmer of dark magic. Violent, corrupted magic, whether the original spell cast on the blade was Light or not. Draco hid his shiver. This was a knife made to kill things. It wasn't intelligent, but it didn't have to be. Everything from the rippled patterns in the steel to the uncompromising hilt—made of bone, and Draco knew it would be human bone—said so. It was a sculpted murder waiting to happen.

His father's note rested in the bottom of the box, explaining the gift, though Draco did not really need the note to know what it was. Only one kind of knife would look like this.

June 5th, 1997

My son:

Happy birthday, and congratulations on having achieved legal wizarding age with all the odds against you. I wish you health and happiness in the life you pursue, and if you are ever captured and have no hope of escape, I wish you an honorable death. This knife's edge will never dull. It will open your throat or your wrists without hesitation; if need be, if your hand shakes, it will guide itself to the cutting. Expect to feel a slight pain in your arm if you use it.

*Your father,
Lucius.*

Draco sighed and leaned back, eyes fastened on the knife. The knife could commit many murders, but only one Malfoy suicide. If Draco's own blood hit it, it would dissolve. But it would replenish itself, yanking on his arm bones to make itself a new hilt, drawing out the iron in his body to forge itself a new blade. Then a bit of Draco's own mind would lodge in it, the darkest and most violent part of himself, awakened when the new owner used it to commit murder.

Such a dark gift, father. But that you thought me worthy of it is—praiseworthy. Honorable. Not something I would have expected from you.

And that was probably the whole reason Lucius had sent it, Draco thought, as he placed the knife back in the box and closed it. To cause him to think about what *Lucius* had done. Most things his father did came back to himself, in the end.

"Are you all right?"

Harry's hand on his shoulder and Harry's voice in his ear were just what he needed, then, though he wouldn't have asked. He briefly leaned back against him and nodded. "Just fine."

He was aware, though Harry wouldn't be, of the judging eyes of some pureblood children in the Hall. He sat down afterwards and ate his lunch, and knew they were watching him do it.

He ate every bite, calmly and without once stopping or glancing at the wooden box beside him that contained the knife.

Harry glanced sideways, started a bit, and blinked.

Well. There's something I didn't think I'd ever see. Draco falling asleep in Arithmancy.

Harry knew it was most likely the fault of the magic humming through Draco's body, but it was still funny. Draco was sprawled across his desk, his head bowed at an angle that would make his neck hurt like fury when he woke up, and one arm half-folded around his face, as if to cover up the equations he was working on from prying eyes. His other arm hung off the desk, trembling a little. That could have been from the force of his snores, Harry thought, laughter bubbling up, or from the magic working up and down beneath his skin, preparing his body for the burst that would occur at sunset.

He tried to force down his amusement, and then remembered what Draco had said to him. *A normal day. I can feel amused if I want. It's funny.*

Even funnier was the expression on Professor Vector's face when she came up behind Draco. "Mr. Malfoy," she said, a little louder than strictly necessary. Or maybe a little softer than strictly necessary, Harry thought, given that Draco didn't stir. Harry had to muffle a snicker.

The professor gave him a narrow-eyed glance. Harry bent innocently over his equations, and worked innocently on them, like a good little student who didn't fall asleep in class.

"Mr. Malfoy," Vector said, and that did it. Draco sat up abruptly, blinking, and several people in the back of the room laughed aloud, though of course they'd stopped and were working on their equations as innocently as Harry by the time the professor turned around. Draco felt at his mussed hair, and his flushed cheeks, and blushed, further making him look ruffled.

"I expect you for detention tomorrow at seven-o'clock, Mr. Malfoy," said Vector sternly. "Ten points from Slytherin." She turned and stalked away with massive dignity, to try to find people who were not so innocent as all that.

Millicent, sitting behind Draco, groaned under her breath. Harry knew why. They were in a close race for the House Cup with Hufflepuff, and the loss of ten points might be enough to let it slip through their fingers.

Draco slid a furious glare at her, then glanced sideways at Harry, face turning thoughtful. Harry blinked, wondering if he was going to cast a jinx because Harry hadn't awakened him.

Instead, Draco just smiled, slightly, and then turned back to his equations, and Harry finally realized that Draco had meant it when he said that he wanted Harry to feel normal, and that he wouldn't scold him for those emotions.

It took a long time, and the presence of Professor Vector sweeping past, before Harry could look innocent again. He was tasting joy too strongly and sweetly.

Sunset came.

Draco knew when it happened, even if no one else in the castle did. He had been born at the exact moment of sunset, as his mother had told him over and over again. So his magic coalesced and came together, carving the final pathways, when the exact seventeenth anniversary of his birthday rolled along.

And that was as dinner was served, with the red and orange light streaming over the chattering students.

Draco felt it beginning to build. Strands of magic coiled and drifted in through his ears and his mind, as though they had been floating about loose in the Great Hall and were attracted to him. In reality, he knew, this was all his own power, tugged away from the usual parts of his body where it resided. It slid into his chest, and then lower, pooling in his solar plexus. It was pleasant and unpleasant at the same time, as though he had eaten too large and too good a meal and was now struggling to contain the fullness.

He bent over the table, and felt Harry rubbing comforting circles on his back. As if jolted into life by that, other magic reached to him from outside and hummed in his ears. He could feel his connections to the wards of Malfoy Manor and other Malfoy properties, which were usually dormant unless he specifically called on them.

"Step back now, Harry," he did manage to gasp, when it felt as if he were about to grow wings.

Harry did, just as a soundless burst of light and heat flared around Draco.

For the first time in his life, *all* his magic was available to him at once. Draco gasped and shook his head, and reveled in the

feeling of it, power piled on power. No, it was not as much as someone like Harry or Snape or Henrietta Bulstrode possessed, but he was no slouch, and enough above average to content him. If someone challenged him to a duel, he could put up a stiff battle. He could defend his properties; the wards would obey him, even against his father, thanks to the passing-on Lucius had done. His possession gift shone in his head like a star, and for the first time, Draco was absolutely certain it was a combination of Malfoy empathy and Black compulsion; he could feel the separate components of the magic like two hemispheres of a brain.

The glorious moment passed soon enough. Draco sighed in the wake of it. He could *definitely* see why most wizards chose to celebrate the seventeenth birthday as the legal coming of age.

“Congratulations, Draco,” Harry said loudly, and held out his hand. Draco managed to stand and clasp it with a firm shake.

The other Slytherins came over to welcome him then, and some of those students from other Houses who had already attained their proper age. Even Connor caught his eye and winked at him from the Gryffindor table, though it wouldn’t have been appropriate for him to talk to Draco unless he was an adult himself. Which he manifestly *wasn’t*, Draco thought smugly.

Snape raised his goblet in toast from the high table, though he looked pale and tired. The Headmistress and Professor Vector, as well as Professor Sinistra, whose Astronomy classes Draco continued to excel in, nodded to him.

He stretched once, and then settled himself back into place, smiling at Harry. “Imagine what your seventeenth birthday will be like,” he murmured.

Harry looked startled, and let Draco see it. That alone was precious. “I don’t think anything like this will happen,” he said doubtfully. “Jing-Xi has told me that Lord-level wizards are different most of the time anyway, and I’ve already come to my full magical power thanks to—everything. I think, if anything, that birthday will just confirm what I already know. Perhaps unfold my magic a bit more. I don’t think so.” He shook his head, and then looked across the room. “But I am interested in seeing what will happen to Connor.”

Draco shoved him. “I think I’ll be more powerful than he will.”

Harry rolled his eyes and turned to dig back into his meal. “I hope for my sake that you’re equal. Then I might have some peace.”

Draco ate some more of his own meal before he responded. The magic had swept through him, and changed him, but he no longer thought it had altered his mind. This normal day had just been something he wanted to have, and he had come up with the idea all on his own. That pleased him.

“Harry?”

“Hmmm?” Harry glanced over at him. Argutus cocked his head, too, though Draco knew he couldn’t really understand the conversation; he did seem to recognize Harry’s name when spoken.

“Sleep with me tonight?”

“Of course.”

Draco shook his head. “I didn’t mean it that way. I mean—just sleep. Lie in my arms, and relax together.” He made an apologetic gesture meant to take in his back, his chest, the whole hollowed-out mess of him. “I don’t think I’m in the mood for anything more vigorous.”

Harry studied him in silence for a long moment. And then his face softened, and he gave Draco a smile that was so normal it made Draco want to crow in sheer delight.

“I’d like that,” he said quietly. “Yes.”

He turned back to his meal, and Draco turned back to his. Sometimes, he thought, the Light might have a good idea or two. They had certainly hit on one when they chose to adopt honesty as a standard.

His hand reached out, to find Harry’s waiting for it. Their fingers intertwined, and that was, for now, quite enough.

~*~*~*~*

Interlude: The Liberator's Eleventh Letter

June 5th, 1997

Dear Minister Scrimgeour:

It's done. It's done, and there will be only a few moments between the time when I cast this letter into the wind and the time when I can leave this place for good and ever.

Well. I suppose it might not be for good and ever. I'll probably still see my parents at times. But I won't live here again, and that—and having my freedom at last—is really all that I need to content me.

I suppose it would be a bit strange to say that I consider you a friend, wouldn't it? But I do. Even though you haven't been able to reply except for a few lines in public speeches and that one botched raid (which I am still embarrassed at myself for causing, by the way), I do feel that I know you. You've been someone who listened to me, and there are few times in my life when that's happened. I seem to have become trapped into a larger cycle of not only not doing what I want, but believing that I'll never be able to do so. You've broken that for me, and I thank you.

This is—

In a short while, I'll be at the Ministry. In a moment, I'll Apparate. This is the culmination of so many months of waiting that I can hardly believe this day is finally here. End of spring, beginning of summer. Oh, in so many ways!

I can't wait to look into your face, Minister, and be able to tell you what it means to me, that my long imprisonment is ended at last. Thank you for giving me a sense of purpose and courage in these last few months.

I fly!

Yours,
The Liberator.

~*~*~*~*

Intermission: In Readiness

He Apparated calmly to his Lord's side that night. He knew what the Dark Lord would say to him, every word planned out, every dance step smooth. He did not need to be fearful or worried any longer. The arrangements had been made.

He appeared in the Riddle house, but this was a room he had never seen before. After a few moments of gazing about him, Severus understood. He was in Voldemort's inner sanctum, an honor that only Bellatrix, among all the Death Eaters, had received before—and then not for any special merit, as he had, but simply because her mad loyalty was beyond question.

The walls were smooth and black, Transfigured into cool stone. Warming charms glittered here and there along the stone, though, brightening and then fading, and Severus understood their purpose—to provide a warm spot for Nagini, and the other snakes that his Lord had collected about him, to rest. The floor was smooth and raspy beneath his feet, paved with either scales or a material not far from it. The chair that stood in the middle of the room flowed into a twisting ramp halfway down the seat, to provide an easy resting place for either snake or man. Or someone like the Dark Lord, Severus thought as he went to one knee and bowed his head, who was both.

“Arise, my child.”

His Lord's vibrant voice made the walls shake. Severus stood again at once, feeling the deep thrill of pleasure within when his Lord spoke his name. Yes, he had expected it, as he had expected everything about this night, but it was still wonderful. Yes, wonderful was the word for it. His Lord was the one who had taught him to appreciate his first name again, and the man who called himself Severus now and had called himself Snape in the past had never been so grateful for it.

Voldemort stretched out a pale hand, and a shimmer of magic rose above it, growing. Severus stretched his own hands out, warming them before the shimmer as he would before a fire. His Lord had been drinking magic from Mudblood children and recalcitrant purebloods. He was a wildfire, a roaring glow of strength that would draw support from every wizarding community across the world in the end. It could not help but be so. The magic filled Severus's senses, and he swayed a bit, drunk.

“You have many griefs, my child,” the Dark Lord murmured, as Severus had known he would say.

“Yes, my Lord.” His words glided around and around him like the whisper of newly hatched vipers.

“And not least of all is your grief against Albus Dumbledore.”

“Yes, my Lord.” *Yess, yess, yess*, hissed his words, as they vanished and died.

“You hate him for retaining the Marauders in school when he should have expelled them and sheltered you, because you were the one who had almost died.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“You hate him for refusing to accept and shelter you when you spied against me. He insisted that you place your life in danger for him each day, and he had the arrogance to imagine that his precious Light had redeemed you, that you joined the Order of the Phoenix for him and not to survive.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“You hate him for the insults and patronizing air he has inflicted on you since, including speaking your name when you never gave him permission to do so.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“You hate him for continuing to favor the spawn of James Potter and the adult Marauders even now. You hate him because you know he mourns the deaths of James and Lily Potter in a way that he would never mourn for you, who gave so much to him and to his cause.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“My child, my dear one, my serpent, my Potions Master, my Severus...” Voldemort’s eyes flashed. The air all around Severus turned a dull and shimmering red, the color of old blood.

“I give the honor of the kill to you.”

Severus slowly opened his eyes. He felt more relaxed and satisfied yet than he had from one of these dreams. It was almost enough to cause him to wonder if they might be erotic in nature, but no, he did not think so. They refreshed his mind as well as his body, instead of leaving him in a state of lethargy.

And if they brought up old hatreds, as well, and floated them in the surface of his mind—well, what could it hurt to imagine them? Albus was dead, and disgraced. Sirius Black was dead, James Potter in prison, the werewolf beyond his vengeance. He had made his peace with Peter Pettigrew. He might remember the wrongs of the past and use them to strengthen himself so long as he did not dwell on them.

He gazed on the shimmering potions in the cauldrons near the wall, and gave a slow, assessing nod to himself. Yes, they were ready whenever he wished to use them. Perhaps he could convince Harry to take the silver potion today.

Today. In readiness.

The thoughts seemed to slide through his mind like blasts of wind, leaving it fresh and clean and—ready.

He pulled on his robes, absently caressed his left forearm, and swept out of his office to begin the day.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ninety-Three: Slytherin and Gryffindor

Harry rounded the corner cautiously. He relaxed when he saw Snape striding ahead of him, not yet returned to his office after dinner. He’d wanted to catch him before Snape could bury himself in essays and resent an interruption.

Once, you would have known that he wished to be interrupted. He was the one who wanted to see you, who didn't mind putting aside essays for a while if it meant that you and he would talk.

And it might still be that way, Harry answered the voice back determinedly, but they had a few rugs to shake out between them first.

“Sir?” he asked.

Snape froze ahead of him, and then swung around. Harry took a step back at the look on his face, and then realized it wasn't really angry, just still, as if he had caught Snape in the middle of a deep thought. And, of course, when he didn't have a specific emotion filling his face, Snape tended to look angry.

Harry forced welcome into his voice. “Sir, I was wondering if I could speak to you. I know that we didn't find anything in your memories about what might have caused that lapse last time, but this time I have my own Pensieve.” He nodded to the one floating behind him. “It's spelled with that magic Draco invented, which lets someone put a memory into the Pensieve and share a mindset. I might be able to learn why you did what you did if I can wear the emotions and the perspective that you wore at that moment. Will you let me?”

Snape stood as if listening, head cocked to one side. Then he murmured, “I do want to know why that happened, Harry. However, I insist on one condition that I want fulfilled if we look into my memories.”

Just one? I can do that easily enough. And I think I even know what it is. “All right,” Harry agreed, happiness bursting in the center of his chest. “Is it that I call you Severus? I can do that.”

He awoke.

It was the name that did it, of course, the name *Severus* being the name of the secret part of him, the part that *knew* he was half-pureblood and different from the other children around him, the part that was intelligent and showed it and was taken advantage of for it, the part that hated Albus Dumbledore and Minerva and all the rest for daring to use his first name when he hadn't given them permission.

Severus was who he was, the man who served his Lord. *Snape*, also called *sir*, also called *professor*, was the mortal coil he shuffled on over that, the dry skin that would provide his anonymity as he glided through the halls of the school like a snake not yet ready to shed.

His Lord had told him to remember his name, to learn to take pride and pleasure in it again, and rejoice.

His Lord was right.

Severus knew what he had to do. His Lord had told him he would know when the time was right, and he did. He gazed at the Potter brat standing in front of him, messy black hair and James's hazel eyes, and he had the strongest urge to strike the boy down as he had his father. But no, that could not happen, not now. His Lord wanted the boy to torture and maim and harm and kill before the wizarding world's gaze. If Severus slew him here, in a deserted corridor away from prying eyes, there would always be rumors that he had escaped and lived on to provide a hope for the Light. *Everyone* must see him die.

But there was another whose presence was legend, and necessary to the fulfillment of the prophecy, but whom everyone would believe was dead without that kind of prompting. There was another Severus hated, whose kill the Dark Lord had promised to him in reward for being a faithful servant.

Albus.

The Potter brat had asked for private time alone together to practice Occlumency; so said the Pensieve floating behind him. Severus kept his voice soft and regretful. “Alas. I've just remembered that I must go to the Headmaster's office. An appointment to keep.”

The boy looked at him with something like concern written on his face. “Is that another lapse, Severus?” he asked, and the name rolled deep into his head, awakening other memories, echoes, moments of being true to himself that he had not had in the last little while, or only widely-separated and scattered. Albus had cast a spell on him, he thought, to keep the part of himself that severed his Lord asleep. Well, he was awake now, and he would remember that spell, and if he felt the numbness returning with

the name “sir” or “Snape” or “professor,” he would make every effort to combat it.

“Another memory lapse?” Because of course the Potter brat was nosy, and would have thought that he noticed something wrong when Severus was himself and not the bitter Potions teacher who lived night and day next to the man he hated and could not even claim his revenge. He saw the boy nod. He softened his voice. He could be good with children if he wanted to be. He could act like *anything* if he wanted to. “It could be. I promise, we’ll use the Pensieve when I return. For now, though, I want to hurry on. The appointment promises nothing good.”

“McGonagall’s going to yell at you, probably,” said the boy, and gave him a rueful smile. “She does that.”

Severus was quickly growing disgusted with what his sleeping self had done. Acting friendly around the Potter brat to dispel the idea that he was a spy had been wise; *actually* befriending him was not. But he would have to maintain the façade for a little longer, until he could recover the memories of what he had done when acting as Snape. And he would have to hold to the boy’s strange fantasy that anyone other than Albus carried Hogwarts. *Minerva! She will never have the chance to ascend to power. When Albus dies, the school will fall apart, and have to be closed.*

Which was rather the reason that his Lord had agreed to let him kill Albus in the first place. He understood how much Severus wanted his vengeance, how the hatred swam in his veins and beat in his heart and filled them to fullness, but he would never let such a major kill happen *only* for vengeance, or to honor a faithful servant. The Dark Lord knew what would follow in the wake of Dumbledore’s passing, the despair that would spread like a miasma around the world. The Light would lose its leader, and so would the Order of the Phoenix, even if most of the wizarding world didn’t know of the prophecy’s existence.

“She does,” he agreed with the Potter boy, which cost him nothing, and made a short bow. “In an hour, then.”

Connor Potter nodded at him and turned away, the Pensieve floating behind him. Severus was a little surprised at the strength of the Levitation Charm around it, but of course Potter had trained behind wards a long way from the rest of the wizarding world, and was less than two months away from his seventeenth birthday—a birthday he would never see. He had had a chance to grow stronger in his magic.

Severus turned for his office.

A few moments later, he left it. Two vials, one full of purple potion and one silver, rode in his robe pocket. The third vial was open in his hand, and, gently, Severus coated the base of the dungeon corridors’ walls with his green potion. Any Slytherins who served the Dark Lord, who had given their allegiance where it belonged, were already safely out of the school.

Minerva was more than slightly surprised when the gargoyle leaped aside and her wards on the moving staircase informed her that Severus was on his way up. She had planned on spending an hour alone with some tea and the latest series of demands the school governors had sent around, which happened every year when they were feeling ignored. But Severus rarely visited her unless it was urgent. That meant a problem in Slytherin House, a matter for the Deputy Headmaster to discuss with the Headmistress, or, perhaps, a personal question, which might have to do with his memory lapses. It was not a problem with a recalcitrant student; gossip traveled fast in Hogwarts, and Minerva had heard all the latest horror stories of Potions classes already.

She put her teacup gently aside, and nodded to Godric, who had appeared next to the desk. He usually offered suggestions about what to do with the school governors’ parchments that Minerva might have adopted if she were also a shade and had no accountability to the living world. “Stay invisible, if you would,” she said. “I think Severus may be talking about something important to him, near the center of his ego, and your presence would harm his openness.”

Godric rolled his eyes to show what he thought of that, but faded back into the wall. Minerva sat upright as the expected knock sounded. “Come in!”

Severus strode in. After a glance at his face, Minerva revised her estimate. *A problem in Slytherin House, with a student he does not particularly like.* He would not have worn that expression of dark glee if he were coming to talk to her about the memory lapses. He would be defensive instead, resenting the necessity of the visit even as he made it, taut and prickly and snapping like a hedgehog.

“Please sit down, Severus,” she said, and waved her wand to conjure up a second teacup. “Tea?”

“Please,” he said, voice a tad deeper than usual, and took the chair in front of her desk. Minerva snorted to herself. *Yes, a student*

he really does not like. He is never polite unless he has something to gain from it or he is so cheerful that he does not care about the effort it costs him.

The teacup appeared, and Minerva carefully conjured tea into it. She was trying to make less use of house elf services herself, in hope of slowly weaning Hogwarts from them altogether. That would take years, but a little practice never hurt. Besides, she was a mistress of Transfiguration. She should be able to make tea out of lint if she wanted to.

She felt a brief, blurring sensation, and thought she heard Severus cast a spell. But when she glanced up from the carefully-poured tea, he still sat on the other side of the desk, with a small smile on his face. She slid his tea across to him and picked up her own, taking a sip.

The tea itself was warm, but ice seemed to reach out from it, spanning her mind with frozen bridges, spilling coldness through her lungs and her limbs. She sagged back against her chair, and felt her mind wander.

Severus's heart beat as if it pumped excitement instead of blood. It had worked. The slight time-delaying charm, which was not a common spell even among the Death Eaters, had let him lean past Albus and slip the silver potion, the liquid Imperius, into his teacup. Now the Headmaster leaned back in his chair, his blue eyes unfocused, his mouth that had spoken the name "Severus" and driven him further into hatred hanging open.

"Now," said Severus softly, drawing out the second vial of potion from his robe pocket, the purple one, "you *will* do what I tell you."

"Yes," said Albus's voice, so breathy that it sounded like a woman's, like Minerva's. Severus snorted at the impossible thought. Next he would believe what the Potter brat told him, that Minerva was in charge of Hogwarts.

"What I wish of you," said Severus, holding out the vial, "is to drink this."

The purple potion smelled foul, as it was meant to, and was full of a dozen substances that made it one of the deadliest poisons ever to exist, as it was meant to be. Severus had worked on it for almost a year, from the moment he had begun to dream most intensely. He thought he had a right to be proud of it.

Albus reached out, accepted the vial, and tilted the poison down his throat without a blink.

Severus could not contain his triumphant laughter, and he saw no reason to do so. The wards on the Headmaster's office would prevent anyone else from hearing him, anyway.

"It will not kill you quickly," he told the Headmaster, the man who had caused him so much pain and so much strife. "It will give you such pain as you have never known. As you writhe in the chair, remember that you should have chosen the side of Slytherin for *once* in your deluded life. It's the fault of your golden Gryffindors that this happened. If you had, just *once*, ever offered a miserable child some comfort, then I would not have hated you so much."

Merlin, he could feel the hatred. It dripped through his veins like blackest swamp water, curdling and turning his blood brackish. The only comfort for it was watching Albus's body jerk in convulsions as he began to suffer the first wave of the potion's effects. A moment later, he began to scream hoarsely, weakly.

Severus nodded in satisfaction. His dreaming self had tried to give the silver potion to the Potter brat, and indeed, that had been his Lord's plan at one time. But it had gone awry, and it was unlikely now that Connor Potter would accept anything from Severus's hand without asking many inconvenient questions first. This was better. Turn the Headmaster's trust against him, and he would die.

He started to rise to his feet, and something cold went through him. Severus turned in alarm. The one thing he had not planned for was that a ghost would be here, Peeves or the Bloody Baron perhaps. The wards on the Headmaster's office were supposed to keep them out.

It was not a ghost that wheeled past him, but a shade. A Founder's shade, Godric Gryffindor. Severus hissed, his hatred for all Gryffindors running so high at that moment as to prompt him to reach for his wand.

But the shade dived through the floor, aiming, it seemed, in the direction of the dungeons. Severus let go of his wand, slowly. Perhaps the shades had gone senile with the amount of time they spent bound to the school. It was beyond him what help Godric

Gryffindor thought to find in Slytherin, especially now that the green potion would be working and most of them would be incapable of helping anyone.

Still. It was not good to linger here, even though he had wanted to watch Albus's death as the convulsions broke his ribs one by one, and other, worse things happened to him. With one final regretful glance towards the Headmaster's desk—Albus had fallen off his chair, and lay on the floor—he turned towards the top of the school and the final point his Lord had wanted him to make before Severus joined him.

“*What is that?*”

Harry glanced up from his Transfiguration essay. He knew how to conjure chocolate; that did not mean he knew how to explain the theory behind it, and he was grateful for the distraction Argutus seemed intent on giving him. “What is what?”

“*That.*” Argutus's tongue darted out, and he unwound most of his body from Harry's trunk, where he liked to stay. “*Something is wrong. Look at my scales.*” He heaved his coils up towards Harry.

Harry stared. There was a blurry green image moving in the Omen snake's mirrored scales, something strange happening right at that moment. He didn't know what to make of it, though. The image looked like nothing so much as a picture of swamp gas or a cloud of foxfire.

“*And there is a strange smell, too,*” Argutus added, darting his tongue out again and swaying back and forth.

Alarmed, Harry put down his quill. Draco was in the loo, letting him have unimpeded access to reach out with his magic. He found nothing wrong in the Slytherin common room. There were students dozing before the fire or doing homework, their magic at a low ebb this late in the evening. There was the old magic of the common room door, dozing until it felt the tug of the password. There were the castle's wards. There was—

Harry's eyes flared open. *Magic moving in the corridors.* And when he lifted his head and squinted, he could see tiny tendrils of green floating near the ceiling, so faint that he would have missed them if not for Argutus's warning.

Abruptly, his throat grew tight. He tried to draw in air, and couldn't do it. Argutus asked him something in a worried voice, but Harry, his panic building, couldn't spare the necessary attention to translate the Parseltongue.

And then he heard somebody collapse in the loo.

Perhaps if he had been alone, the panic would have won. But with Draco in danger, his temper burst free, and with it his magic. Harry held his palms apart and shot his power out like a net, aiming straight for the foreign feel of the green magic, which was subtle as smoke and not as powerful as a spell. A potion, probably. Harry grabbed every single bit of it he could find, not trying to swallow it, because he didn't know what the effect would be, but churning the air and using wind to crowd the potion fumes together into one deserted corridor and away from their probable victims.

His own throat released, and he took in air with a trembling gasp. Then he stood and staggered towards the loo, Argutus coming after him and demanding over and over again, in a voice that made him sound very young, to know what was going on.

He found Draco blue in the face, but when he half-collapsed next to his partner, Draco's chest was still moving. Harry leaned down and huffed air into him anyway, making sure it was clean. Draco coughed and sat up. His eyes were glassy, but he was obviously alive, and his magic flared up in him brightly to Harry's extended senses.

“What happened?” Draco whispered.

“Magic from a potion, I think,” said Harry grimly, and then turned his attention to containing the green fumes. His power raced probing through the dungeons, taking the form of small whirlwinds and shying from interaction with Hogwarts's wards, but found no more fumes above a certain level of the stairs. Harry clenched his hands in wordless thanks. The potion had been meant as a trap for the Slytherins, then, and though eventually it would have risen to infect the whole castle, Harry had managed to stop it before it got out of the dungeons. He herded the excess green fumes into the side corridor with his whirlwinds, and contained them behind a powerful ward.

“And the others?” Draco had given him a once-over, and was now moving towards their bedroom door.

Harry followed him swiftly. He heard coughing and sleepy exclamations of protest in the Slytherin common room, but everyone he looked at was alive. They would have to check the bedrooms, though.

Harry felt anger building in him. *What was this? A prank? Even if it was only meant to send us to sleep, asphyxiation is no laughing matter. If I find out the Weasley twins had a hand in this, or the Gryffindors did and Connor knew about it—*

A hand snatched at him, half-solid and half not. Harry staggered, then turned to catch his breath. Perhaps this had been Peeves' work, and he could confront the poltergeist now. Harry was in a foul mood, enough to rend the ghost apart with his magic.

Instead, he saw Godric Gryffindor, the shade of the Founder bound to an anchor-stone in the school's foundations, hovering anxiously next to him. "You must come!" he insisted. "Minerva's been poisoned by your Head of House, and none of us know enough about potions to counteract it."

Harry stared at him for a long moment. He wanted to protest, to say that Snape would never do anything like that, but he remembered the memory lapses, and he remembered the silver potion held in his hand the day before yesterday when Connor intervened, and he remembered his feeling that the green fumes had come from a potion—

His heart squeezed like a fist breaking an egg.

Please. No. Do not say he has served Voldemort all this time. No.

He rejected that notion wildly. But he also didn't disbelieve Godric, that McGonagall had been poisoned, and whether it was Snape or someone Polyjuiced to look like him, she needed help.

"I'm coming," he promised, and began to run. He heard Draco shout, and then, apparently giving up on shouting, pound right behind him. Godric swooped next to him like an anxious owl. People called questions as he ran through the common room, but Harry did not care.

"What did the potion look like?" he demanded of Godric as they came out into the dungeon corridors.

"Purple," said Godric, unhelpfully. "It smelled foul."

I know—Snape had a purple poison, one that he was playing with while we were still in the Sanctuary—

But again Harry cut himself off from the line of thought that would make him scream if Snape was a traitor. What was important was that he save the Headmistress's life. He did not think there was an antidote to Snape's new poison—certainly he'd never seen Snape brew one—and so he would have to fight it with another means, the only one that worked on all poisons. He held out a hand in the direction of the Potions store cupboard and threw all his magic into the spell he performed next.

"*Accio bezoar!*"

He heard doors bang and wood tear and stone shred as the bezoar soared towards him. He snatched it out of the air and silently promised Snape he would replace the broken cupboards and smashed potions later.

If there is a later. If he has not betrayed us all.

They ran, then, or at least Harry and Draco ran, with Godric floating beside them. Harry's thoughts rose and fell in waves with his feet even as they ascended the stairs out of the dungeon, even as the gargoyle moved aside for them, even as they leaped up the moving staircase to the Headmistress's office two steps at a time. When he lifted his foot, he thought of Snape, and what his memory lapses meant, and whether he had poisoned McGonagall of his own free will or not; when his foot fell he thought of Draco, stubbornly keeping up with him, and how he could convince him to stay behind and out of danger when Harry went to confront Snape.

Did he lay down that green potion along the corridors for me? Did he mean to insure that I wouldn't be in any position to help McGonagall by the time she started to die?

"Here, here, here!" Godric blew through the door to the office, forgetting for a moment that Harry and Draco were solid and would need to open it.

"Go warn the other professors," Harry commanded the Founder's shade, knocking the door open with a blast of his shoulder and his magic, both. "They'll need to know what happened, and that any of them are in danger if they meet Snape. Besides, there's

nothing you can do here.”

“I’ll go,” said Rowena Ravenclaw, stepping around the desk. She had been beside McGonagall, Harry deduced, and hurried towards her. “Since Godric is too worried to concentrate, and Helga is already raising her House.” She stretched her arms over her head and dived into the floor like a fish into water.

McGonagall looked horrible. Already her robe was soaked with blood, and Harry thought she had broken ribs from the convulsions. Her eyes were glassy, and she gasped and choked, and her face had broken out into enormous, pus-dripping blisters. Harry was glad again for Lily’s training in that moment, which had enabled him to see worse sights and survive them.

He fell to his knees beside her, pried open her jaw, and nearly lost a finger to her teeth as it snapped shut again. He growled, and his magic spread into his hand, lending him the strength to hold her mouth still as he plunged the bezoar down her throat.

He felt the moment when the stone’s power counteracted the poison as a start and stutter of steps. Suddenly the purple potion had to hesitate, and flow backward, reluctantly leaving McGonagall’s limbs and torso and blood as the waves of healing spread outward from the lodged bezoar. Harry kept his eyes fastened to the fluttering of the pulse in the Headmistress’s throat, and saw it slow, then begin to beat strongly once more. The bezoar had won the battle. Harry had to close his eyes and let out a deep breath, then. He had not been sure it would. If any Potions Master could brew a poison strong enough to resist the most powerful magical remedy, it would be Snape.

If he brewed it. If that was him. If he’s a traitor.

And now there was no healing to be done, nothing that stood between Harry and finding out exactly what the fuck had happened to Snape.

He sat back, and nodded to Godric. “Fetch Madam Pomfrey. She’ll live, but she needs care for her ribs, and for her heart.” He remembered Madam Pomfrey arguing with McGonagall once about having a weak heart. The poison would probably have attacked that, seeking to exploit any weakness in its victim’s body.

Godric nodded once, and vanished. Harry closed his eyes and reached out, seeking the familiar feeling of Snape’s magic. He knew him, he could sense him, he knew him among all the other different, existing blazes of the students’ and professors’ magic

—
Yes, he knew him. And he knew where Snape was, he could feel it, and there wasn’t any reason for him to be there at this time of night. Harry swallowed, and stood.

Draco was there, catching his shoulders, staring into his eyes. “Wherever you’re going, I’m coming with you,” he said.

Harry didn’t have time to argue about it right now. If worst came to worst, he would shut Draco out of the confrontation with Snape so that he couldn’t be used as a hostage, but he didn’t even know that this was Snape, yet.

If the world loves me at all, if fate is not entirely cruel, it will not be.

So Harry merely gave a sharp nod, and then turned, speeding towards the feeling of Snape’s magic, speeding towards the Astronomy Tower.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ninety-Four: Triple-Edged Blade: First Cut

Indigena wished she could see, wished she could hear. Her Lord lay motionless in a corner of his throne room, and reached out with his mind to cause havoc and sow destruction in the minds of his enemies. He was *moving*, at last, and Indigena would have liked to be able to share his vision as his plans began to bear fruit.

But she had her own task, and she was glad of that, too, glad in a different way. She would finally be free of the enforced stillness that had enveloped her. Reading books, crouching in burrows, using parchment as a weapon—it had all taken too long for one part of her soul, despite her understanding that they could have not moved earlier.

She spent one more moment gazing at her dreaming Lord, then closed her eyes and Apparated.

Severus stood on top of the Astronomy Tower. He had finished enlarging the Dark Mark so that it hung over the school as a malignant, glittering thing. No one in Hogsmeade would miss it, and it might even be visible across the whole of Scotland.

Idly, Severus wondered if Muggles would see it. Then he snorted. *Better for them if they do. It will help them prepare for the coming of their new Lord.*

The night was full of green fire, outside him and inside him. He had killed one man who had been the target of his wrath and hatred for more than two decades, but there were others. His Lord had promised him the werewolf, had promised him Peter Pettigrew. His Lord was determined to punish the Light for daring to oppose him, and in particular those people who had surrounded and loved Harry Potter and pinned their hopes on him, but hadn't had the sense to give up when he was killed. Lupin and Pettigrew had both loved Harry. They were among the victims whose torture the Dark Lord would draw out, though not as long as Connor Potter's.

Severus stroked his wand, and smiled, while the green light of the Dark Mark traveled over him like the light of shooting stars. *That silver potion I invented to poison werewolves would be a good start for Lupin. But I will need something more than that. I wonder if I might find a spell that mimics the full moon, and put myself in control of his transformation? True, none of the ones invented thus far are reliable, but I could create one that was. Or a potion—*

“Snape!”

The sound of the hated name made him swing, snarling. The Potter brat was just coming out of the top turn of the staircase, the green light catching red highlights in his dark hair, his eyes wide and staring. He halted with one foot still on the staircase, and gazed at him with a face full of outrage and betrayal.

Severus laughed. “What is it, Potter?” he asked. “Disappointed to know my true allegiance?” He felt the glee in him growing. His Lord would not mind if he taunted the boy, or even maimed him, so long as the maiming did not make the torture Voldemort had planned impossible. “Sad to learn the true identity of the man who killed your Headmaster, who killed your parents, who betrayed and killed your elder brother, after so long?” He cast a lazy curse at the boy, one that would slap him back and cause him only a little less pain than the words could—a weak curse, actually, but one that the boy would have needed trained power, not merely strength, to block.

Harry was close enough to see Snape's eyes.

Close enough to see the glint of red in them, to see the way they shone with the light of the Dark Mark, to see their darkness tainted by surging malevolence and hatred.

Voldemort has done this to him. Voldemort is in possession of him.

And when Snape turned towards him at his call, Harry could see his left sleeve swing back from the Dark Mark, and he fought the temptation to close his eyes and be sick all over the stones.

The Dark Mark. It hurt him, sometimes, in the Sanctuary. Was Voldemort in his head, trying to control his dreams, even then?

Then Snape began to spout that nonsense about having killed the Headmaster, and his parents, and his elder brother, and Harry could only stare at him in astonishment. *He thinks I'm Connor. Whatever delusion Voldemort's put him into, it's deep.*

A curse came flying towards him. Harry called up a wandless *Protego* without even thinking and deflected it off to the side. He was still studying Snape, still thinking. *It's as though Voldemort's put him into another reality. I know the Sanctuary dreams allowed him to relive the past, and after a certain point in time he stopped remembering them. Perhaps that was when Voldemort's dreams began. And no wonder we couldn't find anything with the Pensive and Legilimency, if he buried himself that deep. And used the connection through the Dark Mark, too. That's probably how he got around the hole in his magical core. If he sends the magic through pieces of his power lodged in other bodies, he's not pulling it into the center of his body where it can drain out again. He makes the Death Eaters into other bodies for him, hands and feet.*

Snape made a low noise. Harry glanced up and met his eyes, and saw confusion peering through the tangled hatred.

And conviction, born perhaps of hope, born perhaps of delusion of his own, came to him as on the wings of a storm.

I can still win him back. Break his delusion, force him to see me, and I may be able to break Voldemort's control.

But it will be delicate. No one can interrupt.

Harry raised wards on the staircase behind him, a wall of solid power that no one would be able to pass or break. He heard Draco's cry, and the impact of a fist on what sounded like wood. Harry didn't glance behind him. He took a step forward, eyes fastened on Snape's face.

"Sir," he said.

Severus did not understand. The Potter brat was not that powerful. He *knew* he was not that powerful. The prophecy said he could not be. Someone stronger was supposed to stand at his shoulder, acting as a guide and a guardian. At one point that would have been Harry, at another Albus, but both of them were dead. Severus could not be facing such power, not here and not now.

Besides, the Potter brat would not have contented himself with deflecting his curse and then speaking to him in a low, soothing voice—calling him by title, even, as if he respected him! Connor Potter would scream and lunge with his wand out, cursing Severus for a filthy traitor all the way.

It was almost as if Harry stood there instead.

But it was not so, because it could not be so. Severus had been awake when he saw Harry die.

He thought.

Memories writhed and twisted in his head. For a moment, his dreaming self, the one called by "Snape" and "sir," fought to awaken. For a moment, he did not know what was falsehood and what was reality.

But then he recalled his hatred. That was real, the one thing he had to cling to, while Harry, when alive, had tried to entice him to his side with false visions of love. Severus knew that no one could ever love him. No one had tried. His Lord cared for him in his own way, and so had his mother, who had taught him the truths of the world, but neither of them loved him.

Cling to the hatred. It is the only reality you know.

"I have no need to listen to you," he told the Potter brat, the dark-haired, *hazel-eyed*, Potter brat, who stood before him. "I know you are only trying to persuade me back to your side. Albus tried that, too, and it didn't work. I am not of the Light. The Light does not know *hate* the way I do."

Hatred. That's it. That's what Voldemort's using to control him, I think. Hatred, and vengeance. He poisoned McGonagall because he thought she was Dumbledore.

And Harry knew how to fight hatred.

"Sir," he repeated softly. "I'm not trying to redeem you. You've done enough to redeem yourself. You chose to accept a child not your own—in fact, the son of one of your worst enemies—into your care. You turned your back on two masters, not just one, to support me, when you really *believed* in Dumbledore. You gave up, you thought, on any chance of my forgiving you because you believed it was the right thing to do, putting my parents and Dumbledore in prison. How many times have you put yourself in danger, nearly given your life, to save me? And you charged forward on Walpurgis, screaming, for my sake. You are Snape." He licked his lips, because the words that he was to speak next still did not come easily to him, and he might never have said them at all if not for the need to convince Snape by any method possible. "My father."

Snape made a wordless snarling sound. Harry saw him clutching his head.

"You are Potter," were the first clear words that emerged from that silent, rebounding struggle.

"I am not," Harry replied. "I gave up that name. I have not taken another." He thought of a final, possible method he might use to convince Snape, and raised his magic, surging, all around him. As he relaxed the barriers, the jungle came out, the brightness of spring and the heat of summer, the shadows of black jaguars and the coil of snakes. "Sir. Remember. Know me. Did my brother

ever have magic like *this*? And you were one of those who taught me to appreciate it, to acknowledge my own power. Please, sir. Remember. Come home. I love you.”

The Potter brat—

Who says he is not the Potter brat.

Why would he choose this method of reaching out to Severus? It was strange. The words he spoke were strange. He had never considered Severus a father. Connor Potter was in Gryffindor. That had put a barrier between them if nothing else had. And for the first four years of school he was an annoying shadow of his brother, and for the last two he had been his Lord’s enemy. Severus did not know him, could never have known him the way he was speaking of. The appeal was bizarre. It had no chance of convincing him to stay.

Unless—unless—Harry—

No! I saw him die! I helped to kill him myself!

The world spun and rocked and bounded around him, and where he found the strength to say, “You are Potter,” in the first place, he could not have said. And then came the even stranger words about Severus teaching him to appreciate his magic, and the infuriating declaration that he loved Severus.

And then came the magic.

Magic like a tidal wave of spring, like the world that might contain love for a person like Severus but called Snape, magic of racing bodies and high pride and sustained courage. Slytherin magic, but magic not like the Dark Lord’s, though with twisting threads of familiarity buried in it, as if the Potter brat were a distorted, echoing mirror of the mighty reality.

What is reality?

The world spun, and words were confusing, and memory had abandoned him, but the magic was real. Severus swayed towards the magic as he had not towards even the roaring fire of his Lord’s power. It touched some deeper part of him.

No! A lie!

He drew his wand and cast wildly in the direction of the magic, to remind himself that this was an enemy, to make the Potter brat defend himself and drop the strange façade that was working on Severus for no reason he knew. To make him stop the magic.

Harry breathed deeply, his eyes focused on Snape. He could feel his mind streamlining itself, other concerns falling away, from what Draco would say when he dropped the wards to his hope that the green fumes had not hurt his Housemates. What he wanted now, what he wanted before he walked away from the Astronomy Tower, was very simple:

He wanted his father back.

“Remember,” he whispered. “You can do it. Remember—“

And then a curse came at him, and Harry, who easily possessed the magic to swallow or deflect it, had a split second to decide what to do.

He dropped his defenses and let it through. A line of blood on his arm. It hurt, but it could have been worse. And when he lifted his head and saw dark eyes staring at him, he knew it had been wise. An enemy would never let someone as dangerous as Snape hurt him. His brother would never have done it. Even if his shield had failed, he would have raised it.

Harry took a deep breath and pulled all his magic back behind him, still retaining its presence so Snape could feel the familiarity, but showing himself unprotected. He held out his hands, palms up.

“You’re not him,” he said quietly. “You’re not the man Voldemort wanted you to be. You’re yourself, and I trust you.”

Snape's wandless magic came out, surrounding him with a maelstrom of half-glimpsed eyes and snapping crab claws. He took a step forward, and his eyes were crazed. The air around him promised pain, promised death.

Harry held his gaze, and turned his head to bare his throat, but otherwise didn't move. His vision blurred, so hard was his heart pounding, and Draco would have said he was insane. But Draco was not here. It was his choice, to take the risk, to trust.

Contradictions ran around inside his head, smashing themselves together, sending shrapnel and bouncing stones down to rain on the unprotected meat of his mind.

Potter did not have magic like that. Harry was the only one who had magic like that.

Potters do not surrender. No son of James Potter would show himself that submissive. But a Slytherin trying to win out over a stronger opponent might. Harry would trust me like this.

This is—I saw him die! I saw him die! I saw him die!

My name is Severus!

His magic rose around him, responsive to his surging temper, ready to rend and rip apart if he could only decide what he wanted to rip apart.

"You're yourself," said the boy whose eyes were hazel, whose eyes were green, whose eyes were pits into endless blackness, "and I trust you." He bowed his head and tilted his throat towards Severus.

His eyes flamed green in the light, green in the light of the Dark Mark, green in and of themselves, green as Lily Potter's eyes.

And he rose and heaved himself forward from the back of his mind, Snape overtaking Severus, fighting madly against the dreams and the sweet pull of the hatred and the blaze in his left arm, the Dark Mark pulling on him to go back to his Lord, tugging him towards the vows he had sworn so long ago.

I am more than a Mark. I am more than a promise.

I am more than the people I hate.

Harry saw the struggle begin in earnest. He knew it was probably similar to the struggle Sirius had waged in third year to take his body back from Voldemort for a few critical moments, but then he'd had Regulus, with his connection to them both, to tell him what was happening. This time, he would have no connection like that—

Unless he forged one.

He plunged forward and put his hands on either side of Snape's head, holding it still. It didn't seem to matter much. This battle was all internal. His dark eyes stared blankly forward.

Harry plunged forward again, using Legilimency to ride like a wind into the confused, conflicted mass of Snape's mind.

The silver Occlumency pools were bubbling, hung over by a dark miasma. Harry shivered. He recognized the miasma. It was Snape's loathing, his revenge impulse, the hook that Voldemort had used to get his hands on his soul. Harry knew how powerful that was. It had showed up even after Snape had supposedly loved him too much to let it take over, when he had fed James the insanity potion in fourth year. It was not an enemy to be lightly defeated.

But now the moment came when he had to choose between losing that impulse towards revenge and losing Harry. He'd never had to do that before. Even the moment of the insanity potion was not test enough, because Harry had still loved him and still testified at his trial.

Harry could do little but hover and watch in silence as Snape fought. It had to be his doing. If Harry tried to join in, he would be taking over Snape's free will, and he would never know for certain if perhaps Voldemort's hook remained in Snape's mind, only buried, not removed.

He was Snape, the Potions Master who hated teaching, the Dark wizard who had given too much of his life to the cause of the Light, the father of an adopted son.

He was Severus, the scorned son of Eileen Prince, the favored servant of the Dark Lord, the father of potions that poisoned and killed.

Names for himself rolled through his head, adding weight to either side.

Hater of werewolves.

Pupil of Albus Dumbledore.

Deputy Headmaster.

Victim of the Marauders.

Death Eater.

Foe of James Potter.

Guardian of Harry James vates, by order of the Ministry.

Friend of Regulus.

Occlumens.

Changer of desires.

Survivor.

Slytherin.

The hatred pulled against the love, the revenge against the impulse to live life as he would, and Snape/Severus knew they were both strong in him, both too strong to simply be defeated. If he turned against either, then he would lose a part of himself. Voldemort would have him, or Harry would.

No. I will have myself.

And that decided him. Snape set his shoulder against Severus and pulled with all his might towards love.

He felt some of the webs in his mind rip and part, and immense pain filled his head as he tore open an Occlumency wound, not nearly as broad as those Harry had sustained in second year, but far deeper. He drained and bailed the foul water, forcing it from him, forbidding himself to care more about hatred of his enemies than he did about protecting Harry.

He turned his Legilimency on himself, as Harry had done once at Godric's Hollow, and he hacked and he burned and he tore and he screamed.

He had sacrificed part of himself, hurt himself so badly there was no telling right now how much he had lost. But the hatred had been Voldemort's hold on him, even more than the Dark Mark. All the dreams of himself as Severus, which he could now remember, had been focused on it, had encouraged it, had told him to seek vengeance. And as he rejected them, so he destroyed Voldemort's hold.

And then he was free, and he could feel Harry's hands gripping either side of his face, and he opened his eyes and stared straight at his son.

Harry screamed like a hawk when he felt what Snape was doing. Yes, it hurt, yes, he had lost some parts of himself and would

never be the same, but he was *free*. Harry lunged forward when his eyes opened and slid his arms around him, holding him fiercely. For the first time in his life, he thought he might know what it was like to have a father.

“Harry,” Snape whispered, and wrapped his arms tentatively around him.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, and then screamed as his scar exploded into pain. Blood drowned his eyes. He could feel Voldemort ripping open the old link between them, sinking claws into his forehead, laughing triumphantly, until all Harry could hear was the high, cold whirlwind of his joy.

Did you think that was the only knife I had prepared for you, my heir? Hardly. It was a distraction, and always meant to fail, though it would have been wonderful had it succeeded. Now see what you have failed to prevent in your concern with your father!

And visions slammed into him, an avalanche of despair.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ninety-Five: Triple-Edged Blade: Second Cut

Rufus looked up with a small smile when he heard the knock on his door, at long last. “Come in, Hope,” he called.

The Auror poked her head through, trying and failing to hide a grin. “She’s here, Minister,” she said. “Do you want me to send her in?”

“She’s passed all the tests?” Rufus asked. Of course, he knew the Liberator must have, or Hope would not offer to let her come in. She would have been kept for an hour in a room alone, without anything to drink, so that she could not take Polyjuice, and she would have had the strongest anti-glamour charms the Ministry possessed cast on her. Even if she were the person who had written letters to the Minister that helped him and Harry win against Falco Parkinson, one could not take chances.

“Yes, sir,” said Hope. “And it’s—well, it *seems* like her. From what I read of her letters, she’s like this. She’s young, and so excited she’s fit to burst.”

Rufus laughed. “That sounds like the Liberator,” he agreed, and leaned back in his chair. His life was full of good news lately, it seemed. Harry had accepted the position of liaison between the packs and the Ministry, and the Wizengamot was falling in line, even those who had only voted for his measure because everyone else had voted for it. And now the Liberator had escaped from her parents’ home and was waiting just a few doors away. Rufus could not wait to meet her.

He glanced back at Percy, who sat at his desk behind his ward, and met a grin that matched his own. Percy had shared more of Rufus’s concerns about the Liberator with him than anyone else. It was only fair that he be present at the first meeting with her, too.

“Bring her in,” he told Hope.

The Auror nodded, and ducked out. Rufus shoved aside his paperwork and sat up, watching, almost holding his breath until the two smiling Aurors waved the young woman in, shutting the door behind her. The wards lifted.

The Liberator was even younger than Rufus had expected her to be, with soft brown hair tinged with blonde that hung to her shoulders, and large brown eyes. She flushed under his scrutiny, to the roots of her hair, and ducked her head as if, freedom and all, she still knew how to be shy. Rufus reminded himself she hadn’t been out of the house more than once a month before. That she had summoned the courage to make the great trek across England to the Ministry was a miracle.

“The Liberator, I presume?” he asked, rising to his feet.

“Yes, sir,” she whispered.

“Might I know your name?” Rufus put his hand out.

She graced him with a dazzling smile, as if the request had restored her confidence. “Iris Raymonds, sir,” she said, and then caught his hand in a firm grip with her left one.

Rufus started to reply, to speak a welcome and reassure Iris once again that she’d be safe in the Ministry, but a sharp sting interrupted him. He pulled his hand away from Iris, startled, and stared. A small wound was open near the base of his right wrist,

seeping blood. From it, a numbness spread up his arm.

And Iris was changing.

Shadows of leaves and flowers appeared beneath her skin, flipping it over, rippling it until her features became those of a different woman entirely—a magic beyond Polyjuice, beyond any glamour Rufus had ever heard of. Streaks of green flooded her hair. She shook her head, and tendrils shone around her arms, dark eyes pooling and shining with power. Where Iris Raymonds had only seemed a witch of average magic, here stood a witch to be feared.

Rufus might not have known who she was even then, had he not read the descriptions Harry had passed him of Death Eaters.

“The Thorn Bitch,” he whispered, still too caught off-guard to feel anything but stunned.

“Yes,” said Indigena Yaxley simply. She watched him with a wistful smile, the only remaining trace of the Liberator, then nodded to his right wrist and held up her left arm so he could see the thorny rose coiled on the back of her hand. “My poison is in you now, Minister. You have approximately two minutes to live.”

Rufus could not speak. There was no answer to this, no way to explain how his life had exploded or what it meant. Above all, he could not believe death was upon him. He had too much left to do.

Percy leaped up from behind his desk suddenly, a ringing battle cry starting from his throat. Indigena swung her head, then bowed it, and two thorns on long, slender vines lashed out from sheaths on her back.

One thorn took Percy through the throat. The other plunged into his chest, staking him like a vampire. When it pulled back out, something red and dripping came with it, something Rufus looked away from.

He knew, now, that the sluggishness gripping him was not the result of simple shock. Indigena’s poison raced through him, biting and stinging with cold spikes, aiming for the heart. He tried to lift his wand to confront her, but his hand could not grip. He watched from a numb distance as his fingers opened and the wand fell to the floor.

Indigena withdrew her thorns from Percy’s tattered body and sat on the edge of his desk, crossing one leg over another, watching him.

Rufus forced his mind to work, to think. He had been poisoned before, in his work as an Auror. There *must* be a way out of this. “How did you do it?” he whispered.

Indigena’s eyebrows lifted. “Why, Minister,” she said, “I’m a very, very good liar. I thought you would have figured that out already.”

“But what—what was the plan?” Rufus forced the words through a closing throat. The poison seemed to buzz and rattle in his ears, or was that his failing heartbeat? “Why send me letters directed at the defeat of Falco Parkinson?”

Indigena sighed and shook her head. “There may be listening wards on the office, Minister,” she chided him. “Or someone could cast a spell that picks up impressions from objects. I’d rather not spill my cunning plan to you. Let us find something more pleasant to talk about in the last minute of your life.” Her face sobered. “I really did consider you almost a friend, you know. The only person I could communicate with during this time who wasn’t my Lord. It is a pity that we could not have met under different circumstances. You are a good man.”

Rufus’s legs gave out. He slumped to the floor, and Indigena bent, following him down.

“Sleep now,” she said. “You’ve done enough for the wizarding world.”

Rufus closed his eyes. He wondered what he should think of in the final moments of his life.

Unfortunately, all he could think of was what would happen now that he was dead, who would be Minister.

Juniper, of course. They will turn to him out of sheer terror.

And before he could fully comprehend the consequences of that, the Light came for him, wave after wave, to welcome him home.

Indigena leaned down further, and gently closed Minister Scrimgeour's eyes.

He had a peaceful expression on his face at the last. Indigena wondered what he had been thinking about. She would have liked to have shared it. But then, her consideration of them as friends, in a sense, had been one-sided, as it must inevitably be.

She was glad that this was done. It had been her plan, her idea, that she would help Harry against Falco Parkinson while making sure that the "help" did not put Harry too far ahead of her Lord. She had come up with the plan when she first realized that another Lord had entered the contest between Light and Dark. Take the Minister at the end of the game, and the blow struck would be a greater hindrance than the help of any minor information she could research about Falco and provide through letters. And the letters themselves, spaced out over time, never quite matching the information of any existing Light family, would encourage the Minister to trust her, and eliminate the difficulties that would exist in getting access to him.

She'd had time to write three letters and leave them with a contact at the *Daily Prophet*—Gina de Rousseau, a woman who did not know her, but would do nearly anything for money—with information to post them on the dates indicated. Given her Lord's preparations for battle at Hogwarts on Midsummer, Indigena could not have been entirely sure that she would survive the fight, or have time to write the letters if she was running or wounded. And that had been a wise precaution, considering what Hawthorn Parkinson had done to her.

She had altered the plan a little bit in the last stages, when she saw a chance to coax Scrimgeour into acting against Cupressus Apollonis and losing himself a Light ally. That had been an outside chance, though, a risk. She was glad it had worked.

Glad and not glad at the same time, she thought, staring at the Minister. *I did not want to kill you. But you would never have taken the Mark, sir, my friend.*

She gave a final glance at Percy Weasley as she stood and pulled a leaf out of her pocket. She had not wanted to kill him, either; his death had never been meant. But since he was in the office with Scrimgeour, he had needed to die.

She placed the leaf on the ground and carefully Transfigured it, until a model of the body she wore as Iris Raymonds lay on the floor of the office. She stabbed a hole through the body's throat when the Transfiguration was done. She had no intention of hiding that this was the work of the Thorn Bitch, but she also had no intention of revealing her disguise if she could help it, the disguise superior to Polyjuice and glamours of every kind. It might come in useful later with people who were not the Ministry's Aurors.

Her own wand had rested safe in her pocket, wrapped with yew leaves, the same way Indigena had smuggled it in when she attended the Potters' trial. That did let her leave Iris's wand with the body. She parted from it with only a little twinge. Her own wand and her plants were dearer to her than a wand she rarely used.

Then she turned and lashed up with her plants towards the ceiling. She would leave the Ministry the same way she had once entered Tullianum, digging up through solid stone.

While she moved, she cast the Dark Mark, and it rose and streamed through the ceiling, to hang over the Ministry and mark the sign of a Death Eater kill. The passing of the Minister would send the wizarding world into chaos. Indigena had just upended everything rather neatly, and she smiled at the thought of the excitement to come, though she had killed two men she did not want to kill.

She had other errands in the meanwhile. First, she was to go to a certain orphanage in Muggle London and fetch out the wand of Rowena Ravenclaw, a Horcrux of her Lord. Voldemort had decided that the orphanage was not a secure holding place for it. When Indigena had it, she would Apparate back to Thornhall and bury it in her garden.

And then she had—something yet again to do. She might have feared to do it, but Harry was busy at the moment, thanks to her Lord. Indigena knew he could not interfere.

Up rose the Dark Mark, carrying its message of death and doom, and on Indigena climbed, steadily, her vines ripping out the stones in front of her, cocooned in the power of green and growing things, bringing her back to the evening light.

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Chapter Ninety-Six: Triple-Edged Blade: Third Cut

It came on him as a sudden swelling tide would, black and littered with the wrecks of ships. It struck through the Dark Mark on

his left arm, and it overwhelmed his mind like a sped-up spider's web of frost crawling across rocks.

Lucius stumbled, clutching at his left forearm, gasping, trying to find himself in the sea of emotions.

The foreign presence in his mind cut through his feeble efforts like a blade of ice. In that moment, Lucius bitterly wished he had learned Legilimency, or that the research on the Dark Mark he had conducted rather desultorily a few summers ago had yielded results. It had not.

He could hear the Dark Lord laughing, a sound he had not thought he would have to hear again. He bent his head and scabbled blindly for his wand with his right hand. Some part of him thought that if he could cast a spell on the Dark Mark, then the call would stop coming through it, trying to make him leave the safety of the wards on the house and Apparate.

The blade had cut through the surface layers of his mind, though, and brought up something that Lucius himself had forgotten.

Dreams, dreams, dreams. Black and purple and deep reaching blue, they rolled down on him, and Lucius remembered how much he had hated Light wizards in the aftermath of his Lord's first fall. They had sneered at him as if they thought *he* should believe that what he had done as a Death Eater was wrong, and Lucius had longed to simply draw his wand and hex them.

And the Mudbloods who had propagated the Grand Unified Theory, and the *disgusting* idea that the Malfoy line had ever mingled its blood with the dust of the earth—

Thomas Rhangnara, the man he had yearned to control, to kill—

Against that welling tide of contempt, Lucius tried to raise his love for his wife and son, but he understood it as a feeble defense even as he tried. He loved only two people in the whole world, and he had never believed in the supposed "power" of love as the Light wizards did. He could not shelter behind a shield he had no faith in.

The web tugged tight, and bound the part of him that objected and would rather stay in the house. Lucius rose to his feet, put his wand back in his pocket, and passed outside the wards, ready to Apparate.

A small part of him, still free, remembered a thought he'd had the first time he met Harry, when Draco brought him to Malfoy Manor for the Christmas holidays. He had felt a fierce gladness that he would get to face an enemy like Harry Potter across the battlefield before the end.

That part of him laughed, an ashy chuckle. *It does seem as if you will get your wish after all.*

And then he Apparated, and he was kneeling at his Lord's side, head bowed to receive the touch of his hand, while the part of him that knew better watched from behind steel walls of hatred and Legilimency, caged by his own lack of love, helpless to act.

And he was back in Azkaban, in the cold, filthy cell, surrounded by Dementors and the stink, not of human hatred, but of human indifference, which was worse, with the phoenix web shining in his mind, a beacon of what being friends with James and Lily Potter, and the protégé of Albus Dumbledore, had cost him.

"No!" Peter shouted out loud, and shoved the vision away.

But it returned, reinforced now by images from his dreams, sweeping up towards the surface of his mind like dolphins seeking the sun. He had lost twelve years of his life to that prison, and he would never regain the weight, the sunshine, the health that should have been his. He had broken free only to help someone else who was a sacrifice like himself, and was that right? Was that fair? Should he not hate his friends? Wasn't he *entitled* to hate them, when they had done so much wrong to him?

Peter felt the burning of the Dark Mark, the call to Apparate, as a dim and distant thing. The hatred, and fighting the hatred, took much more of his attention.

The questions echoed in his head, asked by a voice he recognized now, as he had not recognized it when it appeared in his nightmares, taunting him.

Peter answered with a blast of love.

He had asked himself all these questions when he hid in the Forbidden Forest during Harry's third year, cold and hungry,

watching vigilantly for an opportunity to get Harry alone and a weakness in the phoenix web that would let him tell the truth. He had had no choice but to ask them again in the Sanctuary, when Vera had peered at his soul and demanded answers from him in her own inimitable, subtle way. The answers had rung like bells in his head when he saw Remus walk away from Harry, once again following the strongest personality in his immediate vicinity, and when he had burned with the desire to punish him.

It was not a matter of forgiving his friends and Dumbledore for everything they had done. It was a matter of love being stronger than hatred, of caring more about the future than the past. He could not change the past. He could change himself.

He felt the hook lash out, swinging, trying to snag on a projection in his soul—

And he felt it fall back again, washed away by the fact that he had moved on into the future. The Dark Lord snarled in his ear as his shadow dissolved from Peter's mind like the nightmare it was.

Peter sat on the floor, breathing, for what seemed a very long time. He knew he should be moving—if this had happened to him, then something similar had probably happened to the other former Death Eaters—but all he could really think about was the fact that Voldemort had called him back to the Darkness, and he had resisted. He was free of that threat, should it ever come again.

Now, of course, he had more of an idea why he'd had those dreams, always focused on his enemies and his past, and more of an idea why he'd had an infected Dark Mark almost a year ago. That had been Voldemort sending part of himself ahead into the Marks, trying to sow his former followers' minds with seeds that would grow and force them to accept him.

Someone rammed a fist on his door. Peter stood, still blinking, and staggered over to it.

When he opened it, he found himself on the end of Regulus's wand, and then his stare, and then his embrace. Peter wheezed. He thought Regulus forgot most of the time that, physically, he was still a young man in his twenties, while Peter was in his late thirties now and not the best of health.

"Thank Merlin you escaped," Regulus whispered. "When I realized what was happening, when he tried to take me, I thought you would, but I couldn't be sure."

"How did you escape?" Peter asked.

Regulus pushed his sleeve back from his left forearm, showing the dark dog on his skin. "He has no claim on me any more," Regulus said quietly. "I belong to another mistress now." His shadow snapped its jaws in agreement.

Peter caught his breath. "And Severus?"

"I'm sad to say don't know." Regulus's eyes were shadowed. "Come with me to find out?"

Peter followed at his heels.

The wolf in her welcomed it, of course. It panted and wagged its tail and thought that this was the greatest thing that had happened since the invention of blood.

Hawthorn *fought*. She had never known she could put so much effort into a single thing. The hook scraped through her, bringing up the images of her dreams where she had run on four feet after Lucius and Aurors and Gloriana Griffinsnest, and still she shoved them, forced them away, answered with Harry's image of the storm-clouded world and how one storm did not mean the *end* of that world.

Her wards twanged. Hoping Harry, or some other ally, had come to help her, Hawthorn forced herself onto her knees, tried to ignore the burning in her left arm, and stared bleakly out the window.

Indigena Yaxley stood on the lawn.

The wolf in her *howled*. She *wanted her daughter back*.

Oh, Merlin, Pansy, Pansy ripped apart by this monstrous woman's plants, her neck broken, her beautiful daughter all destroyed and the most beautiful part of Hawthorn's life snuffed out like a rose by a frost—

The wolf leaped. The balance tilted. The hook caught, and Hawthorn knew a brief moment of despair so exquisite that she would have rejoiced to have caused it in an enemy.

Her hatred was stronger than her love, and it had cost her even as Harry had proclaimed in his speech last year, during the alliance meeting on the spring equinox, that vengeance would always cost wizards and witches.

“Come, sister,” Indigena called, voice gentler than Hawthorn had believed it could be. “I have long wanted to discuss gardening techniques with you. And I know this is harder for you, and you will need a few days to settle in. Mindless chatter might be just the way to do so.”

Hawthorn stood, grasped her wand, and passed out of the house. The wolf and the blood-crazed witch walked together in the front of her mind, the witch’s fingers twined in the wolf’s fur. The sane part of her cowered in the back of her mind and cried, sometimes in sobs, sometimes in muffled lupine whines. She had the deadening feeling that it would not be sane for long.

Indigena laid a hand on her shoulder, her smile full of pity. Then she closed her eyes, and together they Apparated.

It took less effort to take possession of Adalrico than it had almost anyone else. Adalrico knew that, understood the moment the hatred began inundating his soul, and he half-defiantly half-welcomed it.

He had a *right* to hate. Harry should have let him kill Pharos Starrise. The whelp had defied law, custom, tradition, honor, *everything* when he had told the Unspeakables to capture Adalrico. It was too much. It was—there were no words for what it was, and if he had killed Pharos, or at least performed a vengeance ritual of some kind on him, then Adalrico knew he could have healed his wounds.

Then he would not be subject to the call of Voldemort.

It had been a moment of sanity that made him call on Harry, a moment of desperation as he found himself plotting ways to actually use the Black Plague spores on Pharos in the Ministry. And then, by the time Harry had arrived, Adalrico had wanted to listen to the dreams. They were making him a bit clumsier, a bit less than Slytherin in his planning, but did that matter? He would have used them soon, and then been done with it, and Pharos too.

In a way, it was Harry’s fault.

So the Dark Mark flared, and so he gave up the long struggle to raise his soul from the poisoned garden in which he found it. He was probably never meant to escape anyway, not if he had gone back this easily. And he had sworn the family oath with Harry. He could not act against Harry or his blood family anyway, not without bleeding to death.

So it would not be so bad.

Even as he knelt before the Dark Lord’s throne, Adalrico did not know if the justifications he had woven came from pragmatism or despair.

Indigena appeared among the other Death Eaters, Hawthorn Parkinson at her side, and shook her head as she watched them. This was where her approval of her Lord’s plan ran out. She did not like fighting beside traitors. They had no honor. They might *pretend* they had honor, that coming back to their Lord as they had done proved they had it, but nothing could make up for that first betrayal.

She gave a pitying look at Hawthorn as the werewolf knelt. She had not wanted to play this part, either, but her Lord had insisted. Hawthorn had resisted hardest of all of them, because she was used to fighting her wolf, a creature of savagery and hatred. It was no coincidence that, when her Lord had chosen to test his control over Evan Rosier and make him lure Connor Potter to a specific place, he had chosen Hawthorn’s garden to be that specific place. Indigena had had three purposes there: to make sure that Evan did as he was supposed to, to make sure that Connor Potter did not die before the punishment her Lord had planned for him, and to see if Hawthorn would react to her with hatred. When she had, the Dark Lord had known that he could use Indigena as a final lure to tip the other woman’s balance, if worst came to worst and she resisted the dreams even to the end.

Glancing around the throne room, Indigena noticed the absence of Regulus Black, Peter Pettigrew, and, most surprising, Severus Snape. She frowned. *Really! That particular traitor resisted the call of his own impulses towards revenge to stay by Harry’s*

side? I suppose I am impressed, but I am more puzzled. I never thought he could do it, with as long as my Lord has been in his head, seeing through his eyes and making him dream to his will.

She paused when she saw a figure she had not expected standing there, and clenched her fists. Evan's black eyes stared at her, the eyes of a caught mad thing, snarling. She almost expected to see the foam of a rabid dog falling from his jaws.

"Relax, my thorn."

Indigena slid to a knee with the others as Lord Voldemort rose from his bed, floating. When he was this close to so many Dark Marks, he could command the magic of their bearers. It circled through their bodies, the pieces of him they carried on their arms, and through his; when the hole in his magical core attempted to drain it off, it circled back to the former Death Eaters instead. He had been unwilling, mostly, to use Indigena this way, since she was with him willingly and he wanted her to use her magic for more important things. But these Death Eaters whom he was punishing for loving Harry and turning their backs on him made the perfect hands and feet.

"Evan has come to me like these others," said Voldemort, settling into his throne, "and I have control of him."

Glancing at Evan, Indigena was not so certain of that—*as well control a thunderstorm*—but she held her peace. It *was* true that Lord Voldemort would never have allowed anyone but her so close to his Horcrux cup unless he was assured they would not rebel.

"And now, my lord?" she asked.

"Now, my thorn," said her Lord, his hand caressing her hair while the snake wound about his waist stared at her with red eyes, "you will go to the new allies we have agreed upon."

Indigena sighed. She didn't like *this* part of her Lord's plan, either. She did not think the vampires would choose to serve Voldemort without asking too high a price. But she had sworn to be loyal, and honor held her still.

"And Harry?" she asked, glancing up.

Voldemort laughed, and the snake swayed.

"Dear Harry has seen all that happened," Voldemort answered, "though only, of course, what I thought wise to show him. I rather fear that I have made my magical heir a bit upset." The snake swayed faster and faster, dancing a mad pattern. "I rather fear that I have made someone else who bears a scar, a brand, connected to me full of hatred."

Indigena, who remembered reading the chapter "Brands and Scars" in the book *Odi et Amo* again and again, knew what that meant, and knew where her Lord was going when he closed his eyes and lashed his mind out and down another Legilimency connection. Before very much longer, if Harry's hatred was strong enough, they might have their Lord's heir standing at their sides.

And having felt the surge of Dark magic that destroyed Falco on Walpurgis Night, Indigena was fairly certain it was strong enough. Harry had a temper when he allowed himself to feel it.

Now, more than ever, she was sorry that she could not follow her Lord into the vision, and would simply have to wait patiently for the result.

~*~*~*~*

Chapter Ninety-Seven: Having Seen That Love Hath An End

The vision flooded out of Harry again, leaving him shaken and drained. For long moments, he could only lie on the stones of the Astronomy Tower, blood soaking out from his forehead, Snape's hand shaking his shoulder, and try to absorb what he had seen.

When he knew—when he had realized that the Minister was dead and three of his allies would be forced to fight him again—then he *screamed*.

His magic burst out around him, phoenix wings gone dark, flaring with steel spikes and serrated edges. Harry heard the wind pick up, and knew the harmless whirlwinds he had raised to contain the green potion fumes in the dungeons were puny compared to the might building now. As if in response to the thought, thunder answered from overhead. His power was drawing a storm.

And why shouldn't it? Harry thought, his hands clenching beneath him so hard that he thought he felt a finger break. And why shouldn't it? I have a right to hate him. All he's done so far, and I thought I hated him for that. But I never knew what true loathing was until now.

The clouds above him swayed and drew together, and obscured the place where the moon would hang, were it not dark tonight. Harry lifted his head and cried out again. The wings beat, hard, very nearly throwing him forward and off the Tower.

Snape shook him again, and Harry could hear him speaking, but he could no more afford to pay attention to the words than he could have afforded to listen to Argutus's Parseltongue when he thought Draco was dying of the green potion. Snape was safe, and would not follow the others to Voldemort's side because he had defeated Voldemort in his own mind. But the others—

The others.

There were people living in pain and people dead right now, and all because they had tried to help Harry, or loved him. Voldemort might have struck at Scrimgeour, because he was Minister, even if he had been Harry's enemy, but the others would have been safe.

Everything I touch, I taint.

The hatred built, curved, piled steps of darkness, half hatred of Voldemort and half hatred of himself. If it had been only one or the other, Harry thought he could have stopped it from building. But how was he supposed to resist this? No one he loved would ever be safe again. Harry had felt the Dark Lord's triumph. If he had had this planned for Scrimgeour and Percy, Hawthorn and Adalrico and Lucius and Snape, he would plan something else for Draco, for Snape now that his first plan had failed, for Connor, for McGonagall, for Regulus. Everything and everyone who loved Harry was in danger while he lived.

Unless he went to Voldemort now. Unless he destroyed him before he could take anyone else or make anyone else suffer.

The wings had firmed on his back, solid black shapes that channeled the wind. Harry stood and made his way towards the battlements, his mind set into one firm mold. He would find Voldemort. He did not know where he was and could not Apparate there, but he would follow the burning of his scar, which would act as a guide. He would find him and he would *destroy* him. He would cause the Dark Lord such pain as he had never known, until he told Harry where the Horcruxes were.

All of this had happened because he had not hated enough, not been angry enough, not been firm enough.

Harry pulled his magic into himself with a roiling crash. The ward on the stairs behind him disappeared. He would need the power it had contained when he faced Voldemort.

He leaped into the sky, and the wings caught and bore him as only a broom would have done before. Steadily, he turned west.

"Harry!"

He whirled around. Draco was on top of the Tower now, having broken through when the ward vanished. He had a hand outstretched, and his voice was harsh with something worse than rage, though his face was free of tears.

"Where are you going?"

Harry laughed. The storm laughed with him. His magic was everywhere around him, aching and hungry for the kill, wilder than the wolf that had come to him on Walpurgis Night. "I'm going to him, Draco. To kill him, as I should have done before it got this far."

"Harry, no!" Draco leaned forward. "I forbid it."

Harry arched an eyebrow, and the wings on his back twitched. "How exactly," he asked, keeping his voice gentle, "do you think you can stop me?"

Draco took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

Harry was waiting for the familiar feeling of Draco's possession gift in his mind, though. He caught it, and captured it, and threw it from his head. Draco gave a pained grunt and staggered back. He might have fallen and split his head on the stones, but Snape caught him. Distantly, Harry was glad of that.

He turned, ready to fly again, ready to give himself to the abyss of fury. His magic purred all around him, glad to be free. Other people kept telling Harry that he had to be the leader in this fight with Voldemort, that he had to set his magic free and use it. He should have listened to them before.

He noticed a small figure rising from the grounds to intercept him, and growled in annoyance. He *did not* have time for this.

As he leaned into the wind, Connor had never been so glad that he had a Firebolt.

He'd spent time with the damn broom since Christmas. He'd *mastered* it. No one else could have taken the Firebolt off the ground and reached Harry as fast as this. Granted, Connor had had to sneak out of the school to the Quidditch Pitch first, because none of the prefects were minded to let the students leave their common rooms with a mad Snape running about, and that had taken some time. But when he heard, from gossip brought back by those same prefects, that Harry had last been seen heading upward, he had known he needed his broom.

And now this. The storm. His brother's magic, restless, whipping around Connor in the air.

Harry on black wings, just above him.

Connor didn't intend to fly away and leave him there. What kind of brother would he be if he did that?

Harry was turning towards him now, his eyes wide. Connor could see his lightning bolt scar welling with blood as real lightning began to flash around them, and the wind picked up. Connor ignored it all. He had played Quidditch in worse circumstances than this. He braced himself against the broom and scowled at Harry, wincing as he felt pain begin in his own scar. He didn't usually feel it—the last time he'd truly felt it had been when he spent months near Voldemort possessing Sirius's body—but if there was any evening when it would happen, it would be this one.

Voldemort was probably behind Snape's poisoning of the Headmistress somehow. Connor could see him attempting to harm Harry, because he had never known how to act around Harry. But harming McGonagall with a poison was simply clumsy. If Snape had wanted to kill the Headmistress, he would have done something subtler.

"What are you doing here?"

Harry's voice was so low and thunderous that it took Connor a moment to sort it out from the storm. Then he scowled harder, because he could not believe that Harry would be that stupid. "Stopping you," he said simply.

"You can't," said Harry.

"Why not?" Connor countered. "I think we take turns being the stupid one. You're stupid right now. He's probably convinced you it's all your fault and you have to settle this on your own. That's what he convinced you of in third year, and second, too, though then you at least had Draco with you. So right now I'm the smart one. And I love you, Harry, and you are not going anywhere on your own."

Wind howled in his ear. Connor raised his eyebrows, asking his brother without words if he was supposed to be impressed.

"You cannot stop me," Harry repeated, his face twisted into a grimace. Connor thought that was four parts Voldemort and one part self-blame. However Voldemort was possessing him, it had to have roots in Harry's guilt and self-hatred, two of his strongest emotions. "My magic is stronger than yours."

"Yeah, it is," said Connor. "But you can't do *this*."

And he lashed his compulsion like a rope around Harry's mind. *Fly back to the Tower this instant, and stop being an idiot.*

He hummed, did Lord Voldemort, he sang, because he had tapped into a part of his heir's mind that was *his*, and which lay deep in the boy, and which almost none of them knew about, though Harry had felt it stir in his head a time or two when he let his temper fly.

Their magic lay between them. So did the link, founded in the scar, and through that Lord Voldemort could feed hatred and whisper to that buried part to rise, to envelop and embrace Harry. Twice he had almost succumbed to it—once with his mother, and once with Lord Voldemort in the graveyard where he had lost his hand. Once the traitor and Lucius’s brat had saved him, and once the necromancer had. But no one would get close enough to Harry to save him this time. Harry would push them away, keep them safe, because he had already witnessed enough loss through the visions Lord Voldemort had given him.

It was perfect.

Which was why it rather annoyed him when he felt compulsion he hadn’t put there striking through his heir’s mind. He reached out, though it was slow and heavy and hard because the connection was so muted, and tried to force the boy riding the broomstick near Harry away. It was not his time yet. Oh, yes, Lord Voldemort knew what he would do with Connor Potter, but falling from his broom, or dying in a blast of his brother’s magic, was too simple a death.

The boy simply snorted, and turned to face him. Lord Voldemort received a vision of his face, half-fueled by their mental connection and half through Harry’s eyes, and saw utter disdain there.

“I’m a compeller, too,” Connor Potter told him. “And compellers are immune to compulsion.”

Which made him even *more* annoyed.

Connor could feel intense pain in his head. The pain only bled into his anger. He was *not* about to give in to the bastard trying to take his brother away from him. He pulled on the rope he had fastened on Harry’s mind.

And Harry screamed, and broke the leash, as any *vates* would be bound to do the moment he felt a compulsion placed on him.

Then the full might of his anger turned on Connor.

A wind came at him, one Connor knew would smash the Firebolt to kindling and himself to tiny bits of flesh. Of course, it had to catch him first, and he wheeled and steered out of its path.

Then a crosscurrent of winds tried to catch him. Connor tucked his knees close to his chest and sent the Firebolt spinning out from between them, then clamped his knees down again and dived from above Harry, making him start and shy, his black wings fluttering nervously. He wasn’t used to them yet, while Connor knew everything about the broom under his hands and knees, how to make it sing.

“You’re being an idiot, Harry,” Connor called. “For Merlin’s sake, you don’t need to go alone. You always do, and look what the hell happens. You almost die of blood loss. Or you only succeed because someone repossesses his own body for a moment and Peter’s there to throw the wand of the sacrifice to you. Going alone, by yourself, is *stupid*.” He took a deep breath. That might make Harry pause and listen, but Connor knew he needed words to attack the self-loathing. “And Voldemort would be stalking someone else if you didn’t exist, me or Neville. People would still suffer, and still die. Magical creatures won’t be free if you go. We need you here, Harry. Too much to let you go. Come back, now.” He extended a hand from his Firebolt, swinging in low over his brother, taking in his wide, devastated eyes, from which rage was beginning to falter and into which sense was beginning to come.

But with the sense came the blame, of course.

“But they died because they were connected to me,” Harry whispered. “They died because I loved them.”

Connor rolled his eyes. *Oh, for Merlin’s sake—*

“Do you need a hug, Harry?” he asked.

That had the effect of making Harry stare at him in confusion, interrupting his self-pitying ramble. “What?”

“You need a hug,” said Connor. “I think I’ll give you one.”

And, not giving himself time to think, he launched himself straight off the Firebolt, and towards Harry.

Lord Voldemort was very, very, very annoyed. Deeply irritated. Displeased with life in general.

Harry's hatred had rolled away too easily, at the first minor challenge. That suggested it would not be as easy to snare his heir's mind and drag him to his side as Lord Voldemort had hoped.

And now he found Harry's focus changing completely, from killing him or blaming himself because he hadn't foreseen this to trying to catch his falling brother.

Lord Voldemort could admit when he was defeated. Besides, he had plans Harry had not seen, plans to punish those who loved him that could begin now. Those plans might be enough to gather Harry's hatred up so that he, Lord Hunter, Lord of the Dark, could make another try in the near future. He cut his ties to the anchor in Harry's mind.

He leaned back, and announced, "It seems that my heir will not be joining us this evening." His thorn's face fell. Lord Voldemort leaned forward and caressed her hair again. "But we will see him soon enough, I have no doubt."

It does not matter. I know the third.

Connor was jumping from his broom, because he was mad, and Harry had to catch him before he could fall. He could not stand if someone else who loved him died this night.

Or ever.

He flared his serrated wings wide, so that they would not cut Connor, and then spread his arms. Then he flew a little backwards, because Connor's leap, brave, stupid thing that it was, had carried him in a wide arc over Harry's head.

He felt the breath leave him as his twin slammed into him, and scrabbled madly at his robes for a moment. Then Connor's arms curled around his neck, and his arms curled around Connor's back, and they hung there in the middle of the air together, panting, while Harry tried to feel some emotion that was not terror or self-pity or hatred of Voldemort or deep annoyance at his brother.

"Why did you do that?" Harry asked at last, because he had to know.

"To—get your mind off what you were thinking about," Connor panted. "To give you someone to protect. That's the only way to get you to stop thinking about the dead. Get you to start thinking about the living."

Harry's eyes closed, and he began to soothe the storm, to draw his power back into him, and make this a calm, dark night in June, the way it had begun.

A calm, dark night filled with so much death.

Harry shuddered. He had learned a number of nasty things about himself in a very short time. He could not protect everyone in this war. He was capable of feeling enough mindless hatred towards Voldemort to want to kill him, after years in which he had never hated anyone that way. He could disregard the living people around him in his concern over the imprisoned or the dead. He still tended to act alone first, if he had a chance at all, and on impulse.

And the moment he felt enough hatred—and Harry knew it would only increase, with Voldemort attacking more people he loved and attacking innocents—Voldemort could try to snatch him again. The curse scar was a vulnerability as great as the Dark Mark of any Death Eater.

"I just want it to be *over*," he whispered into Connor's ear, feeling a great wave of weariness roll over him.

"You and everyone else," Connor responded, his voice hard. "That's why you can't charge off on a whim, Harry. We need you to lead this war, to fight it, to help destroy Horcruxes, to free magical species—for *so* much." His arms squeezed hard, again. "So you had better stay right *here*, or I'll chase you down and compel you to stop being an idiot again."

"If something does happen to me—"

"We're doomed," Connor said, without preamble. "So make some attempt to stay alive, Harry, yes? And don't you *dare* say anything about the prophecy choosing me for the third round," he added with a savagery Harry had never heard from him, when

he opened his mouth. “It might, it might not, but that doesn’t excuse the fact that there are many things only you can do. You’re going to outlive this war and make the world a better place, Harry. Show Voldemort that he’s only a tiny cloud in the sky of your life.”

Harry said nothing, but began to fly towards the Astronomy Tower again, with Connor’s words working slowly inside him.

So that’s what other people mean when they say my life is more important than anyone else’s. I—understand, now. Both emotionally and intellectually.

I’m the Light’s greatest vulnerability, because Voldemort is fighting this war to hurt me. But I’ll just have to continue on with being its greatest weapon, as well. I have to do this. There really is no other way. And I can’t give in to hatred, or the impulse to hurt him independent of allies.

He came in low, set Connor down on the battlements, and landed softly, dissolving the wings back into himself. Then he lowered his head, and relaxed into a simultaneous pair of embraces, from Draco and Snape. He could hear voices on the stairs. Peter and Regulus, it sounded like. He knew they had not been taken, or Voldemort would have shown him that, too, but it was nice to receive confirmation they were there, and free, and alive.

He lifted his head to the skies, and stared at the place where the moon should have been, at the clouds rushing over the stars.

He felt Voldemort’s presence passing through his scar like a second, foul breath, beating heart of the beast.

Harry bared his teeth. *To the death, then, and the third round of the prophecy. Come on, you bastard. I’m ready.*

When he raised his magic this time, he did it in the shape of a pair of phoenix’s wings, and sent his voice to follow it, living reminder of immortality and greatest Light, a warning to Voldemort about what was to come, mourning for the dead, and embrace of the future and its endless sacrifices.

The End.